Blueprint for China

Following the hoopla of the 2008 Summer Olympics, China is now concentrating on its next global showcase, the Shanghai Expo 2010, and new structures blending tradition and trends are changing city skylines across the country.

UK-based architect Will Alsop OBE, of SMC Alsop (Raffles City Beijing sales office, Shanghai Kiss), admits to originally having an "aversion" to China due in part to its emerging market status, which he now sees as turning a corner.

"What happened, particularly in places like Shanghai, was that a lot of US consultants had gone in and secured a project or two with very low fees and pulled things like other failed projects out of the bottom drawer." So there were a lot of new buildings I'd seen before in places like Portland in the US, appearing on city skylines.

But the situation is changing, as he explains: "After that, the Chinese became more open to Europeans in general and genuinely wanted to do a good job.

"The biggest challenge is Chinese clients who think that they can plan a town for 20,000 people in one week. But this is all part and parcel of an evolving market."

Mark Unger, managing director for Woodhead's China office is witnessing development first-hand, from his Shanghai office base. "In the work that is being built, it is easy to see how it represents the socio-economic situation in China over the last twenty years.

"There is a lot of emphasis here on appropriate cultural and contextual design models. Modern China, like many parts of the world at the moment, feels it is right to identify tangible elements of bygone arts and convert them into a contemporary building program. This is as intriguing as it is difficult. It is however, infinitely more relevant than the tragic interpretation of classical European architecture and design that is prevalent."

He adds that, geographically, the story is the same but subject to lower budgets and poorer construction as you move further away from high tier cities. "In some respects, these regions have a more honest architecture. When they don't attempt out of time or out of place design references, they are left to an architecture that reflects the relatively low productivity, skill sets, education and incomes."

Says Alsop, "To bring China into the 21st century there needs to be a focus on urbanism and some Chinese investors are more responsible than others. The prevalent concept is suburbs, and these are being built at a rate of knots, but relocating well-established communities into the edges of cities is not a good idea. But, of course, it releases very valuable land in city centres for large-scale buildings."

"If we have anything extra to offer to the Chinese development industry it would be functional, fit for purpose design," comments Unger.

"It is of course, a matter of prioritisation and, for the time being, developers are either unaware of the value of functionality or it is usurped by other development priorities," he adds.

"The challenges of working in this market are threefold, according to Alsop. First and foremost, you have to be there to work there. It's also vital to employ a combination of expatriates and locals - this is critical and makes life more interesting. It's also important to absorb the culture, which is in a dramatic transition."

"After the Shanghai Expo event, which will be the last big showcase for a while, I think they will start doing things themselves and the role of foreign consultants will diminish," says Alsop.

Cities moving in the right direction are few and far between, according to Alsop. He is, however, impressed by development in the eastern coastal city of Ningbo, as he explains: "The fundamental location of the city, where three rivers converge, makes it a pleasant place. The formed centre is still emerging but it already has a comfortable feel."

Adds Unger: "I believe Shenyang has a very thoroughly and intelligent approach to its urban integration with the neighbouring city of Fushun. There has been a lot of hype around the proposed new sustainable urban zone of Dongtan near Shanghai, but that has gone quiet. We are involved in an exciting project in the Jiangsu province in a city called Xuyi whereby the developer is building a demonstration town and developing a modern agricultural industry around it to ensure its viability and contribution to the declining productivity and declining populations of the region."

"All cities have good design and sustainability in their development policies, or at least in their brief. However, as is too often the case, projects we have proposed have been diverted from their noble course by the perceived commercial or political interests of the client. Short design programs and limited cross discipline collaboration opportunities also hamper innovative design."

For Alsop, the attraction of China for architects has echoes of Russia in the early 1990s, but he points out that, with the exception of the Olympic stadium, no architects have done their best work in China."
"There will be iconic buildings created by the Chinese, but it will take a while. The nature of an architectural conversation doesn't really exist in China at present, and the architects in training now will need another 10 years' looking before they start doing anything," he adds.

He goes further: "That is the nature of the icon. There are so many cities now, of a significant size, all trying to outdo one another."

Lunger remains enthused by the China market, as he explains: "If I am ever annoyed by the missed opportunities of our clients, I am immediately buoyed by the flow of opportunities. I don't believe there is any country or region more interesting to international architects than China, plus Asia and the Middle East."

On the topic of sustainable design, Alsop is not convinced of its current value. "It's a buzzword. Investors and architects just use it to the point where it becomes meaningless. If you get the insulation, windows and orientation correct then you can achieve 80 percent of the targets. It's common sense."

For Lunger, design for ecological sustainability, low energy use and maintenance minimisation suffers from the rhetoric that frustrates its influence in property development worldwide. "In China, the movement is behind the more developed world and the consequences of its relative absence are more devastating due to the rapid rate of construction," he says.

"This is an exciting area for us in China and indeed, it is a component of cultural interpretation. I believe that when the government authorities decide to give sustainability the impetus it deserves, this country will be a world leader in the field," he adds.

He also highlights the absence of a formal rating mechanism as hampering progress. "There are very few buildings rated with tools from overseas. We have LEED and Greenstar professionals in our office and involved in our design teams."

Alsop also emphasises the need to partner with like-minded developers. "What you want is a really good client who is interested in achieving something beautiful, and that's part of the art of making cities."

Lunger agrees, saying: "Collaboration with a confident and respectful client (leads to) innovation, and this does exist. Trends we are seeing in China are in the areas of sustainability, legitimate cultural interpretation and functional design. Two of the most often cited projects in China are the Xintiandi retail precinct in Shanghai and the Soho mixed-use development in Beijing. They both show how it is possible for a Chinese developer to do something credible, appropriate and inspiring."

For Alsop, it is ultimately about architecture as an art form. "Architecture is definitely an art that needs to be practised and not hurried. In its best form, when it's done beautifully, that doesn't mean to say that it is technically perfect. It takes time, and architects need to be looked after and cherished. It's much more than just a commercial exercise."

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