

THE LIM CLAN, FROM LEFT:
VINCE, ELAINE, WILLIAM, LAVINA, CAROLINE AND KEVIN



All in the Family

What happens when a Hong Kong design dynasty gets together for an afternoon?
OLIVER GILES meets the Lims

WILLIAM LIM IS one of Hong Kong's most successful architects, but that doesn't mean he wanted his sons to follow in his footsteps. "I think we actually tried to steer Kevin and Vince away from architecture," he says, glancing at his wife, Lavina. "It's a very difficult profession. There are long hours and you have to deal with all sorts of clients, so I tried to not talk too much about architecture at home."

But whether by nature or nurture, it wasn't long before Kevin and Vince had pencils in their hands. "When they were young kids they liked to draw," Lavina remembers. "We'd take them out and they'd just sit on the side and start sketching."

Ignorant of their parents' plans, once Kevin and Vince started drawing, they never stopped. Both brothers ended up at Cornell University in New York State, William and Lavina's alma mater, where they studied architecture. "So not only did they both study architecture but we all went to the same school," William explains, laughing.



“WE DON’T WORRY ABOUT MEETING EXPECTATIONS OR FILLING SHOES”

Vince Lim

And there’s more. As if working as architects wasn’t enough, both Vince and Kevin are also married to architects. Kevin’s wife is Caroline Chou, who’s also his professional partner in design studio openUU, and Vince’s other half is Elaine Lu, the co-founder of their design firm Lim + Lu.

In other families, working in the same industry can lead to bitter feuds and fraught relationships (think of the estranged Wainwrights or warring

Gallagher brothers). But the easy-going Lims are nothing but inspired by each other. “We do ask ourselves, ‘how can you ever live up to having a father figure who’s so well established?’” Vince says. “But we don’t worry about meeting expectations or filling shoes. We’re actually talking about how we can operate in a different



VINCE LIM AND ELAINE LU’S
LIM + LU HOME FURNISHINGS.
LEFT: FRAME TABLE.
BOTTOM: REFORM CARPET.
OPPOSITE PAGE: MASS SOFA

mode nowadays. We want to take a different route and have our own identity.”

This means that rather than designing hotels and office towers like William, Vince and Elaine are focusing on tabletop products, furniture and interiors. “Our architecture background means we use a lot of clean lines and pure forms, very pure geometry” Vince says. “And that’s how we’re able to jump between all scales, really, because the principles are the same.”

Adaptability is key to many of Lim + Lu’s designs, thus panels within their Frame Table can be added or removed as owners see fit, and their modular colour-wheel-inspired Reform rug for Tai Ping Carpets can be broken into segments and reconfigured to fit any space.

These sleek, functional products are starting to earn Lim + Lu international recognition. A leading Danish furniture brand wants to add Lim + Lu’s Mass Series – a furniture line featuring heavy, brass-look bases – to its permanent collection, and design fair Maison & Objet recently awarded the couple its Rising Asian Talent award.

Kevin and Caroline have found their own niche by following another of their passions:

food. “I went to Cordon Bleu after I studied architecture,” Kevin reveals. He’s too modest to say, but he was one of only four students to graduate out of his class of 21 at the notoriously tough culinary school. Afterwards, Kevin worked at Blue Ginger in Massachusetts, a restaurant run by acclaimed TV chef Ming Tsai.



KEVIN LIM AND
CAROLINE CHOU'S RECENTLY
OPENED MEAN NOODLES



With this experience under the belt, Kevin and Caroline have recently opened a restaurant in Sheung Wan. "It's called Mean Noodles," Kevin says. "The idea is it's a Southeast Asian noodle bar, but we're focusing on Malaysian noodles right now. The interior has some Malaysian motifs."

Kevin is spending every spare moment in the kitchen of Mean Noodles and his hard work shows – sometimes in unexpected ways. "We were in the car driving here and Vince was like, 'Why does it smell like fish in here?'" Kevin recalls. "And I realised it's me, my shirt was in the restaurant and I was cooking seafood broths."

As if opening a restaurant wasn't enough work, the couple has also got several projects for openUU on the go. "We've been working on this hotel in Tin Hau, which has 80 rooms, for the past year and a half," Caroline says. "It's supposed to be finished next year."

William, meanwhile, continues work on large-scale projects around Asia with his architecture and interiors firm, CL3. He's just unveiled his extension of Gaysorn, a luxury shopping mall in Bangkok, which includes 59,000 square feet of additional retail space and a new 30-storey office tower.

In Hong Kong, William is preparing for the launch of H Queen's, a 24-storey tower in Central that he's designed specially to accommodate art galleries.

When it opens, H Queen's will house leading galleries, including David Zwirner and Pace.

"Right now, you have a very transient art scene in Hong Kong because of Art Basel and the auctions," says William. "But I think when H Queen's is done and the permanent galleries are located in the heart of Hong Kong, there will be enough gravity to draw a lot more permanent collectors and people like that to congregate here."

William is uniquely qualified to design gallery space because he and Lavina are two of Hong Kong's most prominent art collectors. Hanging in his Wong Chuk Hang studio where we meet are works by artists including Tsang Kin-wah, MAP Office and Wilson Shieh, as well as a dramatic hanging sculpture by Korean artist Lee Bul. Perched on the floor next to a Frame Table by Lim + Lu is a stuffed chicken by Chinese artist Duan Jianyu. "William was born in the year of the rooster," Lavina says, pointing at more Duan chickens at the other end of the studio.

The couple started their collection in 2005, when they realised that Hong Kong artists needed patrons if the art scene was to develop. They're constantly adding to their collection and have always made a particular effort to collect works by up-and-coming artists. "I think Chloe Cheuk is one to look out for at the moment," William advises.

Kevin and Caroline have caught the collecting bug and, like William and Lavina, they regularly visit student shows. "We discovered an artist a few years back, his name's Chan Kwan-lok, he was a student back then," Caroline explains. "He was about to graduate and he showed us some work but he said, 'Sorry, my graduation piece is not for sale.'"

Picking up the story, Kevin adds, "Then a couple of years ago my dad bought the graduation piece that I wanted to buy! I said to the artist, 'I thought you weren't selling it!' It's a

really nice piece and dad actually gave it to us."

Vince and Elaine own a couple of works, including an original Andy Warhol, but they're more interested in collecting "physical objects and designer items by people like Jaime Hayon and Middle Kingdom", Elaine says.

Many of the items in Vince and Elaine's collection were picked up on trips abroad. They recently bought a few objects – including a statuette of Chairman Mao – in Jingdezhen, a Chinese city often referred to as the porcelain capital of the world. "What's fascinating about China is that there are these different cities where they obsess about one material," Elaine enthuses. "Last time we went to Yunfu, the city of marble. Everywhere there you just see marble slabs and there's nothing else. So that's kind of our quest for Lim + Lu this year, to go to these different cities to understand each material."

As Vince pulls a moss-green porcelain bowl he bought in Jingdezhen from his bag, the family erupts into conversation about glazes, craftsmanship and how design is changing in China. When they all get together like this, do they always talk about art, architecture and design? They pause, then look at each other. "I guess it's sort of inevitable," Kevin concludes, as all of the Lims burst out laughing. ■