



January 2013

Drive time

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.vtc.edu.hk/ive-de-signed>



Part of the [Automotive Engineering Commons](#), and the [Industrial and Product Design Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(2013) "Drive time," *SIGNED: The Magazine of The Hong Kong Design Institute*: , 20-25.

Available at: <https://repository.vtc.edu.hk/ive-de-signed/vol6/iss6/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Design at VTC Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in SIGNED: The Magazine of The Hong Kong Design Institute by an authorized editor of VTC Institutional Repository. For more information, please contact wchu@vtc.edu.hk.



PEOPLE

The Vocational Training Council, HKDI's parent body, has recently formed an alumni association that includes **CHELSIA LAU**, a graduate of Lee Wai Lee Technical Institute who has become one of the world's most accomplished automotive designers. She talked to **SUMMER CAO** about her twenty years with the Ford Motor Company

This is what we are about," says Chelsia Lau, Ford Motor Company's Chief Designer. "We always want to inject a visual premium into our designs. We are not talking about whether it's expensive or not – a car may be for mass market but if it's designed with ingenuity consumers will feel that the people behind it have paid attention to every detail."
Born and bred in Hong Kong, Lau graduated from Lee Wai Lee Technical Institute before continuing her studies at the Art Centre College of Design in California. She joined Ford in 1992. Within

DRIVE

TIME



THIS PAGE REAR VIEW OF THE FORD FIESTA; CHELSIA LAU AT A FORD FIESTA LIFE STYLE EVENT IN TAIWAN 2009





« YOU HAVE TO... BUILD UP A LIBRARY OF CREATIVE REFERENCES THAT CAN TRIGGER YOUR IMAGINATION »

eight years, she was given responsibility for designing models for the South American market and was named by *Autoweek* magazine as “one of the top ten secret people who will change your world”.

In 2006, Lau received the World’s Outstanding Chinese Designer award from the Hong Kong Design Centre. Currently Lau is working in Shanghai as the Chief Designer of Ford’s Strategic Concepts Group, focusing on defining the future vision of Ford design.

Lau’s input to Ford’s portfolio includes concept cars, SUVs and small economy cars, many of which have won international accolades. To give a mass-market vehicle some of the premium feel of a supercar requires strokes of genius and Lau says these require dedication and hard work.

“Inspiration requires preparation. As an automotive designer, you have to subconsciously build up a library of creative references that can trigger your imagination,” Lau says. “You have to know where to look, be curious, and have an open mind. Above all, you must pursue the things that fascinate you. When the right time comes, these resources can inspire unexpected ideas.”

From an original idea to final production, developing a new car model is a cycle that requires about four years, according to Lau. The design



CLOCKWISE CHELSIA LAU EVALUATING A MODEL IN THE FINAL STAGES OF ITS DEVELOPMENT; LAU WITH MEMBERS FROM OTHER TEAMS IN THE FORD MOTOR COMPANY; CHELSIA LAU WORKING ON A CLAY SCALE MODEL.

team begins by making sketches that explore different possibilities. Based on these some scale models will be created. The ideas will be further refined after feedback from customer groups. A few concepts will be selected for clay development and will be subjected to engineering and aerodynamic evaluation. The final theme will be chosen based on innovation and customer feedback. Next step is craftsmanship and product execution through series of stringent tests and refinement. Therefore it is paramount for a car designer to predict what future tastes and technologies may be at least five to ten years into the future.

“We start from the customers,” says Lau. “We observe them and listen to them carefully, study their behaviour and try to think like them, because it’s important to know their priorities. We also look at world trends and try to project what might happen, as we can’t communicate with the customers of four years from now.”

With China changing so rapidly, predicting the future is challenging. Metropolitan areas of China have gone from virtually zero private car ownership 25 years ago to rates of 22 cars per 100 people, a ratio that’s equivalent to that of New York City. The *Economist* magazine recently observed that there are now more than one billion cars in the world, and the number is likely to double by 2020, with much of that growth occurring in Asia, especially China and India. Moreover in Asia there are cultural issues that have a profound influence upon design, making it more challenging to predict customer preferences.

“Deep down Chinese consumers might want something new and different, but they also need to be collective, fitting into the norms of their society,” says Lau. “Some might like a sportier car, but because they need to respect their superiors or care what people think of them, they will buy a more understated vehicle. The contradiction hidden in this context tells us that Chinese customers need to feel like they fit in.”

However, the Chinese markets are not entirely opaque. Chinese culture and traditional wisdom can provide car designers with useful signposts.

“As the economy continues to develop and incomes rise what remains important for the Chinese customers is that their car is a portrait of their status, representing their face,” says Lau. “So a car should be Daqi (大氣) – to convey a feeling of nobility and superiority. As the auto market becomes more mature in China, people will

《 OUR JOB REALLY IS TO PROTECT THE INTEGRITY OF THE DESIGN 》



ABOVE: CHELSIA LAU AT FORD WORLD HEAD QUARTERS

become more comfortable with expressing their own personality and individuality.”

Globetrotting Lau has worked on four continents and she finds Chinese customers to be the most demanding. “The Chinese are most able to articulate what they want,” says Lau. “People here expect a shorter product cycle, they expect new designs to appear more frequently. Moreover, deep in their mind beauty requires that something should look harmonious. The consumers may not be design experts, but they can always tell you whether a car’s proportions look comfortable or not.”

In light of China’s challenging cultural requirements, Lau has recruited local talent. “They really know the culture and the market, and these young Chinese designers are very eager,” says Lau. “But even though they grew up in China, they have different backgrounds, and come from different regions. Some of them have studied car design overseas.”

Lau says one of the most important decisions Ford has made in the last few years is to design and manufacture cars based on the One Ford strategy. With this strategy, Ford will develop a vehicle based on global markets in mind rather than regional needs. This strategy leverages our global expertise and vastly improves the efficiency of developing a vehicle.

“In the past many other car companies would first develop a car for the European market,” says Lau. “Later on, the car company might want to develop a sedan for a different region, so they will just add a back end to the existing architecture. The consequence would be a car with awkward proportions.”

“The Ford Fiesta is a great example. The two models – a hatchback and sedan – were developed side by side from day one. If you look at the roof profile, we have fine-tuned the rooflines, adjusting them so that both cars look sleek and dynamic at every angle. We had input from all the key markets, to develop a truly global product that has universal appeal.”

Although thinking ahead, knowing your future customers and possessing a flair for innovative design are all essential for giving a car premium qualities they are not enough to make customers take out their wallets. Designers face a further battle even after the key design features have been finalised. Different countries have different technological, manufacturing constraints and safety standards, all of which require modifications from the core design.


《 WE MUST BE PASSIONATE ADVOCATES FOR OUR DESIGN AND PUSH AS HARD AS WE CAN 》

“We are talking about thousands of parts, but a very small team of designers are responsible for the entire car and they have to make every part cohesive,” says Lau. “If some technology is not available in one of our manufacturing countries or if that market has different standards, we have to come up with an alternative.”

Pressure also comes from teams in other parts of the company who don’t necessarily speak the language of design, and to whom designers must defend their work.

“Our job really is to protect the integrity of the design, making sure we deliver the best to the customers,” says Lau. “In a regular meeting, we only have two or three designers to speak up for the design and they have to face a large number of challengers. We must be passionate advocates for our design and push as hard as we can in response to challenges from cross-functional teams such as engineering and cost control team. And above all we have to be confident in our design.”

Lau attributes her confidence to embark on a career in car design to the Lee Wai Lee Technical Institute, which gave her a strong foundation in product design. “When I went to the Art Centre, I realised my education in Hong Kong was very good and I was well prepared,” says Lau. “Although I went to the Art Centre to further my studies in product design, I felt I was ready to move on to try different things.”

Lau’s journey has taken her far from Hong Kong but the drive that has propelled her to the top of the car world remains as an inspiration to the city’s current generation of young designers. Lau has proved that with talent, hard work, passion and imagination anything is possible. Even a truly global car with universal appeal. 

BELOW: LAU PARTICIPATED IN THE DESIGN OF THE EXPLORER SPORTTRAC CONCEPT TRUCK

