



Imagoechna

# Building British

Despite heavy restrictions, UK architecture firms are putting their mark on China's urban landscape

China's construction boom and increasingly unfettered creative environment are prompting Western architects to head east. Add to this a score of upcoming world-class events, and China is fast becoming a major market for ambitious architectural and engineering companies of all sizes and reputations.

The UK, in particular, is well-represented. Two high-profile British firms, Arup and Foster & Partners, have been awarded an array of prestigious projects.

Arup worked as structural engineers with Swiss architecture firm Herzog & De Meuron to design both the Olympic Stadium and the National Aquatics Center. Meanwhile, Foster & Partners designed Beijing Airport's recently completed US\$3.65 billion Terminal 3.

Other smaller UK firms are also beginning to establish themselves in China.

London-based DRDH was one of a hundred overseas architectural firms invited by Herzog & De Meuron and Chinese artist, architect and curator Ai Wei Wei to contribute designs to the Ordos Project in Inner Mongolia.

The Ordos Project – 100 avant-garde, up-market villas to be built south of Baotou for a wealthy client – typifies China's increasing demand for bold and original building design. Each architect gets 1,000 square meters of land and free rein to design a contemporary villa.

"The scope for creative freedom and the relative speed of Chinese procurement is a great opportunity for an emerging practice like us," said David Howarth, DRDH's director.

Lewis Shiu, director of Arup's Beijing office, believes the innovative requirements for projects like the Ordos Proj- >>

# Car country

Avis's Lucy Barawitzka, on China's growing car rental industry

**A**vis car rental arrived in China in 2002, via its Berkshire-based European arm Avis Europe. CHINA ECONOMIC REVIEW asked Avis's Deputy General Manager Commercial Lucy Barawitzka about the company's joint venture, Anji Car Rental and Leasing.

**Q:** How did Avis's partnership with SAIC come about?

**A:** Avis wanted to expand into China and finding a strong partner was imperative. Anji Car Rental and Leasing [a wholly owned subsidiary of SAIC] was established in 1992, making it one of the earliest car rental companies in China. Anji wanted to expand its network and develop its business to deliver services at international standards. The priorities for both organizations were aligned, and we formed a 50-50 joint venture in 2002.

**Q:** What are the biggest differences between operating in Europe and China?

**A:** The key difference for our industry is that in Europe the car

rental business is mature and the purpose of renting a car is widely recognized. The industry is regulated and standards are clearly understood and adhered to. In China the industry is still relatively new. Long-term leasing is a popular choice for customers but short-term rental is less mature. There are a lot of legal changes to manage and the industry is not fully regulated, which presents a lot of issues for the industry.

**Q:** Do your Chinese clients mainly drive themselves?

**A:** We have regular requests for both with-driver and self-drive from our Chinese customers. Different customers have different needs and with-driver rentals are a popular choice across Asia. We provide both with-driver and self drive options for short term rental and long term leasing. We also provide with-driver airport transfers and we have started a new one-way rental service between selected cities.

**Q:** Where is Avis's current network?

**A:** At present, Avis operates 22 branches within 15 cities, including North China: Beijing, Tianjin, Qingdao, Shenyang, Dalian; East China: Shanghai, Hangzhou, Suzhou, Wuxi, Nanjing; and South and West China: Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Dongguan, Chengdu and Wuhan. We are really proud to be the largest international car rental and leasing company. Our safety focus, network coverage and range of services offered (including our national hotline) aim to provide our customers with peace of mind and convenience.

>> ect match his company's skillset well.

"For projects that require artistic flair and practical function, and commissions that require end-to-end innovation in terms of developing a design from first principle, instead of just from the application of the design, then Arup will always be a major contender," Shiu said.

However, UK firms that decide to enter the Chinese market face considerable bureaucratic obstacles. Due to what many in the industry feel is a deeply discriminatory environment, the majority of construction work in China is undertaken by Chinese firms. Such policies restrict foreign players to the arena of conceptual planning.

"Architectural, engineering and especially construction firms currently face many barriers in China," said Guillaume Rougier-Brierre, a partner at the Gide Loyrette Nouel law firm in Beijing. "Foreign architects can team up with so-called 'design institutes' to conduct the entire scope of an architectural project, as they are only authorized to do scheme design from offshore."

## Going all in

One way overseas firms are dealing with the problem is establishing wholly foreign-owned consulting enterprises, which do not require a qualification certificate or collaboration in order to engage in "consulting activities relating to design and project management work."

Meg Utterback of law firm Thelen Reid Brown Raysman Stein in Shanghai has seen an increase in inquiries over the last six months from foreign design firms looking to establish or extend their presence in the mainland.

"Most of these firms have already been performing off-shore conceptual design," she said.

Yet the influx of overseas architects, along with the grandiosity of their building commissions, has not been without its critics.

"I would like to see more foreign architects devote their expertise to low-budget, low-tech projects related to Chinese people's real needs," said Xu Tiantian, founder of Beijing architectural firm DnA Design & Architecture. "[But] competition between Western and Chinese architects can be good for motivation."

Indeed, the rise of globally renowned Chinese architects such as Ma Yansong and Yung Ho Chang means there are now local designers in the same league as the UK's heavy hitters.

"We submit designs for high-profile projects in China on a regular basis, competing with a wide range of international and local practices where competition has always been strong," said Mouzhan Majidi, CEO of Foster & Partners.

Howarth of DRDH admits to being a keen admirer of the likes of Ai Wei Wei, Wang Hui, and Ma Qingyun.

"We might have at least as much to learn from them as they have from us," he said. ♦

