Two enterprising young women have built a successful corporate design business founded on their idea that interior design should first of all be functional. "Artistic creativity comes next," according to Lynne Poelmann, one half of the management of the Poelmann Chan Group, founded in 1999 and with a current turnover of HK$20 million. Her partner Emily Chan concurs and the two, who seem to work in perfect harmony, are known locally as the Yin and Yang of the design world.

How did you two meet?
Poelmann: We were working together in PSI [Planning Services International], a corporate design company. We found that we worked quite well together and shared a very similar outlook. I was going to set up my own company and Emily became interested and we decided to establish Poelmann Chan together. I was born in Hong Kong of British parentage, Emily is Hong Kong Chinese, so we feel we represent the fusion of east and west influences that is so typical of Hong Kong.

What were the foundations of the new company?
Poelmann: I worked with PSI for 10 years as a corporate designer and had been running the corporate section. Emily and I felt we had a good enough relationship with our clients that if we formed our own company they would come with us. And so it proved. We were generating income within three months. We took a bit of a risk by employing a professional accountant, an experienced administrator and a skilled marketing person right away. We were not going to attempt to do everything ourselves since we felt that would stifle our growth. We decided to specialize in corporate design, because that was the area of expertise we both had.

Chan: We carefully screened everyone, and took only the best.

Do you find any disadvantage in the fact you are both female?
Poelmann: There are probably some businesses we will never get our foot into because we are women but in general we have not found it to be an issue, probably because we do not think it is an issue. There are only a few women running corporate design firms in Hong Kong although there are many female designers. I would encourage more females to take the next step into senior management/ownership roles. It worked for Emily and I, plus we combined it with families, so do not let others convince you it is not possible.

Chan: I find that as women we also have an advantage because we are very good at detailing, and the staff person at the level we deal with is likely to be female because we deal with middle-managerial staff not top level management in working out our projects. We can relate well to women in middle-management who often would prefer to deal with their own sex. We find that women executives are very supportive of us.

Could you tell us about your backgrounds?
Chan: I was born in Hong Kong. I was determined to educate myself, so I worked for two years after high school for an interior design firm and then I went to the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in Australia for an interior design degree. I came back to Hong Kong in 1993 and got a job as an interior designer with First Pacific Davies where I worked for a year doing corporate design. Then I joined PSI, where I met Lynne. I am now writing my dissertation for a Masters in Facility Management.

Poelmann: I was born in Hong Kong since my father worked for the Hong Kong Government. I went to KG-5 school in Hong Kong, and then took a degree in geography in London. I thought of doing urban planning, but decided to go into interior design, thinking mainly of residential work. I then took a one-year course in interior design at Inchbald School of Design in London.

When I came back to Hong Kong I took a job in a corporate design office and after working there for a year or so decided that was what I wanted to do. Hong Kong was booming at that time and I immediately got the opportunity to work on some large projects and decided I would stay in this field. I joined PSI 13 years ago. My husband Oscar Poelmann and I have three daughters, and I think that having children gives you a better perspective on your professional life. You realize the problems connected with the job are not the end of the world, plus you organize your time far more efficiently.

What bothers you most about your profession?
Poelmann: The interior design profession in Hong Kong is not regulated. Anyone can call himself or herself an interior designer. This is very dangerous as companies may be inclined to employ designers because they are cheap, but who may not be properly qualified, and since very often the whole interior of the building has to be reconstructed the dangers are apparent. There are organizations such as the Interior Design Association and they can be consulted about individual designers. In the present cost-cutting climate there are far too many companies that are employing ill-qualified interior designers and this could have serious repercussions in the future.

What drives your approach to design?
Poelmann: We both believe that functionality is of prime importance in interior design. It is no good creating some extremely artistic project that will win awards if it does not fulfill the purpose for which it was intended. We also believe that an interior created mainly to be functional will have its own beauty of line and form, because it will exclude unnecessary ornamentation and extraneous pieces. We do not believe in nihilism and our interiors are by no means stark, but we consider first of all what use will be made of the interior and try to make it as efficient as possible, while still being pleasing to the eye. It is no good, for instance, putting Epstein-like sculptures in a space that will be used for the passage of many people during the day. Too many designers are self-consciously artistic to attract publicity.

Any Advice for fresh graduates starting out as interior designers?
Poelmann: To women we would say – do not undervalue yourself. Women traditionally undervalue what they can bring to their profession. Do not be put off by the fact that it is a technical job and do not allow yourself to be intimidated by men in your profession. Have confidence in yourself. Design architects of either sex should realize that when they have a degree from college it is only the start of the learning process. Practical experience is everything. Also they should make sure they get into the right sort of company. When we are hiring, experience with the right sort of company influences us most, plus, of course, integrity. You have to have a clear idea of what field of design you want to enter. These days consulting may not earn you a living, as many people are no longer willing to pay consultants. Design build is the predominant way of working, and this can lead to designers lowering standards of design and taking short cuts. If possible, try to get into a firm, which still practices some consultancy. You will learn a lot more and be exposed to higher professional standards.

Chan: Beginners should be adaptable and hard-working and be willing to put that much extra into the job. We also advise beginners not to be too anxious to skip jobs. Try and stay with one firm for a reasonable amount of time; it shows commitment.