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Design Duo

Is it possible to live *and* work together? A Vancouver couple says 'yes!' — and tells us how.

攜手設計幸福生活

——訪建築設計師John Henshaw和室內設計師Joy Chao夫婦

生活中幸福的夫妻，工作上默契的拍檔，Henshaw夫婦就是這樣一對完美的組合。

Chinese Text by **Rui Chen** English Text by **Catherine Dunwoody**

John Henshaw和Joy Chao夫婦在Gastown的家中
John Henshaw, architect and Joy Chao, interior designer, at home in Gastown

「有時，John會說，好吧！我們現在不要再談工作了。我們慢慢學會了劃分這條界線，現在可以為我們的二人世界騰出些時間了。」

——Joy Chao

維繫幸福的婚姻並非易事，擁有一份成功的事業也並非易事，那有沒有人能兩者兼得，而湊巧又是與自己的另一半攜手達成的呢？John Henshaw和Joy Chao就是這樣一對難得的賢伉儷。兩人的婚姻至今已經走過了十六個年頭。與此同時，兩人共同經營的建築設計公司John Henshaw Architect Inc.，也一步步走向成功。更令人吃驚的是，這樣一對完美夫妻的典範，居然是一位英裔，一位華裔，來自完全不同的文化背景。他們是如何走到一起？又是如何在生活和工作中取得平衡的呢？

命中注定的相遇

1989年，畢業於渥太華卡爾頓大學的John創辦了屬於自己的建築設計公司。John說：「Joy的父親曾經是我的客戶。」而正是這樁生意，讓John遇到了自己未來的妻子。原來，Joy的父親是一位臺灣的地產開發商，英文講不好，談項目時，還在讀書的Joy就前來給自己的父親當翻譯。John當時就留意到了這位華裔女孩。「John讓我兼職來他的公司裏幫忙，他當時有一些亞洲來的客戶。」Joy告訴我們：「我那時還在英屬哥倫比亞大學學寫作，但John覺得我有做設計的潛質，鼓勵我去學室內設計。」

不知為甚麼，Joy就這樣對John言聽計從，直到2001年，她正式加盟了John的公司，兩人的感情也起了一些微妙的變化。後來的事情，自不必說，默契的工作夥伴終於成了一對幸福的夫妻。這樣從工作關係發展來的感情，讓婚後的兩人經常沉浸在項目討論中「無法自拔」。「有時，John會說，好吧！我們現在不要再談工作了。」Joy笑著說：「我們慢慢學會了劃分這條界線，現在可以為我們的二人世界騰出些時間了。」

東西反串的家庭生活

不同文化背景的夫妻，經常因思想觀念和風俗習慣的不同，而產生一些糾紛，John和Joy是否也有同樣的困擾呢？「也許John對中國人的瞭解程度超過我。」Joy說：「他從上世紀八十年代就開始為中國客戶工作。而我15歲時，就搬到了北美，我的祖父和父親都不是很傳統的中國人，他們都非常西化。」

除了比Joy更瞭解中國客人的需求，John的性格也有著東方人細膩的一面。「他很善於觀察，還會解讀一

Relationships are tricky business at best, let alone combining marriage with running a successful architectural firm, and keeping both intact.

Vancouver architect John Henshaw and interior designer Joy Chao may well be the poster couple for striking that fine balance, but not without many years behind them of sorting out what works for them professionally, and personally.

After graduating from Carleton University in Ottawa, Henshaw eventually started up his own firm in Vancouver in 1989. “Joy’s dad was one of my clients,” he says. “I did a number of projects for her family.” The two met when Chao acted as translator for her Taiwanese father, who was a developer in the construction industry.

The couple built a friendship, and “John asked me to help out part-time with the books at his firm, since he had a few Asian clients,” says Chao. “I was still in university — studying creative writing, and eventually graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from The University of British Columbia. However, John thought I had an eye for design, and encouraged me to go back to school to study interior design.”

In 2001, Chao officially joined Henshaw’s firm, and by then the couple’s friendship had blossomed into romance. Has it been smooth sailing ever since?

“The downfall with working and living together means you really don’t have time to be apart,” she says. “You have to separate work and life. There are times where John has to say, OK, we have to stop talking about work now.” Chao laughs. “We learned slowly to draw that line, so we have time to ourselves,” she adds.

A separation of workload is a key secret to their success. Joy has taken on the role of manager, while John focuses on the design. But there are challenges when it comes to their personalities clashing in business. Henshaw laughs and begins, “We are two Type A’s, so there has been some head butting.” Chao adds, “You have to learn to give, and to

些客人的肢體語言。我通常都在忙著翻譯，沒這個心思，我們這方面挺互補。不過，連我們的客人都發現了，John筷子用的比我好。」說到這裏，Joy呵呵地笑了起來。

對於Joy的粗線條，John選擇了遷就。他曾對Joy說：「我們家就像電視劇裏演的一樣，每次你這位女主角跳起來發一通脾氣，問題就立馬解決了，一切恢復正常。」John的身上有著溫文爾雅的英倫紳士風範，「他更保守，更有耐性。」Joy這樣評價自己的丈夫。「像所有的婚姻一樣，你得邊過日子邊學習。」Joy繼續說：「我想，對於任何一對來自不同文化背景的夫妻來說，有一個包容的態度很重要。我外放，John內斂，但我們過得挺好。」

事業上的共同追求

在John Henshaw Architect，Joy擔當著經理的角色，而John則側重設計工作部份。「我們倆性格不太一樣，所以總有發生爭執的時候。」John微笑著說。Joy在一旁補充：「你得學著付出，學著讓步。有時，也會想，哦！天啊！我們到底做了些甚麼？」Joy一邊說，一邊做了個仰天長嘆的姿勢。但當她轉身望向自己的丈夫時，濃濃的愛意卻從嘴角的微笑和溫柔的眼神中，自然流露出來。

「當你開始經營一個生意時，需要投入大量時間。」John平靜地說：「我早上離家比Joy早一些，她來辦公室晚一些，但會一直待到晚上。」也許有人覺得這樣「你來我往」的生活不是太理想的方式，但對這對夫妻來說，卻可以擁有一段難得的「個人時間」。「整天一起工作，一起生活，我們真的沒多少時間分開。」Joy說。

做為一個工作團隊，他們的設計理念很一致，那就是簡潔。「我們總會試著找到一個項目的精髓部份。」John說：「也會去尋找它獨特的一面。我更喜歡具有實用性和功能性的空間設計，這對我來說異常重要。」Joy對此很贊同，補充說：「最有趣的是，每一個項目都是全新的。我們會盡力讓設計更具恆久性，讓它不會很快過時。」

在這麼多年的辛苦努力之後，我們問起John，在他的心目中，甚麼是最好的回報。他笑著回答說：「是下一個項目！」一旁的Joy心領神會地笑了笑說：「當客人再次回來和我們合作時，那是最好的回報。或者顧客變成了我們的朋友，邀請我們去他們家裏做客。看到他們在新家住得舒適又快樂，那是最棒的！」

忙了一天後，Henshaws夫婦會回到他們Koret大廈的頂層公寓內，這處位於Gastown的面積有1,400平方呎的公寓，是他們的家。「我們讓內部設計盡量簡潔乾淨，這樣可以放鬆身心。它的戶外空間也很不錯，被一圍陽臺包圍著。」John認真地為我們描述著。

至於兩人最愛的旅行地，蒙特利爾正是不二之選。「我們喜愛建築、美食和時尚，我們喜愛那座城市的秋天。」Joy說。當他們去海灘度假時，Joy常會把自己埋在歷史小說裏，而John會在一旁彈著他的吉他演繹一首新歌。可惜這樣美好的日子對他們來說總是太過短暫，一眨眼的功夫，他們又要投入到緊張的工作之中了。

compromise. There are still days where we think, oh my, what have we done?” she says, throwing her head back. But she rights herself and smiles at him with open affection. Clearly, with 16 years behind them, with both residential and commercial clients, they are certainly doing something right.

As a team, their design philosophy is simple. “We try to find the essence of each project, to create functionality,” says Henshaw. “We look for the unique side of it. I prefer functional, livable spaces — it’s incredibly important to me.” Joy agrees and adds, “The fun part for us is that each project is always new. We look for something that lasts, design that doesn’t date quickly.”

Has the couples’ differing cultures affected their business or personal lives? Chao says, “from a design perspective, Chinese clients are always worried about the Feng Shui. But they love our westernized design. John probably understands Chinese idiosyncrasies better than I do, because he started working with Asian clients in the 80s. I moved to North America when I was 15, and my grandfather and my dad were not very traditional, both quite westernized.”

John and Joy feel that Canadian clients are straightforward. “If they don’t like something, they say so. Some of the Chinese would rather not say if they do not like something, so they don’t offend us,” says Chao. The design team makes a point with potential clients: “We ask them to not go around in circles, and just flat out tell us if they don’t like it,” she says.

“John probably reads our Asian clients better than I do,” Chao says. “He is observant, and watches body language. I am often too busy translating, and don’t have that luxury. We try to compensate for each other.” And she adds with a chuckle, “he even uses chopsticks better than I do, and our clients notice.”

In their private life, John noticed early in the marriage that his wife’s Chinese family communicated differently than his. Joy remembers her husband telling her, “your family is like a sitcom, you blow up, get over it quickly and then everything is fine.” John’s background is English, “more reserved, more of a slow simmer,” says Chao.



John Henshaw和Joy Chao在溫哥華建築設計的作品
Homes by the architecture and interior design duo John Henshaw and Joy Chao, Vancouver, BC

“Like any marriage, you kind of learn as you go along,” says Chao. “I think any couples who come from two different backgrounds should keep an open mind. I’m more extroverted, John is more introverted, but it works.”

After years in the industry, surely there are projects both rewarding, and challenging, for the couple. When asked what he feels is the most rewarding from his body of work, Henshaw laughs, saying “the next project!”

Chao adds with a warm smile, “When a client comes back, to work with us again, it is incredibly rewarding. Or if they become our friends, inviting John and I back to their homes after they have settled in, and we see how comfortable they are living there, that is just great.”

As far as challenging projects go, the couple are presently working on an office building in China, which will likely involve them for two years. However, what was difficult before is now much easier due to email and digital photography. Working

remotely on huge projects is no longer as daunting a task.

When the Henshaws call it a day, and kick back at home, they do so in their 1,400 square foot Gastown loft, in Vancouver’s old Koret building. “It’s big and white. We kept it very simple to clear our sight lines and minds after a busy day. It has a great outdoor space, with a wrap around balcony.” “But not cocktail service,” Chao adds with a wink. The couple takes full advantage of living in Gastown, listing L’Abbatoir and Chill Winston as their favorite hangouts.

A mutual love of travel keeps this couple connected, with Montreal being a favorite destination. “We love the architecture, the food, the fashion — and we love the city in the fall,” Joy says. When it comes to slowing it down with a beach vacation, Joy’s nose is usually buried in a historical novel, while John learns to play a new song on his guitar. But pretty soon it’s time to put those intertwining minds to work once more.

Exterior shot by Barry Calhoun; Kitchen by Hugh Zhao; Foyer by Janis Nicolay.