



Raise the red lantern

Taking inspiration from the “Faster, Higher, Stronger” Olympic mantra, Beijing’s armies of urban planners and construction workers have toiled round the clock to produce a glittering architectural tribute to their country’s economic miracle. The Chinese capital’s structural glass slipper is now firmly in place, destined to prove the Middle Kingdom’s recent rise is more than a fairy tale

WORDS + IMAGES • DANIEL ALLEN



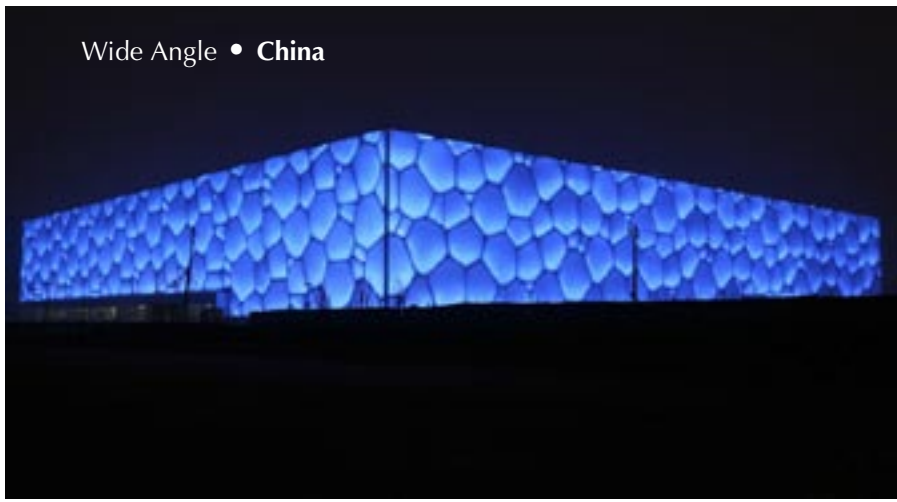
The normally garrulous Wang Lei is moved to silence. The grandest structure in this octogenarian's provincial Chinese village is a modest, brick-and-timber Buddhist temple. Beijing's National Center for Performing Arts, with its fiery-hued, titanium exterior glowing in the late afternoon sunshine, seems as outlandish as the blonde German tourists congregated nearby. This is Beijing 2008, and the capital's bold new image, to which this striking venue contributes, is now ready to inspire awe in more than a few out-of-town guests.

For many years the backward-looking, conservative sister to a cosmopolitan, daring Shanghai, Beijing has finally arrived on the big stage, defining its own, powerful identity in an "open", re-born China. More

than a few Shanghainese are now casting envious eyes northwards, as the capital's architectural makeover throws up an ever-increasing number of cutting edge buildings, and Beijing's Olympic re-branding breeds confidence and urban cool.

A famous Chinese expression states: "*jiude bu qu, xinde bu lai*", which translates to: "if the old doesn't go, the new won't come". Beijing's widespread renovation over the last decade clearly demonstrates that most of the capital's developers have adopted this as their guiding philosophy. And, while home-grown architects are quickly rising in skill, experience and reputation, it's fair to say that much of the city's shiny new Olympic façade started life on the drawing board of a high profile foreign architect. ▶

**"If the old doesn't go,
the new won't come."**



Long before they set eyes on an Olympic venue or towering skyscraper, those jetting into Beijing can now witness China's architectural renaissance from the comfort of their plane seat. Beijing Airport's iconic Terminal 3, which opened on schedule earlier this year, was designed by renowned British architect Sir Norman Foster.

Sir Norman, who was asked to integrate the dynastic style of the Forbidden City into the project design, is clearly delighted with the realisation of his concept. "This new terminal is the largest and most advanced airport building in the world – a celebration of the thrill and poetry of flight," he says. "A gateway to Beijing and the 2008 Olympics, it communicates a unique sense of place, its dragon-like form evoking traditional Chinese colors and symbols."

Wowing passengers with its gargantuan scale, the US\$3 billion Terminal 3 was completed in under four years. The roof alone extends over 80 acres (think 40 soccer pitches), enclosing 445 lifts, 1,800 miles of cables and a 7000-vehicle car park. Easing transit to and from the city centre,

a new metro line now connects Terminal 3 with the gleaming, US\$1 billion Dongzhimen Transit Hub, located close to the site of Beijing's long-vanished city walls. State-of-the-art facilities at this 78,000 square-metre complex allow fliers to check in, access city-wide information and transfer to a recently expanded subway network.

Like Sir Norman Foster, Michael Kwok, a director with Arup, the UK firm responsible for overseeing Terminal 3's construction, is proud his company was able to participate in Beijing's Olympic facelift. "This new terminal will set global standards for sustainability, operational efficiency, and positive passenger experience," he says. "The effort put in by the client, the local and international designers, and the numerous contractors and suppliers bears testament to the common goal."

A radioactive blue glow renders the Water Cube more evocative of a giant candy bar than a US\$200 million sporting arena

Previous page: Fangshan Restaurant; Beijing Airport, Terminal 3
This page, clockwise from top left: The Water Cube will host some 17,000 spectators throughout the Olympic Games; Beijing's new subway; Sir Norman Foster designed Beijing Airport's new Terminal 3; Scarcely finished, the "Bird's Nest" Olympic Stadium has already become an icon of new Beijing
Facing page: The Kempinski Commune at the Great Wall of China, designed by Pan Shiyi and Zhang Xin

In addition to Terminal 3, Arup has also had a hand in two other jaw-dropping Beijing architectural projects that epitomise Beijing's rags-to-riches transformation – the National Stadium and the National Aquatics Center (known respectively, and informally, as the “Bird’s Nest” and “Water Cube”). Both of these flagship sporting venues are located in the southern part of the Beijing Olympic Green, flanked by other high-tech constructions such as Digital Beijing (the Olympic communications center) and the National Convention Center.

Designed by world famous Swiss architectural duo Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, and completed earlier this year, the \$US420 million National Stadium seats 91,000 spectators. Built with 36 km of unwrapped steel, it will host the main track and field competitions for the Olympic Games, as well as the opening and closing ceremonies. At night, when the metallic exoskeleton's sinuous meshwork is thrown into sharp relief by spotlights, it's easy to see why the stadium has won rave reviews for its innovative use of materials and breathtaking aesthetics.

Rivaling the National Stadium in its groundbreaking, high-tech design, the National Aquatics Center's bubbly chewing-gum form is the perfect foil for its neighbor's rigidity. Seating 17,000 spectators, the building will host the swimming, diving and synchronised swimming events during the Olympics. Conceived by Australian architectural firm PTW Architects, together with CSCEC International Design and Arup, the Water Cube's 100,000 square-metre exterior is clad in irregular plastic pillows. As these illuminate at night, the radioactive blue glow renders the structure more evocative of a giant's candy bar than a \$US200 million sporting arena.

The fall of night also gives the uber-modern National Center for Performing Arts, situated close to Tiananmen Square, an extra dimension. With its 20,000 shimmering titanium tiles lending the illuminated dome a distinctly extraterrestrial air, this sensual structure's symmetrical silhouette is glassily reproduced in wind-ruffled form in the contours of its watery skirt.

The brainchild of French architect Paul Andreu, widely acclaimed for his design of Paris' graceful Charles de Gaulle Airport and the new Arc de Triomphe de l'Étoile, the National Center for Performing Arts (known as

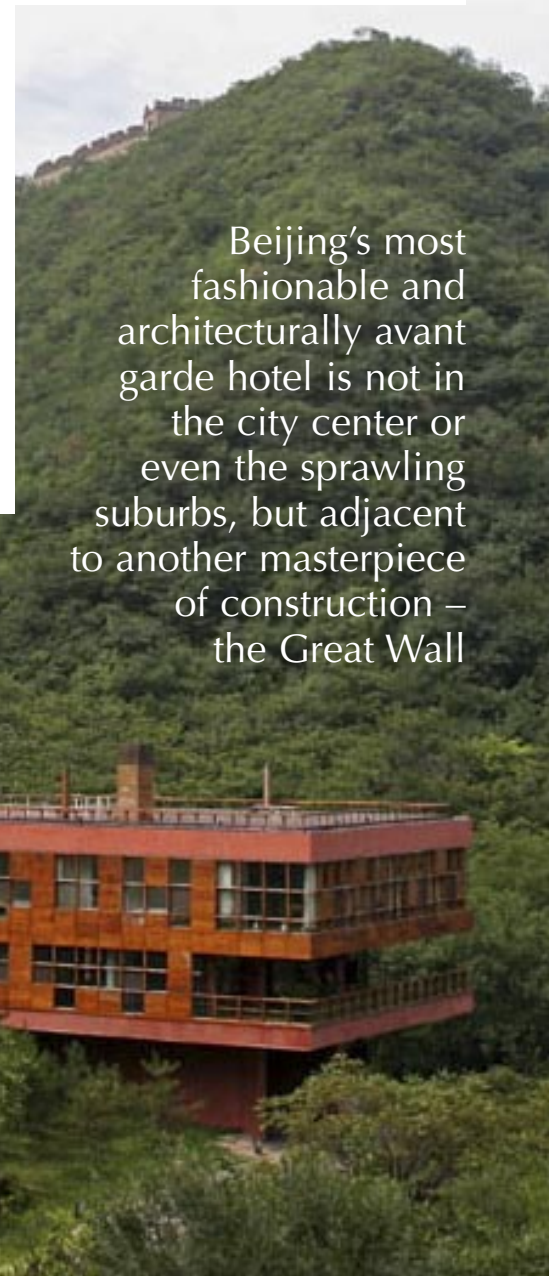
“the Eggshell”) was completed late last year. Erected next to the Great Hall of the People, the contemporary lines of this 150,000 square-meter structure stand in stark contrast to the monolithic, Soviet-style drabness of its heavily porticoed neighbor.

Entrance to the Eggshell is achieved via a lengthy submarine corridor, which enforces its sci-fi surreality. Paul Andreu explains that this innovative passageway is intended “to clear people's minds before they take their seats”, and it certainly serves to heighten expectations as guests approach the copper-lad doors of this Gallic masterpiece. Emerging into the Olive Hall, seven meters below street level, the Eggshell's visitors are rewarded with views of the the Opera House, Concert Hall and Theatre House.

The 2,400-seat Opera House is the most dramatic space within the dome. “Even the sound made by tearing a piece of paper on stage can be heard everywhere in the house,” explains a Center spokesman. The Concert Hall, outfitted in elegant white, seats just over 2,000, and functions as a performance hall for large symphonies and national music exhibitions. The centre stage is lower than the auditorium, with serried rows of chairs behind for choirs. As with the Opera House, the beautifully ornate ceiling is designed to

enhance sound transmission, including notes from China's largest pipe organ.

Beijing's pre-Olympic beautification would have been impossible without some serious financial muscle, developed over decades of whirlwind Chinese economic growth. Nowhere is this growth more evident than the city's CBD, where a range of soaring concrete, steel and glass leviathans vie for the crown of most spectacular skyscraper. But nothing comes close to the capital's most audaciously creative office block – the US\$800 million CCTV Tower. ▶



Beijing's most fashionable and architecturally avant garde hotel is not in the city center or even the sprawling suburbs, but adjacent to another masterpiece of construction – the Great Wall



An exhibit at the Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art in Beijing

Beijing's pre-Olympic beautification would have been impossible without decades of whirlwind Chinese economic growth

EXPERIENCE BEIJING

FOR EATING: Fangshan Restaurant

From sushi and steak to tofu and tapas, new Beijing is a gourmands paradise. Those in search of a taste of history, however, should head over to Qionghua Island, on a lake at the center of Beihai Park, just north of the Forbidden City. Here, in the elegant and exquisitely maintained dining rooms of Fangshan Restaurant, diners can sample dishes favoured by the legendary Empress Dowager Cixi (1835 – 1908). Hundreds of dishes – from delicate pastries to camel's paw in scallion sauce – were created especially for her particular palate and are now authentically reproduced by dedicated chefs for patrons' delectation. Tel: +86 (0)10 6401 1889 (most staff speak English)

FOR CULTURE: Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA)

With its philanthropic approach and curatorial excellence, UCCA has been making waves in the Beijing art world ever since it opened in Beijing's renowned 798 art district late last year. UCCA's overlying theme of China-international dialogue will continue from 19 July when it showcases, for the first time in China, a wide range of contemporary Chinese pieces in the "Our Future: the Guy and Myriam Ullens Foundation Collection" exhibition. Developed by wealthy art aficionados Guy and Myriam Ullens over the last two decades, the collection provides a unique insight into modern Chinese artists' shifting social, cultural and philosophical perspectives, and how they interpret the development of their homeland. www.ullens-center.org.

FOR SHOPPING: Nanluoguxiang

Once an obscure *hutong* (traditional Chinese alleyway) rarely frequented by tourists and expats, Nanluoguxiang's recent transformation into a bustling, bohemian thoroughfare is symptomatic of Beijing's extensive pre-Olympic makeover. Located several kilometres north of the Forbidden City and east of Houhai Lake, the 800-metre long North-South street is now lined with hip rooftop cafes and bars, good value hostels, and funky boutiques offering designer clothes, Chinese antiques, and bargain basement souvenirs. Owned by long-term Beijing expat Dominic Hill, Plastered's t-shirts are some of Nanluoguxiang's most popular exports, with the compact shop offering a range of kitschy, ironic designs based on everyday Beijing imagery. www.plastered.com.cn.

Scheduled for completion in early 2009, the 230-meter high CCTV Tower has already become a landmark, its unique shape visible for miles around. Designed by architects Rem Koolhaas and Ole Scheeren, the building's twin towers connect to form one giant loop that Scheeren says "symbolises collaboration". Rivaling the Pentagon in size, the exterior of the main 450,000 square-metre construction features an irregular grid of panels designed to represent the forces travelling through its superstructure.

Standing in the shadow of the CCTV Tower is the equally ambitious Television Cultural

Center, or TVCC. Although the CCTV Tower's fantastic feat of engineering has drawn attention from the 160-metre high TVCC, also known as "The Little One" or "Mini Me", the building's cutting edge design promises to make it a stunning venue in its own right. Part of the TVCC will host the luxury 241-room Mandarin Oriental Hotel, offering five-star service and panoramic CBD vistas.

The Mandarin Oriental Hotel is the perfect example of how Beijing's architectural revolution is having a direct impact on the city's luxury retail and hospitality sector. From the stylish sophistication of Zhu Pei's Blur Hotel near Wangfujing to the seven-star opulence of Morgan Plaza overlooking the Olympic Green, Beijing's visitors have an ever growing selection of hip, high-end hotels.

Beijing's most fashionable and avant garde hotel is not in the city centre or even the sprawling suburbs, but adjacent to another masterpiece of construction – the Great Wall. Located an hour outside of the Chinese capital in the verdant mountains of Badaling, the Kempinski Commune is the creation of China's first couple of design, Pan Shiyi and Zhang Xin. The Shiyi-Xins have now become China's hottest architectural trendsetters.

In 2005, the Shiyi-Xins handed the Commune to the Kempinski hotel chain to focus on other projects. As the snaking contours of the Great Wall overlook this hotbed of creativity, nowhere else is the full circle of Beijing's architectural revolution depicted in such salient contrast. ■