



DAMIEN VAN BRANDENBURG

Damien is an architect who works in the Dunedin studio of Architecture Van Brandenburg. Among the studio's current projects is designing the headquarters for a leading Chinese fashion label in Shenzhen. Damien provides a perspective on talent from someone who works globally while living in New Zealand.

1. In the context of your professional background, what does 'talent' mean to you?

It's an attitude. I think it's the determination and the focus to push yourself to the boundaries and exceed your abilities, taking on as much responsibility as you can in the process of doing so. You'll find that we have quite a young office here. There are nine of us that work here and we are all very young, all very passionate and all very enthusiastic about what we're doing. That's what really drives us and pushes us through to be able to create what we create.

2. Are you aware of any talent gaps that exist or might arise within the next ten years?

We're very design focused and we have developed design styles and techniques that we use to do our work. The gap I see that is going to need to be developed in a stronger sense is handling the marketing, dealing with social media and promoting ourselves nationally and internationally. That role is being developed at the moment and we're hoping that it really comes into light over the

next few years. But the design talent we have here, that's the core business and the core focus of what talent is needed.

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3. How do successful organisations attract, keep and grow talent?

We have an interesting system here, that is not even a system, that has just developed by itself where we have relationships with universities and polytechs. We have a very open-door policy where we allow people to come into our

offices and see how we work and see what we're working on. Through that, we find we've had students who have started off as students, become interns and developed into full-time staff that have exceeded in talent, developing projects and the business.

We find people come and sometimes their initial roles don't turn out to be what their strongest talents are. Within the first one, two or three months, it emerges what their skills are and how they can fit into the practice.

So in terms of gaining them, it's not a problem, they approach us. Retaining them – they're excited about what they do so they stay, and we give them the opportunity to explore ideas and push ideas. And they have the technologies available to them within the office, some very cutting-edge technologies to explore these ideas.

4. Think about talent hubs around the world, what is cool and why?

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play, and having the freedom to be able to do that. So that is why our space is like this. We've got the creative space to allow creativity to take place.

5. Can you assess New Zealand's performance in attracting talent on a global scale?

On a global scale, I wouldn't consider it to be at a high level, unfortunately. New Zealand has a lot of talent, a lot of people doing incredible work internationally. I don't think New Zealand on the whole could be considered as doing well in retaining talent – there are many other attractive opportunities in other countries. There is certainly room for that to develop.

6. What does New Zealand need to do in order to attract, keep and grow talent?

It's a big animal that you're trying to track. There are many aspects to it, ranging from the political to the social. I think you find interesting places, like for me from a design point of view, such as Copenhagen, Melbourne, Tokyo, cities that are considered to be designer cities, attracting designers. And that developed in that environment. I think New Zealand's urban design and infrastructure plays a big role in that. I think that is something that certainly needs to be developed to be of a scale and stature of those kinds of design-hub cities. When you allow that infrastructure to take place and the possibilities within that, it really creates spaces and places allowing people to develop and grow within the context.

In saying that, there are some fields such as IT where the physical being isn't as important, because of the digital age, and the way information can be transferred digitally.

The location isn't as important any more. But developing those physical spaces that people are living in, the context of their surrounding environment, allows for the creativity to develop and grow, which I think is an important part of attracting people within cities and the environment of New Zealand.

7. Any final thoughts for young people?

Whatever you do, you need to apply yourself to your highest capabilities, and that's where talent really emerges.

The ability to focus and dedicate yourself to whatever industry or profession or activity you are interested in allows for you to develop yourself to your highest potential. I think that takes a lot of hard work, a lot of dedication and focus.

I would say whatever you're interested in doing, focus on that, and really explore it to its full potential.

And allow yourself still to be able to be broad enough to explore other ideas as well, not to get so hung up on one particular idea that you limit yourself in other fields. But when you find yourself passionate about something, really push it to its full potential. Allow yourself to give it your all.

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Interviewed by Darren Zhang at Architecture Van Brandenburg in Dunedin, on 4 June 2013. Photograph provided by Isabella Harrex.