

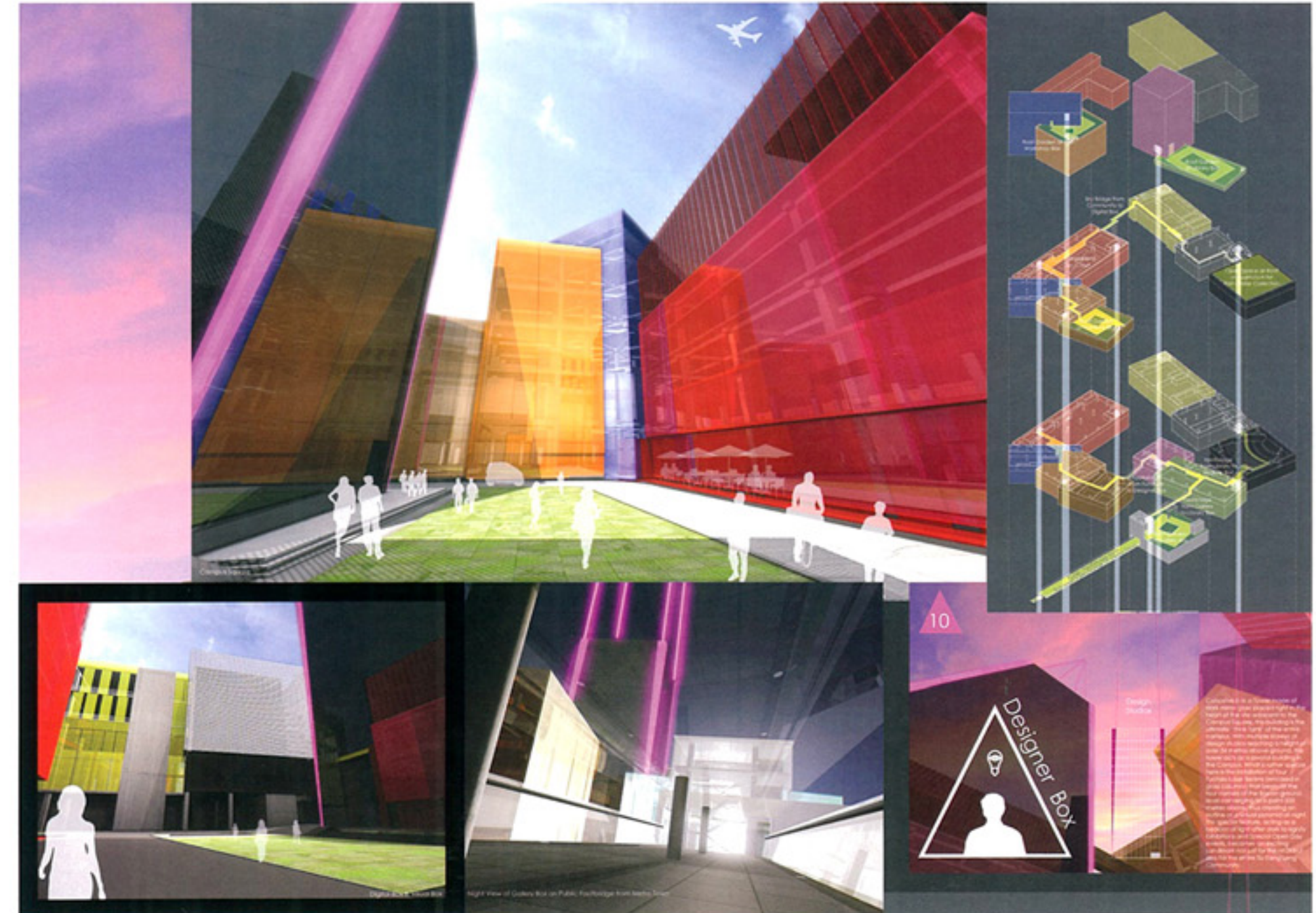
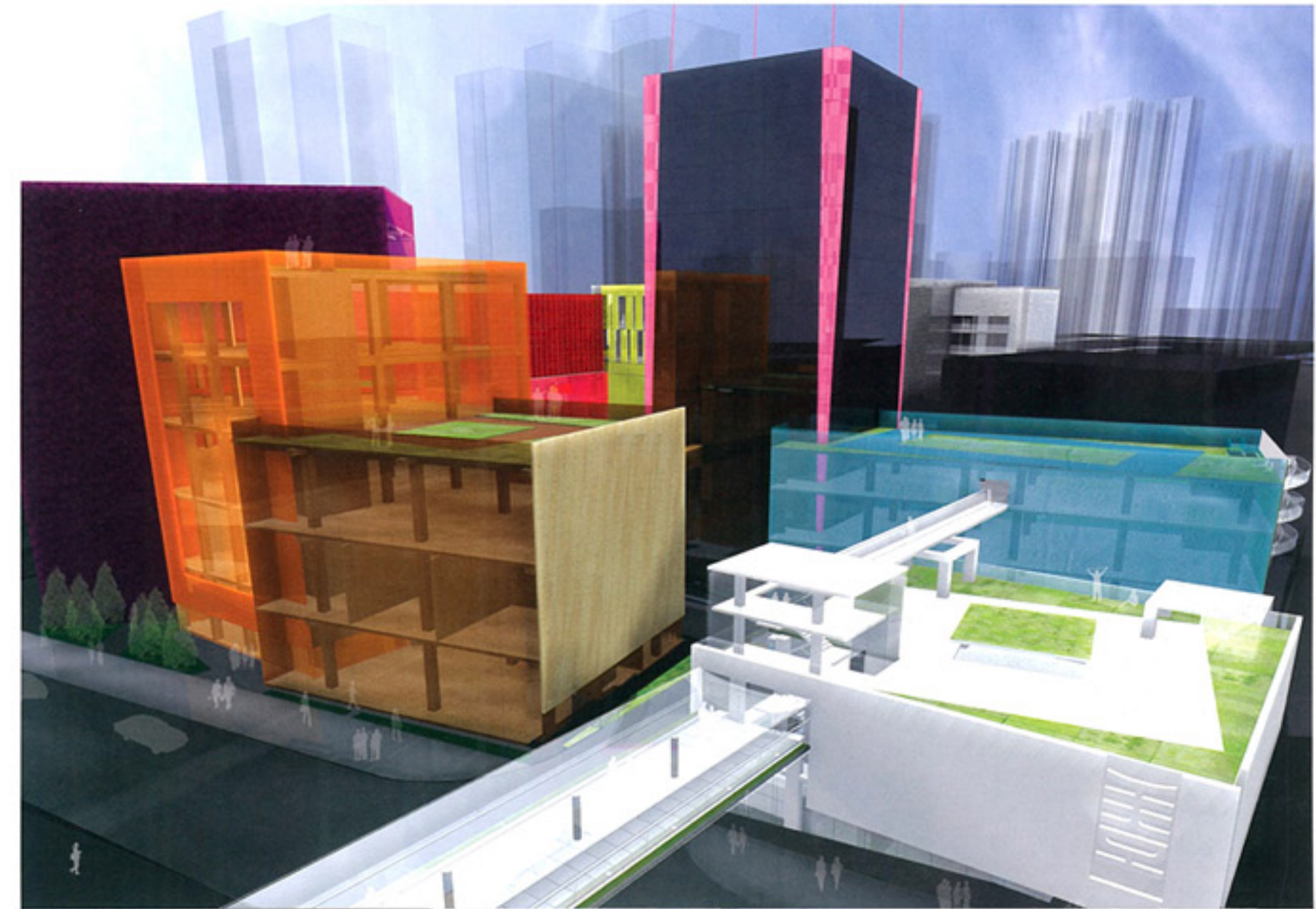
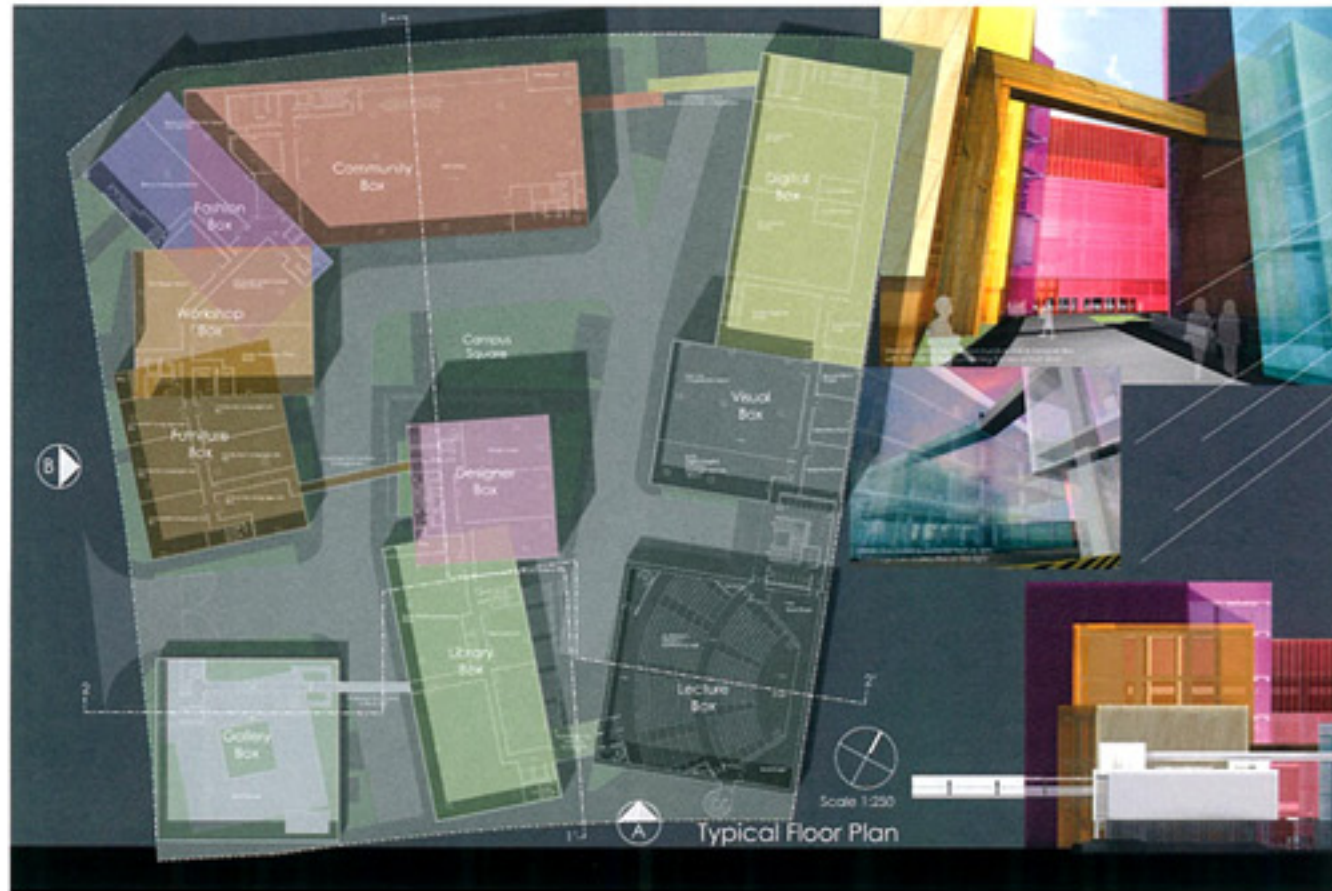
Alexander Wong Architects Ltd, Hong Kong

The proposal of Hong Kong firm **Asiacity** goes furthest toward the 'separate blocks' parti, literally creating an ensemble of near-autonomous boxes assigned to different uses. Dubbed 'Out of the Box', the scheme's programmatic sense is irrefutable, but likely lost precisely because the jury (or the HKDI) wanted one building – and one building identity – rather than numerous ones. **Asiacity's** approach, however, holds the compelling logic that the school will inevitably be a 'village' of pursuits. As hard as you try to group fashion students with engineering, or product designers with graphics students, the individual specialties are just that, individual. In an ideal world, perhaps, a textile designer would actually integrate thoughts, ideas, interests and failures with an interior designer. And some of that might happen, but if the new school tries too hard to force synergies upon the students and faculty, the whole enterprise will disappoint. As seductive as it is to imagine students mingling in the cafes, library, hallways and courtyards, sparking inventive collisions of youthful intellect, what's mostly going to happen is a lot of people struggling to keep up with the enormous quantity of learning in any single field, not to mention dealing with nearby design egos and staying awake through their next charrette. Which in no way questions the validity of the whole institute in the first place. There are myriad advantages to combining all these people and activities under one roof. It's just that **Asiacity** is saying they can also have their own corners. Another positive aspect to this scheme is the potential for enhancing the connections or pride students have with their own specialties. By allowing obvious identification of the departments, the building might have encouraged stronger emotional attachments to the institute. Who knows?

The boxes include Digital, Library, Lecture, Visual, Community, Fashion, Gallery, Designer, Workshop and Furniture. Overlap among departments is obviously incorporated, too, thus answering the HKDI's desire for integration and synergy.

Taking it all to a level deeper, **Asiacity's** scheme explores the activities through materiality of the building's respective skins. The possibilities in this are exciting. Imagine what could have been made of the digital box, to take one example. Certain functions, like the library and recreation, are also given their material day. **Asiacity** intends for the detailed articulation of the boxes to be left 'open', pointing out that design itself is constantly evolving, and that departments over time may wish to re-present themselves. Coloured glazing is proposed as a principal cladding surface, to give the buildings transparency and excitement.

The parti of **Asiacity's** project resembles nothing so much as an Italian town piazza, with an apparently randomly shaped negative space formed by a jumble of small accretive structures. Near the centre is the primary edifice (the duomo and/or palazzo comunale), in this instance the Design Box, a tower of studios, attached to the Library Box. Lord knows the historic model works, and even at the scale of the HKDI, might have provided a vibrant community space, which would have leaked out in various directions along access routes, not in this case, to surrounding countryside and roads to Rome, but alas, to the dehumanised visual brutality of modern Tiu Keng Leng. So be it. At least entering the HKDI, or once within it, students and profs would have experienced an oasis of human scale.



Asiacity's proposal carried a considerable risk, though. The realisation of architecture is rarely if ever an absolute process. Intentions withstand (or succumb to) an unavoidable process of evolving budgets, engineering, programmes, material choices, etc. In projects that begin as design competitions, this process is exaggerated. What in Asiacity's plan is a charming ensemble, and in renderings an exciting montage, could easily have suffered a bout of Hong Kong cold feet, been clad in reflective glass or worse, tile, and turned into another Taikoo Plaza. The scheme depends heavily on the close guidance of a talented design dictator and the dutiful compliance of a faithful (or awestruck) client. Lacking a single, diagram-simple image, this scheme would have been particularly vulnerable. The intentionally ramshackle parti might have come out a mess or, in skilled hands, a wonderfully lively place full of constant visual interest and instances of beauty. Isn't that a fairly model context for inspiring students of design?

Alexander Wong
Asiacity Architects

hinge: What is the central theme or concept of your entry?

Alexander Wong: Our entry entitled, 'A Microcosm of a Global Design Community', is one without any pre-conceived idea of style. The campus is a collection of pure, abstract and transparent boxes in vibrant colours. While each box houses a group of related disciplines with its own unique qualities (materiality and tectonics), related disciplines (e.g. Fashion, Digital Art, Furniture, etc.) can cross-breed and develop new identities. In addition, these boxes are built from the ground up in a simple fashion, allowing them to evolve naturally as their identities must never be "pre-determined". Ultimately, the central theme here is to create a design village of innovation providing a voyage of discovery where people can 'think outside of the box'.

Another core idea here is to grow with the existing community on a grass-root level – start small and evolve with the existing Tiu Keng Leng (TKL) Community which consists of many newly completed residential and mixed-use developments. The outlook of the campus, mainly composed of glass boxes, are inviting rather than intimidating as none of these boxes are placed on a podium. The buildings are mostly transparent, encouraging positive interaction on the ground level without disturbing the surrounding community. Besides sharing communal facilities in sports and a canteen with an outdoor cafe facing the Campus Square, the people of TKL will become friends with this creative institute by regularly commissioning students on projects, large or small – like designing a new wedding gown; or a video of a baptism; or the interior of an apartment, etc. It is only through real life working experiences and experimentations that the students can try out their inventive ideas and learn more from design to budgeting to project management.

h: What originally inspired you to develop the project in terms of its appearance and form?

AW: We were looking at the pure and abstract boxes created by the American Sculptor Donald Judd and found them really inspiring and appropriate for what we were trying to achieve – a sense of place without being totally subservient to a hierarchy based on pre-conceived notions of how spaces and forms should be dictated within an existing urban fabric.

h: How did you incorporate green elements into your design? Would you say these are central or peripheral components of your overall project?

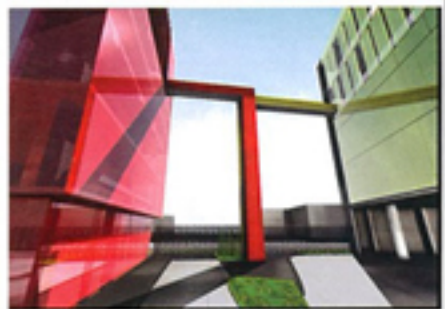
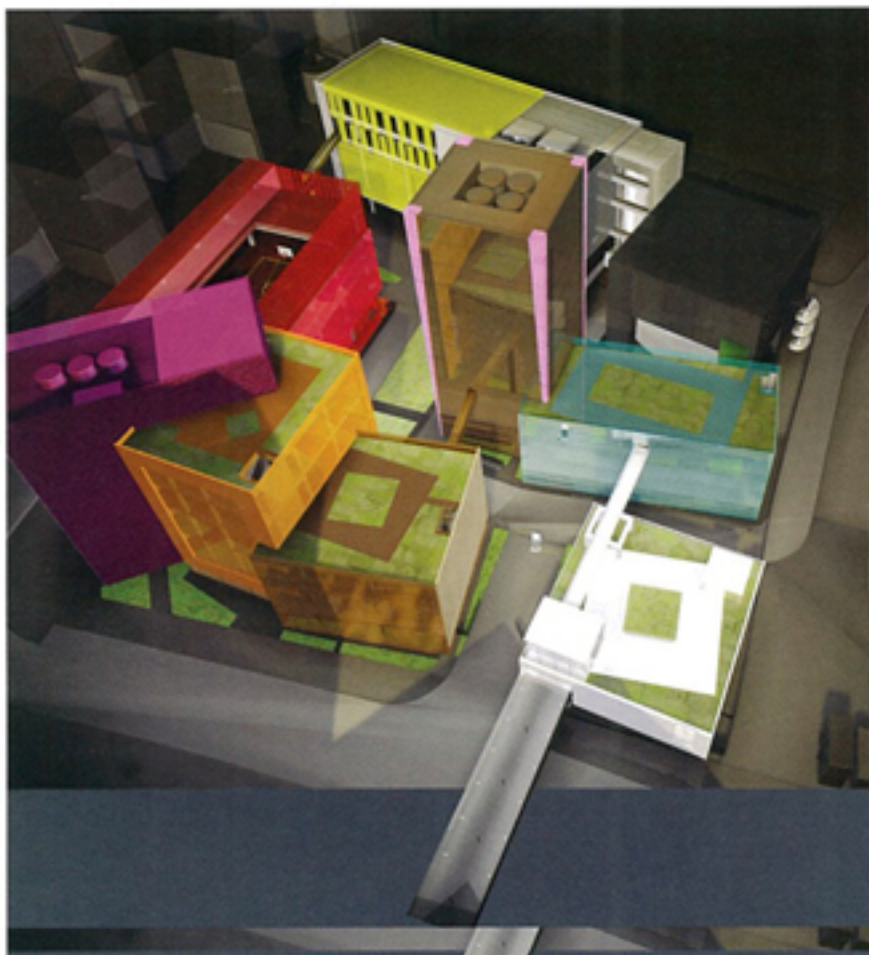
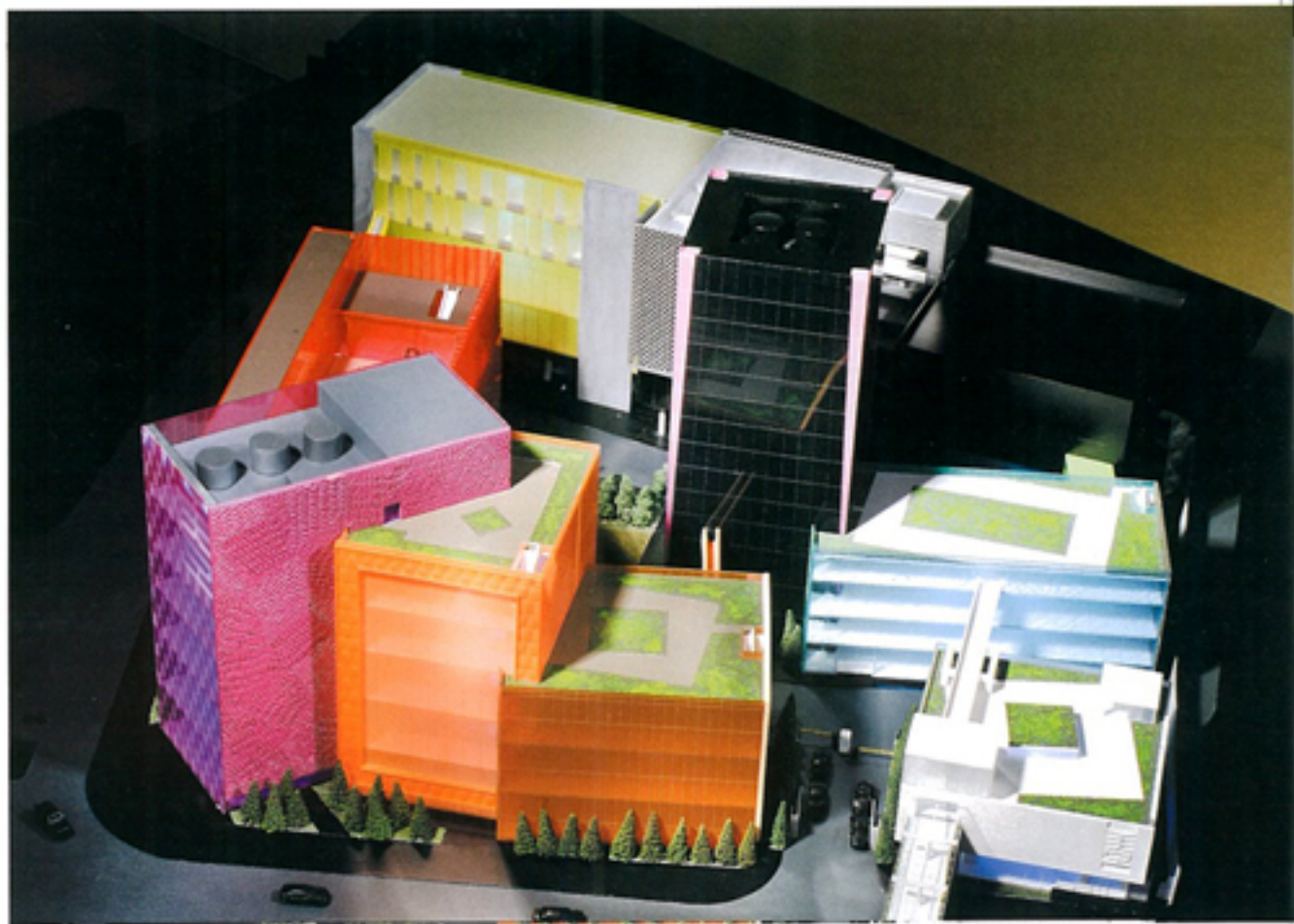
AW: With limited area for landscaping and circulation, this scheme utilizes roof gardens. Moreover, some of the vertical planes of the boxes have been transformed into vertical gardens and waterfalls to increase the surface areas for natural elements. In effect, these horizontal and vertical planes of landscaping help cool the buildings and provide treed areas for the community.

h: How did you envision the project in accordance to its surroundings?

AW: Surrounding buildings are on huge podiums. Our intention is to contrast this approach and create a sense of community by creating a vibrant village – almost like a Renaissance hill-town – and integrate peoples' lifestyles. There is a Campus Square in the middle which can be transformed into a Market Square for design students to showcase and sell their creations.

h: What materials did you choose to employ and why?

AW: The structure of each box comprises a simple column and beam system enclosed by one or two solid



walls. Glass walls with tinted glazing allow for maximum visual access to the outside world and natural light. They also serve as coloured lenses whereupon students may draw inspiration. In contrast, the solid walls anchor the box and houses most of the services of the building. This system is not only easy to construct but also encourages maximum flexibility, providing open-ended expansion possibilities.

h: Are there any 'Chinese' or Asian elements in your project?

AW: Our idea of creating boxes originates from 'Chinese Boxes'. This concept alludes to the interconnectedness of life – there are worlds within worlds and communities within communities.

h: Any comment on the competition's judging process and the final outcome?

AW: Needless to say, this is not an easy question. We know for a fact that the judging process has been handled with utmost professionalism and we have the highest respect for the jury panel. The outcome does reflect the concerns and differences in our interpretations of what an "iconic" building for the HKDI should look like. We are not simply referring to a matter of size or scale here, but rather the meaning of an "architectural icon" (particularly for a design institute) in 2007. If one were to research universities in the past, a majority of

these iconic symbols were intended to be somewhat understated. Our approach of creating something that is closer to the human scale here, one that is rooted firmly to the ground, one that has no preconceived notion of style, and most importantly, one that could evolve as time goes by, is deliberate and strategic. We do not wish to build something that could not transform itself easily or freely with time. Otherwise, the design, no matter how "iconic" it seems at present, will look very dated within the next 10 years. "Evolutionary Design" is the future and we believe any design institute should first and foremost reflect this vital trend.

In the end, as the HKDI develops, it has to grow and evolve rapidly, making breakthroughs in design on a regular basis – competing locally, regionally and then globally. Each department has to blossom according to their respective strengths within their own disciplines. It is vital that these boxes start off being pure, remain flexible and are allowed to transform themselves into something greater as they age. The campus is designed as "see through" as possible, creating opportunities for the different departments to compete positively amongst themselves. And undoubtedly, out of these boxes, revolutionary design ideas will emerge, creating values for everyone in Hong Kong and beyond.