James Law, founder & CEO, James Law Cybertecture

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When Hong Kong architect James Law saw some unused concrete water pipes in a construction yard, he had an idea: transforming them into affordable housing in what is the world's most expensive real estate market.

Law unveiled a prototype of his OPod Tube House in Hong Kong last November, and it has since attracted inquiries from as far away as New Zealand, South Africa and Hawaii. He is now building the first OPod multi-storey building in a new development in Shenzhen, China called 289 Digitland, to be ready in July. He is also working with the Hong Kong government to build OPod affordable housing for young people in Kowloon's To Kwa Wan neighborhood this year, where a portion of rent collected will be invested on behalf of the tenant.

Started as part personal project and part experiment, Law created the tube homes out of the 2.5-meter diameter concrete pipes, with living, cooking and bathroom spaces for one or two people, all within 100 square feet. A bench converts into a bed and the door is unlocked with a smartphone. The cost per unit:
US$15,000. The OPod can be stacked or slotted between buildings and moved to different locations.

The OPod Tube Houses are the latest example of creative yet practical private-sector ideas to try to solve the housing crisis that's gripped so many cities around the world. In New York, creative agency Framlab last year proposed honeycomb-like clusters of hexagonal pods attached to buildings for the homeless. Car brand MINI, owned by BMW, proposed a concept for co-living spaces at Milan Design Week two years ago.

In Hong Kong, the world's most expensive real estate market, the challenge of finding housing is particularly acute. Many live in spaces so tight they are known as coffin homes, unable to afford anything bigger. Last month, a 209-square-foot apartment on the western edge of Hong Kong Island sold for about US$1 million.

Had the problem of affordable housing been on your mind?

I was born and bred in Hong Kong. And I'm an architect. So I'm especially sensitive to the issues of housing. Hong Kong has become such an inordinately expensive place. The younger generation, even though they've studied hard, worked hard, they struggle to gain independence, to have a home and to feel secure. Many are pushed to live in squalid conditions, pushed to live in caged homes, or what are often referred to as coffin homes.

But housing is expensive for all generations. Why did you focus on the young?

I think different sections of the community have different ways of dealing with this. Older people tend to have more money. This is why I focused on young people. I never thought my OPod would be a real solution. It is a spark of creativity, a spark of optimism that is particularly important for younger people when they are starting out in life.

Hong Kong has been a prime example of a city in the 21st century that has become so successful, it has become a victim of its success. So many people around the world want to invest in property here that prices are astronomically inflated. Unfortunately the indigenous people, young people, are not necessarily elevated by this. They get left behind. They are no longer on the crest of the wave, but behind the wave.

The result is a fracturing of society. Those who don't have much will have it worse. The middle class in
between struggle too and the rich will see a huge inflation in their wealth.

**The OPod is so very different from the other buildings you've designed which are high-end, futuristic, glass-clad office and residential buildings. How does the OPod fit into this universe?**

Every project I do fits into the Cybertecture universe. My work embraces diversity of approach and aesthetics. However they all share the same values of Cybertecture which is innovation, creativity and modernity.

![Image of OPod](image)

**We have seen architects such as yourself coming up with ideas for affordable housing - in Hong Kong, but also in New York and in Milan - in instances where governments are lacking resources or ideas to do so. Can we talk about what sort of lens an architect brings to urban living issues?**

Some would argue that governments and institutions are necessarily the only people that should be responsible for coming up with a solution. Often they can't, they're too busy trying to keep the ship afloat. If you look back in history, architects have played a role in shaping the grand boulevards of Paris, in postulating how nations should be masterplanned. Architects used to recognized as thought leaders. In current times, architects are relegated much more to a service provider, commercial kind of work. I don't see why the role should not be reactivated.

**I see that the first OPod multi-storey building is to be built this year in Shenzhen, China. Who is funding it?**

After we developed and showed our first OPod in Kowloon, Hong Kong, it caused a lot of noise. A developer in Shenzhen got in touch with us. They thought it would be very interesting to add the OPod to one of their projects, which is turning an old, dilapidated factory into a cultural and design center and commune called 289 Digitland. I went to see the building and it is absolutely huge, tens of thousands of square feet. We came up with the idea of putting a mini building in front of the building - six OPods, three on the first level, two on the next, and one at the top, to form a pyramid shape. These micro-units would be attractive to young, small start-up design companies. That will be ready July 2018.
Any other OPod projects in the works?

The Hong Kong government has granted me a piece of land in Hong Kong to build Hong Kong's first OPod settlement for young people. I hope to finish it within this year, or at most, early next year. I am forming a consortium of non-governmental groups, construction companies and others to donate consultancy and building materials and actually construct it.

It is right in the heart of Kowloon, in a very old district called To Kwa Wan. Subject to final design, it should be 20 units, probably on two levels. The plan is to rent out each unit for HK$3000 (US$380) a month, to young people, means tested. HK$1000 will be rent and management costs, HK$2000 will be saved and invested for tenants and returned to them when they leave, with interest. So there is a social component.

Beyond Hong Kong, we have been approached by many, many parties to construct and supply OPods for everything from reconstruction of shantytowns in South Africa to affordable housing in Hawaii to hostels in New Zealand and also low-cost accommodation for the World Expo in Dubai in 2020. Lots of different people are contacting us, although none of those have really started yet.

We have touched a nerve. What we call the ability to afford a decent life is increasingly difficult in so many places. Perhaps this is the first step in a revolution for a new kind of housing for people around the world.