



Foreclosure affects the whole family.  
Click here to learn more or call today.

1-888-995-HOPE

ASIA TIMES Online  
www.atimes.com

Click Me!

WRITE for ATol

ADVERTISE

MEDIA KIT

GET ATol BY EMAIL

ABOUT ATol

CONTACT US

Read us in Chinese at



Search: Archive ASIA TIMES by keyword

- Front Page
- Greater China
- China Business
- South Asia
- Southeast Asia
- Japan
- Korea
- Middle East
- Central Asia
- World Economy
- Asian Economy
- Book Reviews
- Letters
- Forum



War and Terror



The Complete Spengler



The Complete Henry C K Liu

## Greater China

May 18, 2007

### China chasing an urban utopia

By Daniel Allen

BEIJING - Pipe-dream design or realistic vision of the future? Standing on the bleak concrete expanse of the world's largest square, it's hard to visualize Chairman Mao Zedong's mausoleum surrounded by trees and a carpet of grass. Such is the wind of change currently blowing through China's native architectural scene, and the day when a visit to Tiananmen Square means a walk in the park may not actually be that far away.

A famous Chinese expression states, "*Jiu de bu qu, xin de bu lai*," which means in effect, "If the old doesn't go, the new won't come." Beijing's widespread transformation over the past 15 years

clearly demonstrates that most of the capital's planners and developers have adopted this as their principal working philosophy. Nonetheless, many have complained that a lot of the old that has now disappeared was good, sacrificed for some pretty ugly, third-rate, un-Chinese architecture.

It's true that the euphoria surrounding Beijing's building boom masks a number of deep-rooted problems - shortsighted

Print this article

Email this article

Currency converter

Comment on this article: Go to



THE EDGE  
Your world, your forum

RELATED ARTICLES

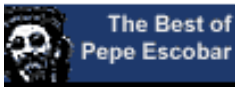
[Shanghai: Land of the rising trapezoid](#)

(Apr 8, '06)



- Beijing Hotels
- Shanghai Hotels
- Guangzhou Hotels
- Xian Hotels
- Guilin Hotels
- Taipei Hotels





planning, single-mindedly commercial development, frequently dismal building quality, jarring urban styles and the reckless embrace of all things Western. For important commissions, such as the various Olympic venues dotted around the city, Western architects are still clearly held in higher esteem than their local counterparts. Reflecting this semi-official dogma, many Chinese designers have been inspired to explore every aspect of design history - every history except their own, that is.

Original architecture in China is far from dead, however. A growing number of talented young Chinese architects are performing an increasingly important role in preventing Beijing from becoming just another Western-inspired architectural playground. They belong to a promising new generation that has emerged with its own individuality, producing work that refers to the latest international trends, but that hasn't lost track of China's rich building heritage.

Eduard Koegel, a well-known German architect and author of several books on Chinese architecture, commented: "There are a lot of young, talented Chinese architects around now. They are starting to become noticed worldwide, and this is helping to establish a forum for exchange. If they are successful, Chinese architecture could become a model for many other developing nations."

Today the majority of Beijing's high-profile building projects attempt to steal the limelight with bold architectural gestures such as impossibly angled roofs or hanging glass exteriors. However, some home-grown architects are pushing innovation in a different direction - one that focuses on the intrinsic issues of materiality, limited-budget construction and local context.

In their own small way these pioneers are contributing to something huge - a radical new identity for Chinese architecture. Instead of attempting to fuse Oriental esthetics with Western-style design, leading architects such as Chang Yung Ho and Ma Yansong are exploring more sophisticated ways of connecting today's construction to their nation's culture. Combining an understanding of local craft traditions and the fabric of urban life with contemporary approaches to technology and new materials, these designers are pushing the creative envelope and changing the built environment in a way that has never been attempted before.



**Upload**



**Share**



**Earn**

**Upload  
Unlimited Files**

**100% FREE  
File Hosting  
Service**

Xu Tiantian typifies the new breed of Chinese architect. Having received her master's degree in urban design from the Harvard Graduate School of Design, she founded the Beijing architecture firm DnA: Design & Architecture in 2004. Key projects to date include the Songzhuang Art Center outside Beijing and the New York China Square Art Center in Chelsea, New York.

Xu is clearly excited about the rise of native talent in China's architectural sector, commenting: "Modern Chinese architecture has been developing profoundly recently. It's not as mature as in Western countries' - we're still learning the technical side - but the initial ideas are originating from our own culture. By incorporating the old and the new we have great potential for creativity. In general I found what's happening in China now is probably the most creative in this nation's history."

She continued: "Competition between Western and Chinese architects can be good motivation. However, I'm more interested in seeing foreign architects devote their creativity and expertise to Chinese architecture not only in major eye-catching high-profile developments but also in low-budget, low-tech projects related to tradition, local lifestyles and Chinese people's real needs. After all, architecture's contribution to society is not only artistic."

The architecture of Chang Yung Ho reflects Xu's sentiments. Now a well-known face on the international design scene, Chang founded Beijing's first private architectural firm, Atelier FCJZ (*feichang jianzhu*, or "unusual architecture"), back in 1993. Opting to take his creative expertise overseas, Chang became chairman of the

Massachusetts Institute of Technology's renowned architecture department in 2005.

Chang Yung Ho is internationally acclaimed for a diverse range of work, including urban design proposals, large state projects, private residences



Chang Yung Ho's Split House

**M<sup>3</sup>**  
**RADIO**

Click Here For  
Featured Artists

J  
O  
S  
E  
P  
H  
Y



Y  
O  
V  
I  
T  
R  
A



C  
H  
A  
R  
L  
I  
N  
E



K  
I  
Y  
O  
M  
I



B  
L  
A  
C  
K



and a number of exhibitions at international art venues, including the Venice Biennial. While he does work in major metropolises such as Beijing, much of his work can be found in secondary Chinese cities.

Chang often uses traditional forms as the basis for his designs, such as the Split House at the showcase Commune complex by the Great Wall outside Beijing, which is a modern and eco-friendly interpretation of the four-sided Chinese *siheyuan* (courtyard). He is also well known for his use of indigenous materials, especially bamboo, in his work.

Last year a group of China-based architects accomplished a feat that brought them instant fame and respect, and underlined to the rest of the world just how far Chinese architecture has come. Beijing architectural firm MAD, founded by Ma Yansong in 2002, won an international competition to design a 50-story tower block in Mississauga, Ontario. They were the first Chinese-based architects ever to win a competition outside of China. With several other international projects now commissioned, MAD is poised to become the first international and global Chinese practice, opening an office in Tokyo and embarking on projects in South America and Denmark.

Speaking of progress, Ma Yansong said: "China has grown very fast and the country faces very distinct challenges. This gives China the opportunity to create unique solutions and do something different for the future. In China, we describe the Chinese tradition - the older generations understand this tradition as very symbolic - bamboo, courtyard, etc. But our understanding is that maybe Chinese tradition is invention. Change the old conventions. If we continue the old thing, maybe our grandmother and grandfather think we don't respect them, because we are just repeating the past. I think there is a chance for us, the new generation, to do something bold and new."

Ma completed his apprenticeship in London under the prize-winning architect Zaha Hadid, and is one of the most daring and least conventional within China's groundbreaking architectural community. Last September, Ma's firm MAD held an exhibition at the Venice Biennial called "MAD in China: A Futuristic Practice and Place". Part of the work on display was a collection of imaginary designs called "Beijing 2050", intended to give an impression of what Beijing might look like halfway through the

21st century.

Perhaps the most extreme and eye-catching of these forward-thinking designs was a blueprint to transform Tiananmen Square into a big park. Providing the reasoning behind the proposed change, the MAD website states: "By 2050, a mature and democratic China will emerge, and spaces for massive political gatherings and troop processions like Red Square may no longer be necessary. The transportation could no longer rely on the ground traffic system; it may utilize an above-ground or underground system. In 2050, Tiananmen Square is an urban space filled with life and the biggest green area in the center of Beijing."

Looking to the future, Eduard Koegel summed up the challenges that lie ahead for China's fledgling architectural movement. He said: "The current state of Chinese architecture is dynamic. Lots of things are happening at the same time, but it seems that very few people have the time to think at all.

"Years ago, Chinese architects had to fight against narrow-minded investors and politicians with terrible taste. Today we find many open-minded people at all levels of the decision-making process. This in itself is good, but the most critical issues today are not only architectural design, but building maintenance and sustainability. The way that Chinese urban development is planned and organized has to change."

***Daniel Allen** is a freelance writer and photographer from London who has lived in China for the past three years.*

(Copyright 2007 Asia Times Online Ltd. All rights reserved.  
Please contact us about [sales, syndication](#) and [republishing](#).)

**All material on this website is copyright and may not be republished in any form without written permission.**

© Copyright 1999 - 2007 Asia Times Online (Holdings), Ltd.

**Head Office:** Unit B, 16/F, Li Dong Building, No. 9 Li Yuen Street East, Central, Hong Kong

**Thailand Bureau:** 11/13 Petchkasem Road, Hua Hin, Prachuab Kirikhan, Thailand 77110