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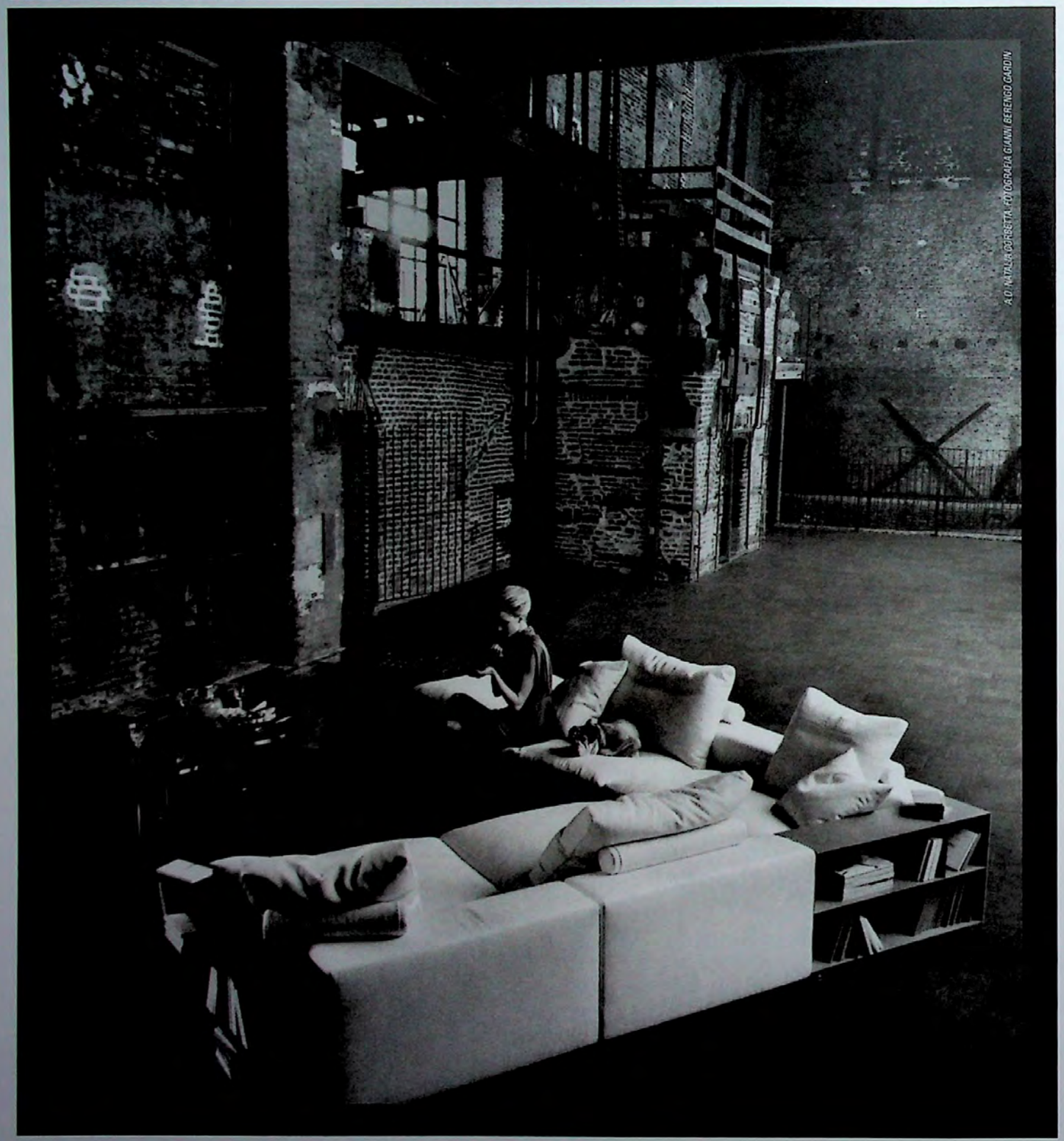

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Cite

THE ARCHITECTURE + DESIGN REVIEW OF HOUSTON

A PUBLICATION OF THE RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE

88 SPRING 2012

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ABOUT THE COVER: Ningbo History Museum designed by 2012 Pritzker Winner Wang Shu. Photograph by Lv Hengzhong.

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FROM LEFT: Thomas Colbert, Steven Lewis, and Raj Mankad.

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

When *New York Times* architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable visited Houston in 1976 she called it, "The city of the second half of the twentieth century." She found herself excited by the dynamism and explosive growth of the city but she also found Houston to be "a study of paradoxes" and "disturbing."

That's pretty much the same reaction that our intrepid reporter Christof Spieler had to some of China's most rapidly growing cities when he visited them last summer. It wasn't clear in 1976 that Houstonians would ever question our obviously questionable building habits. But here we are today, questioning the burgeoning cities of China and, in their reflection, our own as well. What do Houston and the great cities of China have in common? The answer is, a lot. Cheap fossil fuel and global capital markets, automobiles, the internet, emerging construction technologies, and contemporary paradigms of architecture and urban development to name but a few of the forces that link all global cities.

Despite the universal forces that seem to be shaping cities, there are forces of resistance and modification at work. Regional political issues and cultural forces also shape the character of places and local communities. But how exactly does this work?

In order to gain some insight into this issue we interviewed some of China's best-known architects. Their visits to Houston as part of the RDA Fall Lecture Series allowed us to ask how their practices have responded to the pressures of dizzyingly rapid growth and urban erasure. Interestingly, the architect whose work was most centered on the poetic preservation of China's historic craft traditions and building typologies, the architect whose work can be seen as the most resistant to the forces of erasure has now won the Pritzker Prize. The first Chinese architect to receive this award, Wang Shu, deeply embeds his work in vernacular construction technologies as well as modern ones.

Pritzker winner Wang Shu.

Houston design firms have also played a big role in China. In fact, part of SWA Group's Houston office moved to Shanghai last year under the leadership of Scott Slaney, who, in an interview for this issue, describes positive shifts in urban planning and landuse.

Elsewhere, we include a variety of perspectives on China including a photoessay of street advertising, a translation from a Chinese magazine that highlights migrants from the countryside to the cities, and an interview of Nobel Prize laureate Amartya Sen that puts economic growth and architecture in the larger perspective of freedom.

The idea for the focus on China came from an architect in the Houston community, Camilo Parra, whose wife Meng Yeh teaches Chinese at Rice University. We hope, in turn, that many of you will contribute back to this community-supported publication by reflecting on the relevance of these articles to local, national, and international questions and sending your thoughts to **mankad@rice.edu.**

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Background: A scale model of Beijing after World War II

CHRISTOF SPIELER

RDA GALA

CANOPY

The Woodlands Grows Up

THE RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE HOSTED ONE OF ITS largest galas on Saturday, November 12. Nearly 1,100 people gathered at the Bayou City Event Center to celebrate The Woodlands and The Woodlands Development Co. that has continued to honor the vision that founder George Mitchell had for the new town almost 50 years ago.

Dan Leverett, Vice President of The Woodlands Development Co., accepted accolades from RDA President David Harvey on behalf of his company and paid homage to George Mitchell. Leverett also recognized his associates, including Robert Heineman, a 38-year veteran of The Woodlands, who was part of the original Mitchell team. Gala chairs Chuck and Janna Gremillion thanked Fundraising Chair Sandy Lynch, whose committee raised nearly $500,000; architect and environment chair Dallas Felder, whose creative canopy transformed the ballroom; and auction chair Kristin Skarbovig, who was delighted by the furious bidding going on.

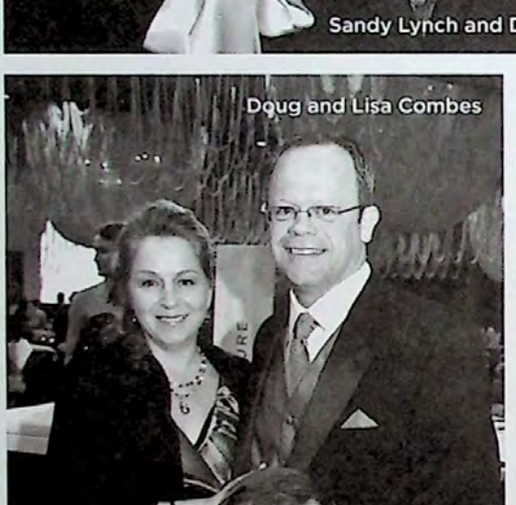
Guests enjoyed perusing the silent auction that featured over 100 unique designer items and art works. Bidding was hot and heavy over an offer of a dinner for 10 and stories by caterer Frankie B. Mandola of the Mandola, Carrabba, Butera restaurant family. Mandola's served a dinner of marinated ribeye steaks and shrimp Damian that got rave reviews by guests.

The band Doppelganger provided the entertainment and the dance floor was crowded throughout the evening. After dinner, only those placing final bids on auction items were absent from the revelers.


Sandy Lynch and Dan Leverett


Tabitha Doby, Kristin Skarbovig, and Katie Plocheck


Andrea and [illegible] Crawmer


Doug and Lisa Combes


Betsy Strauch and Lonnie Hoogeboom

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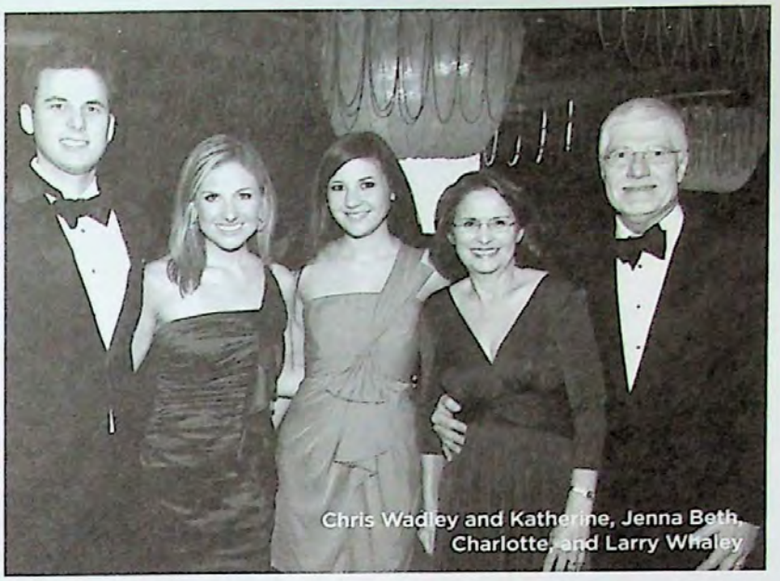

Chris Wadley and Katherine, Jenna Beth, Charlotte, and Larry Whaley

Raymond Brochstein, Louis Skidmore, Sarah Whiting, Kimberly Burnett, Susan Brochstein, Jim Burnett, and Anne and Chris Skidmore

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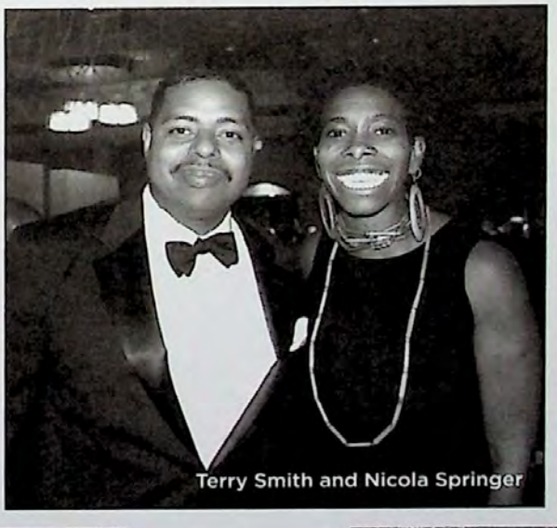
Alaina Dickson and Shanna Palajes



Terry Smith and Nicola Springer

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COMMUNITY

ART OF FRAMING OF ART

The Labor Behind Display

In foreground an artwork wrapped in glassine paper awaits framing. Jorge Galvan measures an artwork by the frame display.

CLAUDIA CASBARIAN

YOU CAN HEAR A SAW GRINDING IN THE BACK, milling wood for a custom frame. Designers work out front, taking down clients' specs, their tape measures no more than a hand's reach away. Custom panels installed on riders display the firm's hundreds of frame samples, arranged into periods and styles. And an antique mirror, someone's prized heirloom, its appliqué frame damaged in a move, waits for repair. A Roy Lichtenstein waits for a pane of museum glass. As does a Frank Stella.

Are these headed to a private collector's home? One of Houston's largest museums? You can't tell. Sarah Balinskas, who has owned this framing firm for three decades, hopes to treat every artwork the same.

Born in East Texas, Balinskas moved with her mother to Houston in the 1960s. After earning degrees from Mount Vernon College in Washington, D.C., she returned in the early 1980s, working at a private gallery. Soon she made connections with Houston artists and she volunteered to do layouts for Bert Long's publication *Art Scene* at Midtown Arts Center, where she met a painting conservator with whom she started the business Preservation of Art.

"I can do framing," Balinskas says she told her partner. This was more of a prediction, at the time, than a proclamation. Though she had spent hours studying frames in museums, she had no formal training. But she figured she could learn. She took out a loan. Her grandfather, hearing the news, mailed her tools and an apron—suited more for a hobby shop, though, than a framing business.

"They were from Brookstone," she says, grinning.

Poring through catalogues and trade journals, asking questions and consulting with expert wood workers, finishers, gilders, paper conservators, and museum staff, Balinskas learned the trade. She acquired real tools—a mitre saw and table saw. "We were working around the clock," she says. The scale of production soon required a move to an East Freeway warehouse, where they began subleasing space to Houston artists and architects. In 1993, Balinskas relocated her newly established Sarah Balinskas Fine Framing first to a building next door to the Museum of Printing History and then to it's current site at 1114 Taft.

It is a business founded on reverence. Balinskas has set out brochures in her showroom about "caring for your art," with recommendations about light, temperature, humidity, and cleaning. A large sign reminds her small crew to do nothing that can't be undone. She's making decisions to ensure the object will last.

An unusual one recently arrived: a 30-foot scroll of the Torah, the Hebrew inscribed in rich black ink on aged leather. "It's presented some challenges," she says. "First, we had to figure out how to support its weight. Then we decided to have someone fabricate an armature so you could turn it and show other parts of the scripture." It waits on a table now. When it's prepared, no one, Balinskas hopes, will have to think about what went into hanging it or framing it. No one will have to think about how it got here. They'll just get to look—to see it as it is meant to be seen. c

- Allyn West

CITINGS

>> NEWS FROM RICEDESIGNALLIANCE.ORG

WEBSITE THRIVES

The Rice Design Alliance website features commentary and podcasts from RDA civic forums and lectures, a calendar of RDA events and events sponsored by other area organizations, travel journals from RDA city tours, and several resources, including links to OffCite.org, the *Cite* blog, and CiteMag.org, a website featuring free access to the archives.

FROM LEFT: Interior from 2012 house tour, wall design, and public art by Greg Lynn.

> HOUSTON INITIATIVES

RDA is holding its 13th annual grants program for students and faculty of the Rice School of Architecture, the University of Houston Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture, the College of Architecture at Prairie View A&M, and the Department of Urban Planning and Environmental Policy at Texas Southern University. RDA makes separate awards of up to $5,000 to student and faculty winners. The announcement of winners is set for April 23.

> ANYTHING THAT FLOATS

Anything That Floats challenges participants to build a device to float a short distance along Buffalo Bayou with discarded building materials provided the day-of by rdAGENTS. The second annual competition will be held April 28, 2012. Teams arrive in the morning, build between 11:30 and 1:30, and then float. Breakfast will be provided by RDA. The challenge takes place at Sesquicentennial Park along Buffalo Bayou. The entry fee for RDA members is $20 and $25 for non-members.

> HOUSE TOUR

The 36th annual RDA architecture tour was held Saturday, March 24 and Sunday, March 25, 2012. The tour, Living with Art, showcased eight houses in Houston that exhibit impressive art collections. The houses on the tour demonstrated how art can reshape architecture, most intriguingly in houses that were not originally designed with art exhibition in mind.

> BRAZIL TOUR

Modern architecture in Brazil made a first timid appearance in the city of São Paulo, yet it was in the city of Rio de Janeiro that a particular, and internationally recognized, brand of architecture was forged. Rice University faculty Fares el-Dahdah, who grew up in Brasilia, and architecture historian Stephen Fox will be our guides. The tour dates are June 12-19, 2012.

> SALLY WALSH LECTURE

The Sally Walsh Lecture will feature Greg Lynn on Tuesday April 3, at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. His studio, Greg Lynn FORM, works within and among multiple fields, partnering with companies such as BMW, Boeing, Disney, and Imaginary Forces. His work has been exhibited and placed in permanent collections in major museums, including the Canadian Centre for Architecture, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and New York's Museum of Modern Art. Lynn was named one of *Time Magazine*'s 100 most innovative people in the world for the 21st century in 2001, won the Golden Lion at the 11th International Venice Biennale of Architecture in 2008, and most recently received a fellowship from United States Artists in 2010.

> MIKE SIMONIAN SAYS GET OVER PRACTICALITY

In the earnest tone with which he delivered his entire talk, Mike Simonian suggested on Wednesday evening, January 18, that in a given body of work, "if everything is perfect, then there's a certain ugliness to all that beauty." This from the designer who made the Xbox console beautiful? You'd be hard pressed to find a blunder among the offerings coming out of Mike & Maaike, the San Francisco-based industrial design studio led by Simonian and his partner, Maaike Evers. By looking for one, though, you'd also miss the point.

Simonian and Evers, with the support of an international cadre of young interns, push their projects through a concept-driven, rigorous process and produce compelling works. A sort of completed perfection, though, doesn't come across as the primary objective. The designs pose questions without declaring answers. They stir up trouble, find intrigue in uncertainty and sometimes fly in the face of staid conventions.

See Michael Viviano's post on OffCite.org to read more.

HOUSE INTERIOR BY PAUL HESTER, OTHERS COURTESY GREG LYNN

IN FOCUS

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

MISSION **POSSIBLE**

Those who visit San Antonio and go beyond a stop at the Alamo to walk the grounds of the nearly 80 structures that constitute the city's Franciscan missions find in them an air of quiet significance. Beyond the famous Texas battleground, arranged along the brushy San Antonio River, are four missions built by Indian hands under the direction of Franciscan monks and Spanish explorers in the 18th century. With the Alamo, these five missions stand as a living monument to the colonialism that shapes the entire Americas.

In June 2011, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar announced his nomination of the San Antonio Franciscan missions for inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2014. According to Suzanne Deal Booth, founder and director of the The Friends of Heritage Preservation, recognition by UNESCO "is the highest award that can be attained for a cultural heritage monument. It's a way of letting the world know that our heritage, in this case U.S. heritage, has global value..."

The San Antonio Franciscan missions join 13 other sites nominated in the United States, which means that they will be contending against heavyweights like historic buildings by Frank Lloyd Wright and Thomas Jefferson.

According to Booth, the lack of official government interest in our own historical sites and the reliance on private donors is a reflection of our being a relatively new country. "It has not been in our cultural psyche, our national psyche, but it's there now." She points to the particular value of the sites as holding "the tangible remains of an entire cultural landscape, not just the missions, but the communities that were built around them, and [their relationship to] the water, and how they farmed...the whole city of San Antonio grew up around them."

Frescoes mark the interior walls of Missions San Jose, San Juan, Concepcion, and Espada, which today are active parishes of the Catholic Church, open to the public for worship. Perhaps, the life of the space finds its source in the seven acequias (irrigation ditches), five dams, and aqueduct that have irrigated 3,500 acres of land for nearly 300 years, the last being the only remaining Spanish aqueduct in the United States.

Despite the Alamo's status as a popular Texas tourist attraction, there has been less international interest in the other four missions. Stephen Fox, architectural historian and fellow of the Anchorage Foundation of Texas, acknowledges the emotional pull of the missions, but notes that "in Mexico there are probably a hundred sites or a thousand sites that have this same kind of affective power." And, indeed, the UNESCO World Heritage website has included the possibility of a "bi-national nomination," which in this case would include the San Antonio missions with the five Franciscan missions of the Sierra Gorda in the Mexican state of Querétaro, which are already recognized on the World Heritage List.

Recognition of the San Antonio Franciscan missions as a UNESCO Heritage Site could deepen our own understanding of the place, adding dimension to the traditional Alamo narrative by layering in the earlier American Indian, European, and U.S. history. The World Heritage List assigns permanent value to the sites, which frames not only the way the world looks at us, but how we see ourselves.

- Nicole Zaza

CALENDAR

LECTURES

RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE

SALLY WALSH LECTURE

Greg Lynn

Greg Lynn FORM

Tuesday, April 3, 7 p.m.

Brown Auditorium

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

ricedesignalliance.org

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

THE ART OF FOLK SPIRIT

Henry Glassie, Diane Goldstein, and Pravina Shukla, Scholars from Indiana University

Honors Lounge, M.D. Anderson Library

Thursday, April 19, 4-7 p.m.

EVENTS

UNCONVENTION

Open House at Rice University including an AIA-led tour of the campus

Wednesday, April 11 – Sunday, April 15

ANYTHING THAT FLOATS

Saturday, April 28 (see facing page)

TOURS

RDA CITY STUDY TOUR

The Escola Carioca: Modern Architecture in Rio de Janeiro and Brasilia

June 12 – 19, 2012

713.348.4876

Ai Weiwei's Five Houses Exhibit Makes U.S. Debut in Houston

Architecture Center Houston
April 19 to May 25, 2012

A major new architectural project by Ai Weiwei—the first since Chinese authorities detained the internationally acclaimed artist last year—will be presented at the Architecture Center Houston from April 19 to May 25, 2012.

In development for the past three years, Five Houses was created by Ai Weiwei in collaboration with Basel-based HHF architects. It is the cornerstone of a larger project, "Ai Weiwei House," which interprets the concept of a residential building as a Gesamtkunstwerk—a complete work of art.

The exhibit includes rough sketches and brainstorming notes to scrapbooks, prototypes, and fully realized drawings and plans.

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BIG IDEAS TIGHT SPACE

Proposals for Houston's Central Station

ON THE EVENING OF TUESDAY, JANUARY 24, the Houston Downtown Management District, along with METRO and its design-build component, Houston Rapid Transit, hosted a public presentation of five proposals for the new "Houston Central Station." They were the result of an invited competition whose impressive advisory panel featured among others the new, and apparently well-connected, deans of Houston's two schools of architecture, Patricia Oliver of the University of Houston and Sarah Whiting of Rice University. Entries were presented by Chris Sharples of SHoP Architects, New York; Paul Lewis of Lewis.Tsurumaki. Lewis, New York; Neil Denari of Neil M. Denari Architects, Los Angeles; Mark Wamble of Interloop—Architecture, Houston; and Craig Dykers of Snøhetta, New York and Oslo. (I would have liked to see women architects like Jeanne Gang or Toshiko Mori also included.)

They are all decidedly avant-garde, modernist firms who have begun in the last several years to build increasingly large and prestigious projects. Collectively, they tend to use computer modeling to create rather complicated swooping and angled designs that rely on the newish technology of digitally-assisted, custom fabrication for their realization. As such, they tend to be highly regarded in architectural schools and in the architectural press where these techniques are the common currency in trade, though perhaps somewhat less by the general public who usually seem awed, mystified, or repulsed by such work.

My initial fantasy image of fedora-clad Mad Men and buxom ladies in stiletto heels rushing to catch the midnight train in a moodily lit Central Station was quickly dispelled by the detailed introduction given by Lonnie Hoogeboom, Director of Planning, Design and Development for the Downtown District, who explained that, in fact, the project was for a modest open-air platform where two new light rail lines, the East End Line and the Southeast Line, intersect with the existing Main Street Line. The site is on Main Street between the existing Main Street Square Station and the Preston Station. It faces Houston's great Art Deco setback skyscraper, the Gulf Building, completed in 1929, where the Sakowitz Brothers once had their department store. The Central Station will be inserted in the median between the existing tracks, and as a result, will only be about eleven-feet wide, but will run nearly the length of the block. The current budget is about $1 million, including design fees, and each firm was given a $20,000 honorarium for design and travel expenses. Once they accepted, they had about six weeks to design the projects they presented in Houston. That firms of such caliber enthusiastically participated in what is in reality a very small project is perhaps a signal of the clout of the advisory panel. The winning firm will subcontract to a local architect of record, selected by METRO, who will prepare the final construction documents.

Two of the projects, ShoP's and Snøhetta's, featured architectural designs that responded to the climate in Houston. The first provided chimneys that would hopefully wick hot air up and away from waiting passengers. Snøhetta's took the formally opposite approach by using funnels to channel water away from passengers during storms. Maybe a whole series of stations could be designed to reference Houston's climate, which in the absence of attractive topology takes on a huge role in defining the city.

Lewis.Tsurumaki.Lewis, ever the Manhattan firm, observed that subway commuters always stand facing oncoming trains to devise a platform that was subtly inflected upwards at its corners to suggest the north and southbound lines.

The remaining two projects, Interloop's and Denari's took inspiration from the manmade urban environment in Houston. Interloop's scheme used requisitioned traffic signs to make a multi-colored sheath for their platform canopy. Denari's proposal took inspiration in color and form from key architectural works in the city. His project was based on lines—power lines, light rail lines, freeway lines, etc. The distinctive color of his proposal was taken from Alexander Calder's red-painted metal crab in front of the Brown Pavilion as well as the METRO's red coloring coding of the Main Street line on its maps. This project would be fabricated out of steel (like the crab), fashioned into a continuous, sinuous, box-like strip about two-feet square with a flat rectangular canopy extending to the edges of the platform.

As of this writing, the competition's winner has not been announced but is expected soon. c

- Ben Koush

TOP: Neil M. Denari Architects proposal for Houston Central Station.
BOTTOM L-R: SHoP and Snøhetta proposals.

RENDERINGS COURTESY SNØHETTA SHoP AND NEIL M. DENARI ARCHITECTS

Finding Houston in Shanghai, Beijing, and Shenzhen

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTOF SPIELER

The most startling aspect of China is the feeling that everything is moving in fast forward. But not everything is moving at the same rate or direction. From the windows of the Beijing airport express train, speeding on its way from the Norman-Foster designed terminal of the second busiest airport in the world, I could see farmers working small plots by hand. From their small houses they can see the five-star hotels and modern office buildings of the airport business park. The farmers, it seems, exist in 1911 and the airport in 2011.

In the West, we look back at the history of urbanization as an orderly sequence: technology advanced, demographics shifted over time, planning ideas were tried, and those ideas gave rise to new ideas. But nothing about China seems so orderly. It's no stretch to say that a century of American urbanism—the civic beautification of the 1920s, the migration to the cities of the 1930s, the industrial decentralization of the 1940s, the freeway-driven suburbanization of the 1950s, the urban clearances of the 1960s, the megablock redevelopments of the 1970s, the instant skylines of the 1980s, the historic preservation movement of the 1990s, the green building movement of the 2000s, and the place-making of the 2010s—is playing out all at once in China. All our mistakes and all our successes, plus all the chaos of a century of figuring out what a city should be, are here alongside each other with older Chinese urbanisms.

In the past 30 years, the population of Chinese cities has grown by 300 million; secondary cities like Chongqing, Wuhan, and Chengdu are now bigger than Houston, and Shanghai's metropolitan area has 3 million more people than New York's. These cities are a preview of the future. Just as Chinese planners once toured American and European cities for inspiration, planners and architects from all over the world are touring Chinese cities now. Just as American developers helped create China's skylines, Chinese developers are starting to invest around the world, and the burgeoning ranks of young, talented Chinese architects will soon be working across the globe. China's cities are the cities of the future.

I spent two weeks in China last summer to see what these cities are like on the ground. I came away simultaneously impressed, depressed, startled, and awed. I was also left with an odd feeling of familiarity. We can see China as a way of looking at ourselves, a mirror reflecting our own cities back to us. In looking at Beijing or Shanghai, we see how another culture sees us. Often it's an unsettling view. In the extremes of Chinese city building, I can see the basic flaws in our own cities: buildings that don't quite add up to places, traffic projects that divide as much as they connect, walled compounds that segregate rich and poor, and a disregard for local history and culture. I can also see the same spirit and the same forces that drove our cities' growth. China has a different culture, a different history, and a different political system, but it can feel very familiar.

POST OAK ON THE HUANGPU

Above the Lujiazui subway station in Shanghai, where Century Avenue shoots out from a tunnel under the Huangpu River, streets converge onto a massive traffic circle. Five boulevards combine into three lanes of traffic speeding around ornamental landscaping. A circular walkway above, 400 feet in diameter, carries pedestrians over the chaos. All around, buildings compete for attention. The pink spheres of the Pearl Tower perch on a concrete tripod. The International Convention Center combines a neoclassical façade with a pair of huge glass globes depicting the world, China shaded in red. Nearby, an office building is clad with tiers of ionic columns, like a Roman temple-turned-shelving system. Next to it, a glass cylinder perches on a pair of stone shards.

At ground level, I found the place vast and forbidding. The buildings are cut off from the sidewalks by broad lawns and granite driveways. Traffic speeds by on six-lane streets. The pedestrians—and there are many in a city where only the wealthy few own cars—look lost. On a map, Lujiazui Green appears to be an inviting oasis in the midst of Shanghai's bustle; in reality, it's an empty park, a decorative foreground for the buildings around it rather than a gathering space.

Instead the life takes place inside the buildings. At one side of the circular walkway is the Super Brand Mall. At 13 levels, it's so tall that there are two Starbucks, one almost directly above the other. Nearly every building in the area includes a mall of some kind, and they're all busy on a Monday afternoon.

This is Pudong, Shanghai's new central business district. Designated as a development zone in 1990,

At ground level, I found the place vast and forbidding. The buildings are cut off from the sidewalks by broad lawns and granite driveways.

LEFT THE PUDONG SKYLINE RISES ABOVE A MASSIVE TRAFFIC CIRCLE SPANNED BY A CIRCULAR FOOTBRIDGE LEADING TO A 13-LEVEL MALL.

it now has half of Shanghai's class A office space, including the fourth and 13th tallest buildings in the world, with the future second tallest under construction. The urban plan was developed in conjunction with the French agency IAURIF, and the long axis of Century Avenue echoes La Defence in Paris. To a Houstonian, Pudong with its broad streets and showy towers feels like Post Oak, only bigger.

Business districts like this one are the signs of urban success in the new capitalist China: every city must have one, and many have several. Shanghai, like Houston, is marked by clusters of skyscrapers all over the urban core, each with its own activity center and each enthusiastically promoted by its own district government.

Like Pudong, most of China's new "downtowns" don't really resemble downtowns at all: their broad streets, self-contained building complexes, and manicured greenery resemble nothing more than 1980s edge cities in the United States. We've figured out the shortcomings of those places since then: the traffic gridlock, the monotony, the lack of a public life. We're now revitalizing our downtowns, adding residential space to areas that previously had only offices, and trying to make places like Uptown more pedestrian-friendly. But then, shiny glass buildings behind broad lawns always looked better in renderings than in practice, especially since the renderings left out the traffic. That image is what China is after: modern, sleek, and tidy. It looks good on a website. These new Chinese CBDs are diagrams that have transferred all too literally to real life.

MEGABLOCKS

Ultimately, the shape of Chinese cities is being defined by the linked needs of traffic engineering and real estate development. Beijing gained 6 million more people (the entire population of metropolitan Houston) over the past decade. This growth requires massive real estate development, accomplished by a partnership of government planners and private developers. The government subdivides rural land into blocks, assigning each block to a developer along with a zoning requirement for how many housing units it must accommodate. This is the modern Chinese version of the 1811 New York City grid: a tool for the conversion of land into developable property on a massive scale.

This technique has dramatic implications for urban form. The blocks are big—a quarter mile by a quarter mile is typical—and divided by a network of wide streets. The size of the blocks and the lanes of traffic surrounding them create self-contained enclaves.

The monotony of these landscapes is apparent from elevated subway lines in Beijing, Shenzhen, and Shanghai alike. Block after block are full of towers, sometimes five stories tall, sometimes ten, sometimes taller, each model repeated ten or 20 or 30 times per block in an endless vertical sprawl.

I wandered into one of these megablocks just north of the old core of Shanghai. The Chinese version of a planned community, it had 30 highrise residential towers, each 30 stories tall, all behind gates and security guards. Enough people live there to support an entire shopping complex, including a full-sized supermarket within the gates. A whole private riverfront, too, on the banks of the newly cleaned up Suzhou Creek, is for residents only. We can't imagine housing at this density in Houston, but we are building much the same kind of place: a city designed as a series of self-contained gated enclaves, marketed for their private amenities and perceived safety.

These compounds can be very pleasant places. In Beijing's CBD, I found Jianwai SOHO, completed in 2005, with 7.5 million square feet of retail and residential on 42 acres. One level is reserved for pedestrians and retail, with access roads, parking, and loading docks placed below, while the 2,110 residential units occupy a series of matching towers above. The strategy of separating people and cars works—the pathways along the buildings are quiet and comfortable, and there's no risk of being plowed over by a taxicab or a delivery moped. The buildings are well detailed, and the shops face outward to enliven the public spaces, which include landscaping, benches, and trees for shade.

Where Jianwai SOHO fails is along streets where it meets other superblocks. The CBD—Beijing's

“OLD” DOWNTOWN, NEW DOWNTOWN

Pudong was not the first of China’s new downtowns. After all, the economic boom in China did not begin in Shanghai or Beijing, but in the south, where four coastal cities and an island province were designated special economic zones. The most famous of these is Shenzhen, a onetime fishing village just across the Hong Kong border in 1980 and now a city the size of Houston. In 1985, when Chinese economic reform was only seven years old, the 50-story International Foreign Trade Center, with its rotating restaurant, was the tallest building in China. Thomas J. Campanella notes in *The Concrete Dragon* that its construction at a floor every three days became known as “Shenzhen Speed.” Today, the trade center is not even among the ten tallest buildings in Shenzhen. But it’s not only the building that seems outdated; it’s the whole neighborhood.

Shenzhen’s “old” downtown—the area developed in the 1980s and 1990s—is a thriving, cluttered place. Office buildings, malls, and highrise apartments press in on each other across narrow streets **(top)**. The main shopping area feels almost like an old city in Europe, with curving pedestrianized streets, retail buildings leaning out over the sidewalk, and narrow mid-block alleys lined with stalls selling fast food, cheap clothes, and cellphone cases. On the corner, diners at a three-story McDonald’s—the first in mainland China—look out on the crowd of shoppers below.

Shenzhen is no longer a new boomtown. Appearances matter, and a city concerned with appearances needs an impressive downtown, so Shenzhen has built one five miles down the road from the old one. Called the CBD, it connects the convention center, the city hall, the concert hall, and the library along a one-mile axis lined on both sides with office buildings showcasing every possible architectural variation of smoked glass. On a satellite image, the clarity of its plan contrasts with the chaotic road network of old Shenzhen. This new center must have looked great as a 1:1000 scale model. But on the ground, it’s even more alienating than Pudong.

The convention center **(center)**, a third of a mile wide, faces the street with a stepped plaza so long and high that a dozen escalators have been installed to speed the trip from the sidewalk to the front door. In the renderings by Von Gerkan, Marg, and Partners, these steps are full of stylishly dressed people; on a day with no convention they are simply desolate.

Across the street from the convention center is the central park, built on the roof of a partially buried shopping center, surrounded by shiny office towers, including OMA's new stock exchange **(bottom)**. This park, the centerpiece of the new Shenzhen, may be the least people-friendly park I’ve ever seen. It has what you expect from a park—trees, lawns, benches, paths—but nothing is quite right. The benches are uncomfortable. The paths don’t really connect anything to anything. And when they get to the real centerpiece of the city, a highway interchange, you find yourself separated from the city hall by 17 lanes of traffic and multiple landscaped traffic islands with no way to cross **(bottom)**. Actually getting to the building you see directly in front of you takes a half-mile detour. There’s no direct connection to the shopping mall below. Nor is there a good way to get from the office buildings to the park. In Shenzhen, a crowded city where people love gathering outdoors, the park is nearly vacant.

This park is not a park at all. It’s a design move. It’s a grand axis that looks good on a postcard. It’s a beautiful view from an office tower. Some of this is inevitable in a place that is growing so fast, since it is much easier to sketch a grand axis on a map than it is to get all the details of a public space right. Some of it may be expected in a country where the idea of central business districts is relatively new. But in fact many of the ideas behind places like this “non-park” are imported, brought directly to China by Western architects or simply inspired by US and European precedents. This new downtown could be seen as the worst of Chinese boomtowns—but it’s also the worst of Western urban planning.

biggest business district—is centered on the grade-separated interchange of a 12-lane arterial and an elevated highway with ten lanes of frontage road. In the shadow of two massive overpasses, pedestrians make their way across the street on a 300-foot long crosswalk with a concrete traffic island in the middle. Nearby, the main entrances to the local subway station come at the end of a 200-foot long sidewalk flanked by high-speed traffic on one side and a loading dock on the other.

This scene is typical of Beijing. My first impression of central Beijing as I emerged from the subway at Chongwenmen station was one of overscaled roads. Here, even the arterial streets have frontage roads. At Tiananmen Square, the mausoleum of Chairman Mao looks out over 18 lanes of traffic at grade, and pedestrians must go down the stairs to cross underneath. Westheimer in Houston looks like a side street by comparison. At this size, streets become major obstacles. Crossing on foot takes some courage, especially since pedestrians are expected to yield to cars, bikes, mopeds, and buses. At major intersections, orange-vested traffic wardens try (with varying degrees of success) to keep order.

These large-scale streets are the result of a massive effort to reshape Chinese cities for cars. Numerous streets in Beijing have been widened, displacing tens of thousands of residents and businesses. Still, traffic is a mess, and the vast majority of residents don't even drive: where the United States has 828 vehicles per 1,000 people, China has only 37. It's impossible to imagine how Beijing will ever be able to accommodate the traffic that will result from even half its residents commuting by car, but traffic engineers seem to be doing their best to discourage pedestrians.

The new avenues are lined with sparkling new office buildings, but no matter how spectacular the buildings are, or how nicely landscaped their entry drives, the experience on the ground remains one of incoherence. Places like Jianwai SOHO—or even Super Brand Mall—are an attempt to overcome this by turning inward: developers and architects can't change the overall structure of the city and overcome its fundamental problems, so they try to create good places within it. Even transport links take this approach: the new Beijing South high speed rail station has a beautiful concourse, but, surrounded by tracks, ramps, and parking lots, it has no relationship to the surrounding neighborhoods. That seems familiar to me: American cities tried it in the 1970s and 1980s, and it failed. Embarcadero Center in San Francisco, Peachtree Center in Atlanta, and Houston Center all tried to solve the problem of American downtowns by creating self-contained, vertically separated, mixed-use complexes. But not only did the projects themselves fail to generate enough activity to sustain much more than food courts, they further weakened the city around them.

View from above, the Beijing South station reveals itself as a perfect oval, a pristine object in the city. Likewise, seen from only a few stories up, the CBD begins to resemble its architectural renderings: a series of towers floating above the ground plane. Those towers themselves are spectacular—OMA's China Central Television (CCTV) headquarters is every bit as vertiginous and shimmering in real life as it is in a magazine—but they don't add up to a place.

That leaves me with an unsatisfying thought: in the fast-growing cities of China, architecture doesn't matter all that much. Once the urban form is established, the buildings themselves can do only so much to change it. The CCTV headquarters is an extraordinary building—but in the context of the CBD's oversized streets and noisy traffic, it feels little different from the ordinary buildings that surround it. The role architecture plays in China is not so much city-shaping as symbolism. Western "starchitects" are hired to lend prestige to a development, to brand a corporation, or to mark a city's economic success. They are not hired to make better places. If architects wanted to do that, they would need to be involved earlier, before the streets are laid out and the overpasses planned.

A HISTORY OF URBANISM

I walk down a busy street in Beijing, just north of the Forbidden City. It's crowded with buses, cabs,

mopeds, bikes, and people. But then I turn into an alley—a hutong—maybe 25-feet wide, between two buildings. I pass a store selling groceries, a four-table restaurant grilling meat over a charcoal burner, a small workshop. Then the alley becomes residential. The homes themselves are hidden behind lines of walls; occasionally a portal opens into a courtyard crammed with small buildings. There is life everywhere: laundry hanging out to dry, old men playing mahjong, kids running around, men loading a truck. The alley twists and turns until the busy city is lost somewhere behind me. As it gets narrower, I'm sure I've hit a dead end, but there's a narrow way through, a path only six feet wide between buildings. After a few more twists, I suddenly emerge onto a major street again, back in modern Beijing.

In a commercial alley south of Tiananmen Square, shops face each other across perhaps 30 feet of pavement, with no curbs to separate the pedestrians, bikes, mopeds, cars, and delivery vans. Businesses spill out onto the street with their tables, chairs, and racks of merchandise. Electric signs hang overhead. It's visually chaotic, but unlike in the modern streets of Beijing, traffic is surprisingly polite. Cars slowly make their way through the crowd, people step aside, and nobody seems bothered.

The urbanism of Beijing is very old. There's been a city in this spot since before the 1200s, when Marco Polo visited here. In the 16th century, Beijing was the world's biggest city. The supreme irony of Beijing is that it had no need to look to the United States or France for a precedent for how to build a great urban place; that precedent existed here already.

The hutongs were not perfect, of course: they were often overcrowded, badly heated, and unsanitary. But they offered things that the new office towers and residential complexes lack: a relatively congenial mixing of cars, bikes, mopeds, and people, social public outdoor space, individual identity, a human scale, and a sense of community.

In Shanghai, this older urban tradition met the 19th-century European city. The International Settlement and French Concession, established in the 1840s and ruled by foreign powers until World War II, became home to tens of thousands of Westerners. They designed the Art Deco highrises lining the riverfront of the Bund, the department stores of Nanjing Road, the tree-lined streets of mansions, and the blocks of courtyard apartments. Much of this remains surprisingly intact. Standing on the riverfront in Shanghai, I looked across the Huangpu at the highrises of Pudong, then turned the other way to see one of the best preserved 1920s business districts in the world. I wandered northwards across the Garden Bridge where I found much of the old city still intact: three- and four-story buildings with ground floor shops, apartments above, and courtyards in mid-block that could be in Paris. Despite the foreign architecture, the street life felt much as it did in the hutongs of Beijing. Chinese urbanism and Western urbanism had melded here.

This traditional Chinese urbanism has persisted. I found it just off Beijing's CBD in the alleys behind Jianwai SOHO. This part of the city developed in the 1970s and 1980s, and there's certainly nothing quaint about the mid-rise apartment buildings and cinder block shops. But the roads are narrow. Gates open onto walled courtyards. The stores are small. The buildings feel lived in. Cars, bikes, mopeds, and pedestrians mix freely. A remarkable urban life flourishes here, sometimes directly across the street from the granite drives and manicured lawns of office towers.

But the original Chinese cities are now being steadily destroyed by a potent combination of capitalism, central planning, and Western architects. More than half of the old hutongs of Beijing are gone, as are most of Shanghai's courtyard apartments. Their former residents scattered, they've been replaced by government buildings, office towers, and highrise apartments. This has attracted some disapproving attention in the West, but of course we did the same thing long ago in our own cities, and we're still doing it today.

For now, the demolitions seem to have slowed down. The government has put protections in place and is talking up a program to rehabilitate what remains. But I have a sinking feeling that the hutongs as we know them are doomed. Preservation, after all, usually means preserving buildings; no development regulation can preserve a community of people. This land is too optimally located in the heart of the huge city to house poor families forever. The hutongs are in a literal time warp, preserved for the moment as the city changes around them. Like on those farms near the airport, time may have moved more slowly here than elsewhere in Beijing, but the clock will catch up. I hope these buildings will be saved, so that people 30 years from now will be able to see what the old cities of China looked like. But I also hope that their lessons will be learned so that new places can embrace some of the same virtues.

This park, the centerpiece of the new Shenzhen, may be the least people-friendly park I've ever seen. It has what you expect from a park: trees, lawns, benches, paths. But nothing is quite right.

OPPOSITE **CARS SPEED BY THE NEW SHENZHEN CITY HALL.**

NOSTALGIA

On the wall of the Beijing Planning Exhibition, a bronze model depicts Beijing before the revolution. Seen at a small scale, the city reads as texture. A city wall five miles east to west and five and a half miles north to south encloses a dense fabric of hutongs. Much of this is gone now, as is the city wall itself. But the defining center of old Beijing is still there: the Forbidden City, its vast and orderly sequence of courtyards, the symbols of imperial power, contrasting with the city around it.

After the emperor fell, the Japanese were driven out, the nationalists were defeated, and the People's Liberation Army marched into Beijing in 1948, the communists appropriated the symbols of the imperial dynasties. The palaces were kept intact, and Tiananmen Square was widened into a huge parade ground, surrounded by the buildings of the new regime and centered on a monument to the soldiers who fought in the revolution. In 1976, Mao's mausoleum was placed directly in line with the old gates. This axis remains one of the key organizing principles of Beijing; it was extended northwards in 2008 to form the centerpiece of Olympic Park, an extension that was envisioned, perhaps ironically or perhaps appropriately, by Albert Speer, the son of Hitler's architect. The historic east-west axis, which intersects at Tiananmen Square, has also been strengthened: it's now anchored by the CBD on one end and another major office district, Beijing Finance Street, on the other.

I walked across Olympic Park the day after I went to the Forbidden City. It was a hot August afternoon as the sun beat down on the crowds of Chinese tourists. The vast paved plaza that marks the axis—two and a half miles long, up to 600 feet wide—has no benches, no trees, and no shade. There is not much to do here on an ordinary day but be awed by the surrounding buildings. The Bird's Nest and the Water Cube look a little worn now; they do not quite have the same sparkle they did on TV during the games. But they remain jaw-droppingly impressive, huge otherworldly objects at an inhuman scale standing in magnificent isolation on the plaza. They look nothing like the Forbidden City, but they send the same message of power and strength. Mao successfully appropriated the symbols of imperial China to reunite a country torn by civil war under a strong central government, and today's regime is using similar symbols to underline a message of common purpose.

The emotional power of history is also being exploited to commercial ends. Just south of Tiananmen Square on the central axis, Qianmen has been rebuilt as a pedestrian street. It's lined by 1920s buildings—some, according to the plaques, real, restored to their earlier appearance, and others no doubt imaginative re-creations. Antique lampposts, stone benches, a replica streetcar plodding slowly down the street, and thousands of red lanterns create a stage-set atmosphere of an imagined 1920s Beijing. The buildings are occupied by shops for the brand-conscious: Sephora, H&M, Häagen-Dazs, Zara. The place is a hit: it's the busiest outdoor public space I saw in

Beijing. Nostalgia clearly sells.

In Shanghai, too, the past is being celebrated again. The Bund has been restored. The French Concession is prestigious. In the underground concourse that connects the Urban Planning Exhibition Center to the subway, a re-created "Shanghai Traditional Street in the 1930s" features stores selling iPod cases, fast food, and bottled water behind fake European storefronts, with yet another replica streetcar at the end.

There's a contradiction built into all of this. After all, the Concessions—territory outside of Chinese jurisdiction seized by foreign powers at gunboat-point—were a central part of the foreign humiliation of China that led to the communist revolution. In Shanghai, this history is blunted by memories of a common enemy: in 1937, when the Japanese invaded, the foreign territories became a refuge, then after Pearl Harbor, when the Japanese invaded the Concessions, too, the Westerners suffered as the Chinese did. But the images of Westerners riding in rickshaws pulled by Chinese that are displayed in the "Traditional Street" still give pause.

The ironies in these revivals of Shanghai history are most obvious at Xintiandi, perhaps the most famous commercial historic preservation project in China. In 2003, two blocks of old buildings in Shanghai were rebuilt or restored as high-end retail. They now house a Starbucks, a Häagen-Dazs, a BMW Lifestyle Boutique, and a Lawry's Steakhouse. Western restaurants in rehabilitated buildings recall an era when the West ruled most of Shanghai, yet there's one more building in the complex: the place where the Chinese Communist Party held its first meeting in July 1921.

Nostalgia, however, is not the same as preservation. Nostalgia for the past has grown alongside widespread destruction, with replicas of history being built even as real historic buildings have been demolished. As in the hutongs, the government may respond to rising public concern by trying to protect old buildings, but there's no assurance the old neighborhoods will keep their character. Perhaps the buildings will remain—the government can assure that—but it may be different people who live there. I saw a Mercedes in a hutong, which could be a sign of the future. Once the fad for Western ideas has passed, the new rich and upper middle class may rediscover these old places, fix them up, and enjoy a more comfortable, less crowded version of hutong life.

NEW ATTITUDES

In the Shanghai office of the landscape architecture firm SWA Group, transplanted Houstonian Scott Slaney is hopeful about the prospects of urban planning in China. He laments the obvious problems: he says that a decade ago, new developments still included bike lanes and narrower streets but now he's seeing wider and wider boulevards. He also agrees that most parks are planned as greenspaces and not gathering places, and he remembers the Shanghai neighborhoods that have been demolished. But, he says, attitudes are changing, and urban planning in China is getting more sophisticated.

I spent two days in Shanghai seeing some of what Slaney was talking about, starting at the building that houses SWA's offices. Highstreet Lofts is an old factory converted into offices and stores by Italian expats Kokai Studios, who were also responsible for the renovation of one of the landmark buildings on the Bund. A central light court, opened up within a framework of existing beams and columns, floods the high-ceilinged offices with light, and the old loading docks have become a quiet courtyard. The outside skin is a mix of existing walls and windows, and inserted screens and signage, with no attempt made to disguise the alterations as historic fabric. At the front entrance, a coffee shop faces a narrow Shanghai street across a small plaza. In a city where many new buildings face the street with walls and security cameras, the shop and plaza are a welcome public gesture.

The Highstreet Lofts is an example of something that's happening both in Shanghai and in the United States. Industrial uses are moving further from the urban core, leaving old factory complexes, now replaced by larger and more efficient facilities, empty. And here, as in the United States, the old industries are being converted. Near the river, the former Shanghai Oil Plant has been converted into bars, restaurants, and a boutique hotel. It's called, rather transparently, Cool Docks. As at the Highstreet Lofts, the modern alterations are unapologetic, and while there is some of Xintiandi's nostalgic architecture, many of the rough edges of the old buildings have been allowed to remain. Cool Docks may be historic, but it's not quaint.

To the north, on the banks of once polluted Suzhou Creek, the M50 arts complex occupies an old textile mill. Much of the old fabric here has been torn down, and a long graffiti-covered wall hides an empty field that awaits cleanup and redevelopment.

The supreme irony of Beijing is that there was no need to look to the United States or France for a precedent of how to build a great urban place; that precedent was there already.

OPPOSITE THE WIDE STREETS OF BEIJING REPLACED OLD HUTONGS LIKE THIS ONE.
ABOVE IN SHANGHAI, THE OLD CITY IS BEING REPLICATED IN AN UNDERGOUND ARCADE AND REPURPOSED AS GALLERIES AT M50.

But at M50 the old buildings were converted into a series of galleries. The former factory gates, set in a tall wall that surrounds the compound, open into a series of irregular courtyards lying between the old brick buildings. Again, there was no attempt at pastiche; the existing finishes mingle with modern steel, glass, and concrete, and planes of primary color mark the gallery entrances.

These reinvented places have a human scale that's entirely lacking in much of modern China. But I did see something of the same scale in a few new places as well. The most dramatic was actually an SWA project. Beijing Financial Street is the counterpart to the CBD on the opposite side of the city. It too is home to branded corporate headquarters and luxury boutiques. But unlike the CBD, the district is centered not on a highway interchange but on a park. The roads are at an urban scale, with two to four lanes and wide, tree-shaded sidewalks. Opposite the park, the street is lined with restaurants, which occupy the ground floor of an office building. It was the only business district I saw in China where I actually enjoyed walking around. And so did others, it seemed: on one Saturday afternoon, with the office workers at home, the adjacent mall was empty, but families lingered on the sidewalk in front of the restaurants.

Do projects like this reflect a new, more sophisticated version of urban design? In Shanghai's urban planning museum, the exhibitions about historic preservation, sustainability, and new urban villages inevitably present an idealized view, reflecting aspirations more than reality. But they are an indication, at least, of government planners' awareness of public concerns, and those planners can steer China's cities into more livable directions. I imagine that the same planners who first noticed the gleaming highrises on their trips to the West have since returned to note a shift toward more context-sensitive design, and now they're responding. But the Beijing Finance Street and the CBD were built at the same time, and even as Cool Docks and M50 draw crowds, other warehouses are being torn down for new office parks.

AMBITION

The centerpiece of Beijing's planning exhibition is a huge scale model of the urban core. Families can stand around and see what their city will look like—the activity centers, the neighborhoods, the expressways, the transport hubs, the monuments, the parks.

In China, planning is overt. That's in contrast to Houston, where agencies justify new highway projects by saying things like "this capacity is required for future traffic needs." In China, they tell you that they want to convert farmland to neighborhoods housing hundreds of thousands of people, and that they want to create clusters of corporate headquarters around the edges of the city, and so they're building a highway to enable that plan. It's ironic that China—a regime where the public has no input on any of these projects—is having a more honest discussion about planning than we are.

The infrastructure that the Chinese are building for their new cities is truly impressive. Shanghai opened its first subway line in 1995, and today it has 270 miles of subway lines, more than New York, London, or Paris. All were built in two decades, and plans are on the books to double that system. Shanghai isn't alone: Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen all have subway systems of over 100 miles, surpassing Washington, D.C., and Chicago, and another eight cities have smaller systems. The subways I rode were all up-to-date, with sliding doors at the platform edge for safety, excellent signage, easy-to-use vending machines, and "smart card" fares.

China is building all kinds of infrastructure at this same scale. Across the countryside, I saw miles of new six-lane highways (albeit nearly empty). China's ports, full of new wharves and state-of-the-art container cranes, include seven of the world's ten busiest. The airports are big, shiny, comfortable, and passenger-friendly. China has the longest overwater bridge in the world, the longest cable-stayed bridge span, and five of the

ten longest suspension bridge spans.

Perhaps the most prominent symbol of Chinese infrastructure is the country's high-speed rail network. The Beijing to Shanghai high-speed rail line opened on June 30; I rode it four days later. Cruising along smoothly at 190 mph, I could not help but be impressed by the ambition of this project. Of its 800 miles of new, double-track, grade-separated electrified railway, 86 percent is elevated, including two major river crossings, and 22 tunnels go right through any hills that got in the way. Twenty brand new stations serve cities along the way, and the Beijing and Shanghai stations were completely rebuilt to serve the new demands of high-speed rail. Imagine traveling from Houston to Atlanta by train in five hours and you get the idea.

Now 90 trains a day travel between Shanghai and Beijing carrying 165,000 riders.

It's nothing short of remarkable that China has reached this point. In 1999, China was the last country on earth still building new steam locomotives for regular service. Then in 2003, the first new, dedicated high-speed rail line opened. China began importing high-speed rail trains from Europe and Japan in 2006; by 2008 the Chinese were building foreign-designed trains under license; and today, a Chinese-designed and Chinese-built train is the fastest mass-produced train in the world. By comparison, the United States built its last steam locomotive in 1953 and still has neither a dedicated high-speed rail line nor the capability to design or build high-speed trains domestically.

Spurring all this expansion is China's sense of optimism. Developers are building because they have every reason to think they'll make a profit. The people support (or at least tolerate) the government because they think that their future—or their children's future—is getting better. In the same way, the government's infrastructure spending is a statement of positive expectation: new highways, railroads, and ports will create economic growth, and that growth will justify the spending. That's the same motivation that created the highways of Houston and the subways of New York, and it's what felt most familiar to me about China, even as we've lost some of that optimism back in the United States.

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF ARCHITECTURE

In Beijing, Mao's portrait overlooks the city. In Shenzhen, that place is held by a billboard of Deng Xiaoping, who led China from 1978 to 1992. It was Deng who designated Shenzhen as a special economic zone in 1980, and his triumphant 1992 tour of Shenzhen cemented the economic reforms after the Tiananmen Square massacre. Shenzhen was the prototype for the new Chinese city, with monuments to economic success, not military victories.

A small park in a residential area of Shenzhen tells an alternate history of China. The park rests on the site of the fishing village the city started from, and was built when the village residents were rehoused in modern apartment towers. A series of bronze plaques tells the history of the fishing village, starting with a summary [reproduced here as written]:

> "The beautiful Fisherman village borders Hong Kong. It is by the side of Shenzhen River. Great Changes have taken place in the last decades. In the early 1940s the Dongguan fisherman used to live and set up thatched cottages on the semi waste peninsula and float on the river to fish. When the People's Republic of China was founded, the fisherman began to move onto the bank gradually and live in one-story tiled houses. The village was formed and the name of Litoujian was later replaced by Fisherman Village. The extreme "Left" trend of "Cultural Revolution" (1966-1976) was as violent as typhoon and it made the people's life poorer and poorer with each passing day and people began escaping to Hong Kong one after another. At the beginning of the reform an opening up of the country, Shenzhen Special Economic Zone was set up. Great changes took place in the fisherman village. The people there worked hand in hand to develop multiple trades and they reached the goal of being the first village of 10-thousand RMB households in China. Thirty-five two-story buildings appeared by the side of the Shenzhen River for the first time. It began the first phase of the Chinese peasants exploring the ways of better life.
>
> "On January 25, 1984, Comrade Deng Xiaoping visited Fisherman Village. He chatted with the villagers and was solicitous for their welfare. Knowing that the people's livelihood was improving, Xiaoping was very gratified."

This display is extraordinary and telling. Its take on the past is blunt: there is actually a bas-relief of mean-looking Chinese border guards in front of a barbed-wire fence, blocking the peasants' escape to Hong Kong during the Cultural Revolution. But like every historical marker, it provides an edited view of history.

This notion of communal progress is at odds with what I saw in China. On average, society has taken huge strides forward; there is no doubt average Chinese citizens are better off than they were before Deng. But that progress has not been evenly shared. The farmers outside the airport can see China changing around them, but are their lives any better? Today, one of the biggest sources of political unrest in China—and instigators of some of the rare instances of public protest—are peasants who are losing their land to new development.

What really rings true in the Shenzhen park memorial, however, is the adamant belief in the virtue of development. The measure of progress has become economic, not political: the failure of the Cultural Revolution was that it kept people in poverty, and today's success is measured in household income.

And the manifestation of this economic progress is built form: people moving from boats to "thatched cottages" to "tiled houses" to "two-story houses" to apartment buildings of "high standards, strict requirements, and good quality." I saw this extolling of development everywhere. On a construction site, a red banner read, "Like surging waves, never stop developing." In Beijing, a sign urged us to "develop and enjoy together." The Shanghai paper reported an incident of panic on a subway train when a man ran through yelling that there was a bomb on board. There wasn't, and when police tracked down the passenger, his excuse was that he was trying to get away from an overzealous real estate broker.

Halfway around the world, I came to a conclusion that was hardly new: cities are shaped by money more than by design. Economic imperatives transcend political systems, and this is as true in centrally planned China as it is in supposedly laissez-faire Houston. Architecture works, as it always has, in the service of the economy. Theories of urban planning and the social impact of architectural styles are insignificant in comparison. Cool Docks, Beijing Finance Street, Jianwai SOHO, and Qianmen have little in common on the surface, but they are all tools for making money.

The view from the airport train proved telling: in making up for decades of lost time, China is completely jumbling the usually orderly timeline of how cities have traditionally evolved. Instead of a succession of styles and ideas, the history of urban planning has become a grab bag of ideas to mash up, try out, and celebrate. The neat progression implied in the Shenzhen park is misleading: a two-story house is obviously an advancement from a thatched cottage—but it's not clear that the new downtown Shenzhen is a beneficial evolution from the old one. I could assemble what I saw in China into a story, echoing the story of Western development: an old, pedestrian-oriented urbanism gives way to car-oriented cities, and then planners realize the shortcomings of that approach and rediscover a more sophisticated solution. But it's hard to maintain a linear narrative when everything is all happening at once. If Chinese cities are the cities of the future, then the future is certain to be disorienting. 文明

It's ironic that China—a regime where the public has no input on any of these projects—is having a more honest discussion about planning than we are.

OPPOSITE **FARMS OUTSIDE BEIJING GIVE WAY TO THE NEW CITY DEPICTED IN A MASSIVE SCALE MODEL.**

A Story About Him, Him and Him

他，他，他

TRANSLATED FROM *URBAN CHINA* MAGAZINE BY BRIAN D HAMMER

AN URBANITE
他是市民，

A FARMER
他是农民，

A FARMER IN THE CITY
他是进城的农民

中国人居住在城市和乡村，在长期的环境适应及发展中形成了今天不同的生活方式。而进城农民这一特定阶段和身份的群体，又在过着异于上述城和乡的生活。他们的生活场景片段，就是城乡统筹这一命题最为微观的故事背景。

Chinese people living in cities and villages have developed and acculturated to the different ways of life that we see today. However, farmers in the city—this group defined in this particular period and by their special status—live a life different from both the city and the village mentioned above. A portrait of their life is a microcosm and forms the background of urban and rural integration.

HE HAS (NON-AGRICULTURAL) HOUSEHOLD REGISTRATION STATUS.

HE HAS (AGRICULTURAL) HOUSEHOLD REGISTRATION CARD STATUS.

HE HAS APPLIED FOR A TEMPORARY RESIDENT.

HE'S A MEMBER OF THE 9-TO-5 OFFICE WORKER CROWD.

HE'S A FARMER WHO WORKS FROM SUN-UP TO SUN-DOWN.

TO HIM OVERTIME MEANS HE CAN MAKE MORE MONEY.

HIS LIFE IS INSEPARABLE FROM HIS MONTHLY CALENDAR.

AS TRADITIONAL HOLIDAYS APPROACH HE STARTS TO CLEAN HIS HOUSE.

CHINESE NEW YEAR MEANS HE CAN GO HOME (TO SEE HIS FAMILY).

HE'S SO BUSY ALL DAY, EVERY DAY, THAT HE NEVER STOPS THINKING.

HE SAYS HIS DAYS ARE VERY TAXING, BUT THEY'RE STILL PRETTY SIMPLE.

HE'S NOT CERTAIN WHAT HIS LIFE IN THE FUTURE MAY BE LIKE.

HE LOVES TO SOAK IN THE BATH.

HE WASHES JUST ONCE PER WEEK.

HE PREFERS SLEEPING MORE TO TAKING A BATH.

HE SITS ON A TOILET.

HE USES A SQUAT TOILET.

HE SQUATS ON THE SEAT OF A WESTERN TOILET.

ONCE IN A WHILE HE GOES DOWNSTAIRS TO EAT AT MCDONALDS.

HE OFTEN EATS A BOWL OF NOODLES ON WORK DAYS.

HE EATS IN THE COMPANY CANTEEN.

HIS ANNUAL SALARY IS 19,909 RMB.

HE MAKES 5,919 RMB PER YEAR.

IN A YEAR, HE CARRIES HOME 8,000 RMB FOR HIS FAMILY.

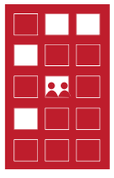
IN CHINA THE URBAN POPULATION IS 630 MILLION.

IN CHINA, THE AGRICULTURAL POPULATION IS 630 MILLION.

OF WHICH, 240 MILLION ARE MIGRANT WORKERS.

他的家，他的家，他的家

HIS HOME, HIS HOME, HIS HOME



HE AND HIS WIFE BOUGHT AN 80M2 APARTMENT.

HE AND HIS EXTENDED FAMILY LIVE IN A HOME WITH A COURTYARD.

HE AND HIS WIFE ENTERED THE CITY TO WORK WHILE THEIR PARENTS AND CHILD LIVE IN THE VILLAGE.

A WINDOW IN HIS HOME.

A WINDOW IN HIS HOME.

HIS DORMITORY IS NOT HIS HOME.

IN HIS HOME REFRIGERATOR SITS A 5 RMB BOTTLE OF SPRITE.

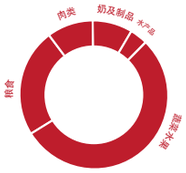
ONCE IN A GREAT WHILE, HE'LL BUY A 7 RMB LARGE BOTTLE OF SPRITE.

SPRITE IS JUST A KNOCK-OFF ITEM.

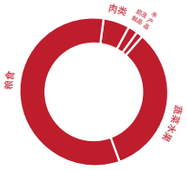
THEIR FAMILY'S ANNUAL EXPENDITURES OF 36,000 RMB ARE USED ON TENNIS, FAST FOOD, CELL PHONES, SUBWAY FARE, PERFUME, MEDICINE, AND CLOTHING.

THEIR FAMILY'S ANNUAL EXPENDITURES ARE ALLOCATED TOWARD RICE, CLOTHING, FERTILIZER, AND FARMING IMPLEMENTS.

THEY ARE NOT AT HOME, SO THEY ARE VERY THRIFTY (EAT NOODLES).



THE STRUCTURE OF THEIR DAILY DIET.



THE STRUCTURE OF THEIR DAILY DIET.

THE STRUCTURE OF THEIR DAILY DIET.

IN CHINA, URBAN HOUSEHOLDS NUMBER 200M.

IN CHINA, AGRICULTURAL HOUSEHOLDS NUMBER 150M.

THE VAST MAJORITY OF URBAN MIGRANT WORKERS' FAMILIES ARE STILL IN THE COUNTRYSIDE.

他的城,他的乡, 他的...

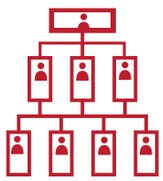
HIS CITY, HIS VILLAGE, HIS...

EACH DAY HE CRISSCROSSES HIS CITY'S COMPLEX ROAD NETWORK.

WALKING TO THE OTHER END OF THE VILLAGE TAKES 10 MINUTES.

WHERE HE LIVES IS CALLED A VILLAGE IN THE CITY.

RELATIONS IN THE CITY ARE MONETARY, WORK-RELATED, DIGITAL, AND THROUGH MARRIAGE.



MOST OF THE MEN IN HIS VILLAGE ALL HAVE THE SURNAME LIU.

RESIDENTS OF THE VILLAGE (IN THE CITY) COME FROM "FIVE OCEANS, FOUR SEAS" (EVERYWHERE).

HE ONLY RARELY SEES HIS NEIGHBORS.

HE KNOWS EVERYONE IN HIS VILLAGE.

HE FREQUENTLY SEES HIS NEW CO-WORKER FRIENDS.

MANY SUPERMARKETS OF VARIOUS SIZES ARE LOCATED NEAR HIS HOME (CARREFOUR, DARUNFA, LIANHUA, QUANJIA, LEGOU).

AT THE VILLAGE EDGE IS A SMALL SHOP SELLING SUNDRY GOODS.

HE'S A FREQUENT CUSTOMER OF NIGHT MARKETS, WHERE GOODS ARE SPREAD ON A BLANKET ON THE STREET.

IN THE EVENING, HE AND HIS WIFE SOMETIMES WATCH TV.

IN THE EVENING, HE MOVES HIS TV TO THE COURTYARD FOR ALL TO WATCH.

AFTER WORK, HE SOMETIMES GOES TO THE INTERNET CAFÉ TO CHAT.

ONCE IN A WHILE HE'LL GO TO A BAR WITH FRIENDS.

IN HIS FREE TIME, HE AND SOME FELLOW VILLAGERS WILL PLAY ERHU.

ONLY RARELY DOES HE THINK ABOUT GOING TO HAVE A FOOT MASSAGE, BUT HE DOESN'T GIVE IN TO THE URGE.

SOMETIMES HE'LL ARGUE WITH PEOPLE.

SOMETIMES WHEN HE'S ANGRY HE'LL GET IN A FIGHT.

USUALLY WHEN HE ENCOUNTERS A PROBLEM, HE'LL JUST LEAVE AND IGNORE IT.

CHILDREN WALK TO SCHOOL.

CHILDREN WALK FIVE KILOMETERS ON A MOUNTAIN PATH TO SCHOOL.

AFTER CHILDREN COME TO THE CITY THEY OFTEN TRANSFER THEIR STUDIES AND RETURN TO THE VILLAGE.

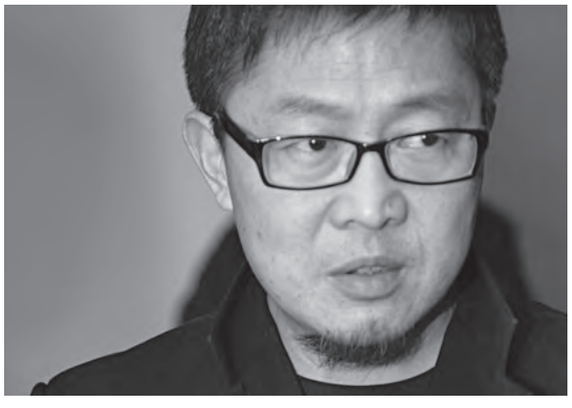
IN CHINA, THERE ARE APPROXIMATELY 655 CITIES.

IN CHINA, THERE ARE APPROXIMATELY 644,000 VILLAGES.

IN CHINA, HOW MANY VILLAGES IN THE CITY ARE THERE?

3 CHINESE ARCHITECTS ON TRADITION, INNOVATION, AND BUSINESS:

Conversations with Pei Zhu, Wang Shu, and Qingyun Ma



China's rapid urbanization has brought tremendous problems. Entire neighborhoods are demolished in days, with thousands of citizens displaced as the eager nation tries to leave its past behind. Centuries of traditional building knowledge have been all but lost, swallowed by countless miles of Western-style sprawl. And as villages become cities overnight, architects are hard pressed to instill safe and high-quality modern building practices.

Recently, I witnessed some of this firsthand in my work as an architectural and landscape designer, an experience that I found to be both exhilarating and frustrating. Because of this, I was excited to sit down with Pei Zhu, Wang Shu, and Qingyun Ma, after their talks for the Rice Design Alliance 2011 Fall Lecture Series. The three accomplished architects established themselves during China's recent building boom. I wanted to know how they produced such amazing work in such compromising circumstances, and I wanted to hear what they have to say about Houston, our own city of rapid-fire change, disappearing history, and endless sprawl.

Zhu, Wang, and Ma lead three very different practices, but common themes emerged in our discussions. They each spoke of innovative ways to incorporate the past, whether at the scale of the city or the building, or within a practice itself. They are all deeply concerned with the state of contemporary practice, not just in China but in the United States as well.

Pei Zhu

Thursday October 6, 2011

Pei Zhu has designed several high-profile projects such as the Guggenheim Art Pavilion in Abu Dhabi and the Control Center for the Beijing Olympics, as well as a large number of museums in China. His transformation of an ordinary office building into the Blur Hotel gained him international attention as did his sensitive contemporary addition to a traditional courtyard house. The interview was conducted after a tour given by Karl Kilian of the Menil Collection on a bench underneath the eaves of the main building.

Pei Zhu | In China we have built infrastructure and museums, so many physical things, but we still have a long way to go in terms of people's cultivation and education.

Julia Mandell | The work you do with museums is crucial. You said during your lecture that your clients commission the museum design without a program in mind. That speaks to a superficial understanding of the museum, viewing it as an icon in the city, not as a qualitative experience.

PZ | I try extremely hard to work with our clients to help them to develop their ideas for programming. I bring in a museum consultant at the very beginning of the architecture design.

JM | Can you talk about how your work relates to the city? It seems that officials from each city not only want an iconic museum, but want the same one.

PZ | I look for opportunities to experiment. I try to formulate an experimental process. The historic city and contemporary design can really work together. But right now Chinese urban development typically surrounds the historic center with a very generic metropolis. The government today does not like to touch the historic center, so they treat it like a mu-

seum. They build a totally new city around it with no consideration of local culture. They bring in foreign architects and borrow models from America and Europe.

How can we make a connection with our past and integrate that past with contemporary architecture? I really loved exploring this possibility with the courtyard renovation at the Guggenheim Museum. Another possibility is the hutongs, the historic courtyard houses in Beijing and all over China.

Sometimes I deal with more open suburbia. The buildings in those cases, like the Menil, may be surrounded by low-density construction. Then you ask, how can you make your building both connect with the neighborhood and provide public space?

JM | Recently architects in China have undertaken full-scale restorations, like the Shanghai Xintiandi or Tianzifang. What is your opinion of those sorts of projects?

PZ | Xintiandi, I believe, is a bad model for the Chinese city. You feel that it is fake. You feel that it is not reality, but more like a movie. They have created a surreal moment isolated from its surroundings.

JM | Here the Menil is actually quite different from your approach of contrasting the historic city and contemporary architecture. The consistency of color and materials with the bungalows around it creates a single composition.

PZ | Yes, but I still feel a very strong contrast in terms of scale. The museum is not a house. A house basically deals with people's daily lives, but the museum must provide some spiritual space. This building is quite contemporary and actually contrasts with the vernacular houses, but there is also a dialogue. I think that's the success of this museum. We are sitting here in a sort of dialogue. In this small arcade, you still have a neighborhood feeling, but at the same moment you feel this is a museum.

My approach is, I think, a different solution, but we are looking for the same connection. At the Cai Guo-Qiang Courtyard House, we use totally contrasting materials, but scale-wise we remain the same as the surrounding structures. The idea is the same; we just use different ways to make a contrast. We need to provide a new experience but at the same moment connect to the local culture.

JM | The Cai Guo-Qiang House and the Guggenheim Beijing have a kind of poetic specter of paradoxical presence and absence. Again, within this discussion of Chinese urbanism, it seems very political as well—a commentary on anxiety, on the absence of meaning in contemporary city building or in architecture. They seem to be strong political statements about both the lack of preservation and the displacement of urban communities. Have you thought about that?

PZ | I had one installation that presented some of my study and research on urbanization. In it Beijing was cut into pieces, creating isolated islands. Each island is really disconnected. The only connection is through traffic, but in terms of people's communication, the city is totally fragmented. That's the biggest problem.

So basically you cannot imagine that the historic city can live again. I have used different projects—for example, the Blur Hotel, the Publishing House, and the Cai Guo-Qiang House—to carry out experiments in starting communication between those islands. Make the historic dialogue with the contemporary, right? I use a Chinese method that I call the Acupuncture Way.

I start with individual small projects, and then those small projects can release energy to influence their surroundings. At the Publishing House and Blur Hotel, we dealt with institutional buildings. Then we started to use the acupuncture of small changes to bring new life. We brought in public activity, providing public space and more transparency in terms of architecture: the roof terrace communicates with the neighborhood, etc.

Architecture cannot avoid addressing urban challenges or questions—that's automatic. You have to react. You have to find some solutions to resolve the problem. For architects it is a basic responsibility to do this.

JM | If Houston and other Texas cities can learn from the explosive growth in China and the tearing down of historic buildings, the Blur Hotel seems to me to be a very useful example.

PZ | Demolition goes against history. It doesn't matter if the architecture was good or bad. We have to keep the memory, the mark, the layer of history. But we can transform historic buildings in a very interesting way. Memory is still here. At the Blur Hotel you can feel both the older structure and a new layer. A courtyard starts to gradually generate a kind of benign urban tumor as it is introduced inside of a solid building. That is when you feel this is much more interesting than building a new thing.

Right now everybody focuses on the sprawling city and growing the economy as if everything is positive. In Chinese philosophy, if you have too many positives, you must have a balancing negative. A natural disaster is a big repercussion for human beings' overly ambitious dealings with nature. I think this is true not only for Chinese cities, but also almost everywhere, right?

Sometimes I just feel architects are too professional. Architects need to build something, but actually we do not think about what architecture is supposed to be.

JM | I was very struck by the photograph of the OCT Design Museum when it was under construction and the people were walking toward it. It looks like a spaceship in that picture; I didn't believe it was a real building. Very cinematic. It also seems to have a Western aesthetic. You have an understanding of Chinese tradition, but the museum reminds me of someone pulling city images from the rest of the world and placing them in China.

PZ | You may feel it has a really Western aesthetic, but I feel it is quite Chinese. Actually this is a good thing. We share the same things. We are all human beings. Civilization is not only declaring, "This is my country and this is my nation."

Some people fall in love with the vernacular. You are going to see Wang Shu's work. He falls in love with the vernacular, and I think he can make the architectural world richer. I don't think the vernacular is wrong. We need diversity. I still believe it doesn't matter if you use the vernacular or the contemporary. The building itself must be alive. It must be in dialogue with the people. That is what makes it a successful building.

When people see a building they love to touch, they fall in love with it. They make it exciting; they make it emotional. That's totally independent of the language of its architecture, whether it is vernacular or contemporary.

So, I think, this is my final judgment: people need continuity, and they also need a fantastic thing. Different architects have different responsibilities. Maybe some people are more focused on the local and vernacular research. Maybe some architects need to take a different approach, a more contemporary or a more experimental way to explore a new thing that has never happened before. 文明

TOP **Cai Guo-Qiang Courtyard House Renovation.**
ABOVE **OCT Design Museum.**

PORTRAITS COURTESY OF THE ARCHITECTS. ALL OTHERS COURTESY PEI ZHU

Wang Shu

Thursday October 13, 2011

A few months after lecturing in Houston for the RDA 2011 Fall series and interviewing for this article, Wang Shu was announced as the 2012 winner of the Pritzker Prize. Subsequent press celebrated the award as the rise of China's first star architect. Those who saw him here know that Wang Shu emphasized his collaboration with traditional craftsmen above an individual style all his own. The interview was conducted over lunch at the Hotel Zaza.

Julia Mandell | I am curious how you think your practice relates to the urban, to city making, to the city.

Wang Shu | In my work we have several different, interesting lines. Urbanism is one important line. For example, I like to think about gardens. In China gardens have a very special meaning in urban areas. Our gardens in ancient times were built by scholars and craftsmen, usually in very high-density cities. Why did the people want to build gardens? They wanted to live in nature, but had to live in cities because they had a family, a job, there. Because their heart was still in the mountains, they built gardens in the cities.

According to Chinese traditional philosophy, you should think about taking a natural way. You can have a very high-density community, but people still want to have a garden.

For example, I designed a highrise apartment building in 2001: six 100-meter-tall highrises. I designed a garden for every home in the highrise. Even if you live in a 100-meter-tall building, you still have a garden; you have a chance to plant a tree six meters high. You have a chance to do it. When I did that design, people said, "You are crazy. It is impossible." But finally we finished the construction, and the gardens were there.

In another example, I designed a small museum. The museum is just 400 square meters. But the design is not just a museum because it includes a small public garden. The garden is open 24 hours a day. People visiting here find that they can enjoy some garden "feelings." So you can design gardens, I think, even in the most difficult situation.

JM | It is amazing that you have managed to build the way you do in China. It is clear how you have done it, by building relationships with craftsmen, but in China designers are often distant from the site: there is a group of people who do the design drawings and a different group of people who build them.

WS | In China architects usually don't go to the site. So working on-site is quite a different way of doing things. But you should understand what your workers and your craftsmen can do…My way, I call it the "dirty way." A little bit dirty, a little bit imperfect. I like the feeling. I don't like perfect things. The feeling is perfect, but you can see many small mistakes. That's my philosophy.

JM | Did you encounter resistance from clients and construction professionals?

WS | In fact, I spent a long time to do it … to develop a different system. In my studio we do many small experiments. Through this process we build friendships and an understanding of the ways of craftsmen. Finally we have what I call the "architect-directly-working-with-craftsmen-together" way.

Our studio does research in the countryside so we can think about how to let [vernacular construction] techniques continue and how they can be mixed with modern techniques. Because we have modern construction regulations now, we have different principles to follow.

JM | Hangzhou is beautiful. I have spent a couple of days there. It clearly has a very strong landscape tradition: Do you think that has helped you to promote your type of work? Do you find that the city values and understands it more?

WS | This is true of Hangzhou and also not true. In Chinese tradition Hangzhou is the perfect example for big cities. The city's name means half city and half landscape. It is not just half and half, though; in fact, they mix together. It is totally about the landscape-city system. For the Chinese dream of the traditional city, Hangzhou is the perfect model. They call it paradise.

But now if you visit Hangzhou, you can go directly to the city downtown center to see West Lake, and it is true that you will see the beautiful lake, the mountain, and the city built in relation to each other. But the ratio is not half and half anymore; now it is one to ten landscape to city. The city has expanded very quickly. The historic part is just a small area, compared to the other side, which I call the "server area." Hangzhou now has a population of eight million. Only 20 years ago, we just had one million.

JM | Do you think the understanding of preservation is changing at all in China? In a few recent projects, for example, Xintiandi in Shanghai, they are restoring old structures.

WS | In that way Xintiandi is better than demolition. But on the other hand, it just performs some commercial function. Usually Chinese city governments are very powerful; they are like big companies, and they just think about how to earn the most money. They don't care about people's lives. For example, if you want historic conservation, the government sees it is as expensive. No money comes back. So they say they can't do it.

> **DESCRIBING TRADITIONAL CHINESE STRUCTURES, PEOPLE MAY SAY, "THIS CAME FROM 1,000 YEARS AGO," BUT IN FACT YOU WILL FIND IT HAS BEEN REBUILT MANY TIMES, WHILE NEVER TOTALLY DEMOLISHED. YOU WILL FIND MAYBE A FEW TINY ELEMENTS THAT BELONG TO 1,000 YEARS AGO.**

JM | I've read that in China, in terms of preservation, there

LEFT Ningbo History Museum.
CENTER AND RIGHT Xiangshan campus, China Academy of Art.

is a cultural idea that site is more important than structure. American scholars speculate that this may be in part why there has been less of a Western idea of preservation there. Do you think that is at play?

WS | Yes. It is very difficult to do preservation in China. Describing traditional Chinese structures, people may say, "This came from 1,000 years ago," but in fact you will find it has been rebuilt many times, while never totally demolished. You will find maybe a few tiny elements that belong to 1,000 years ago. This is quite a different way to think about architecture, about construction, about craftsmen techniques. But now few craftsmen know this way of rebuilding around older structures, very few. The last generation of craftsmen who know it are 60 years old; they will work 10 more years and they will die. But no younger generation can do it.

In the 1950s we had the revolution, and then the country wanted to become a modern industrial country. The craftsmen way was the old way. They abandoned it immediately.

For example, in Beijing before the revolution, many craftsmen every day walked through the very narrow, hutong-lined streets to ask, "Do you need to repair your house?" Suddenly, one day, every craftsman disappeared. In the past 30 years without them, every building has decayed. The system changed. In the countryside they still had the system of rebuilding the old until the 1980s. Then the people went to the city to become factory workers. They left the house in the countryside. They wanted new things.

The way of modern architecture in China is similar to what it is here in that it is quite different from the traditional way. That is why we are in a very dangerous situation. But I think there is another possible way. We should connect [vernacular knowledge] to that [modern] system. The farmers can't do this. They know the old system, but they don't know how to connect it to modernism. And the modern architects demolish old things to build new things, but the new things have problems. They are not ecological. They need a lot more energy. I think modern architecture, up to now, is just beginning to develop. It is not finished. It has not solved very many of society's problems.

JM | Last night at your lecture, one of the things you had on the screen was the statement, "Life is more important than design." What does it mean to you?

WS | Some architects tell me, "I really enjoy your work; I want to do something like you." But I tell them it is not easy because it is not just about design. First, it is about your way of working. If you don't change your way of working, you can't do something like this. You just draw on the computer.

Second, you have to change your way of life. Some people just want to change their ideas. No, changing an idea is not enough. You need practical experience—experience influences you more than your thinking. I say, "Your hand controls your brain; it's not your brain that controls your hand."

JM | Change your work, I can understand: to draw and to build, and to use your hands in your process. But what do you mean change your way of life?

WS | For example, the life most now have is one of speed. Just 100 years ago, Chinese were the slowest people in the world, the ones who most knew how to enjoy a relaxed way of life. Now you can't imagine the Chinese like this. Now the Chinese are the fastest people in all the world.

To slow down means that on your way to your office, you go to a small courtyard, to a garden, then through your neighborhood, along a small street, and finally to an office building. Now life is very fast. You have an apartment unit, you take an elevator down, you take a train directly to an office building, then you take the elevator and go up.

JM | You talked about Chinese scrolls last night and showed scroll-like drawings. Could you speak more about what you think the value is of viewing your work in that horizontal fashion?

WS | The real Chinese traditional spirit is not just about the form or the shape. It is about the inner experience. That is very important. In the scrolls the picture continues to move; it is not just about the façade. An inner experience, something like this, means different layers. It means one surprise after another. It is quite a different way of thinking about architecture.

JM | When you design, how does that apply to your process of thinking about space?

WS | For example, my typical way, say, of designing a large building for the campus is that I think about it and make some small sketches, maybe for two months. Then—and this is a very typically Chinese way—one morning I get a feeling that is very clear. Then I pull out paper, and I draw it from this end to that end, maybe working four hours before I finish the design. Four hours.

JM | I'm assuming you have already visited the site and digested the program…

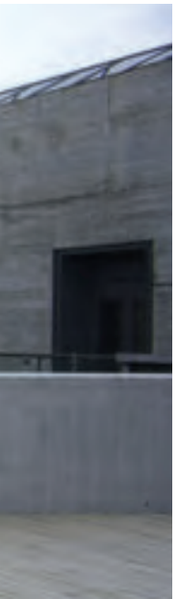
WS | Many times, many times. After you think clearly about almost everything—inside, outside, relation to the site, relation to the mountains and to the rivers, how every building has some relation to each other, how many courtyards you need, about water falling, everything—then you should do a drawing. Keep moving. Keep continuing the feeling. Don't stop. The drawing includes many details, different scales, different distances.

JM | Scrolls have directionality and a progression. When you are drawing like that, is the building meant to be experienced in that same sense of a progression?

WS | Yes. Chinese painting is usually like this. You should think you have to go into the painting. Once you work inside the painting, then you can understand. If they just think of it here, they can't understand. It's a landscape; it is so strange. In fact, you see it move, and your body flies into the painting. You stand in that cave, with so many different positions, so many orientations, angles, and you know it means different times. This painting is one painting, but it means one month, different days. They are joined together, but it is not just about space: it also includes movement and time.

JM | And also narrative, a story. You are living your life in this space, in this drawing. 文明

ALL IMAGES THIS SPREAD LV HENGZHONG



LEFT Xi'an Museum.
RIGHT Guanghua Road SOHO.

Qingyun Ma

Thursday October 20, 2011

Now in his late forties, Qingyun Ma has designed more completed projects than most prolific architects do in a lifetime. Ma coordinated Rem Koolhaas's first Harvard Project on Cities, which yielded the 1993 book *The Great Leap Forward*. He founded the firm MADA s.p.a.m. in 1996 and has served as Dean of the University of Southern California School of Architecture since 2007.

Julia Mandell | I'm interested in your take on Houston and what Houston can learn from the explosive growth of Chinese cities.

Qingyun Ma | From the airplane, the city of Houston is rather monolithic, a low-rise residential condition, and then all of a sudden you have a downtown.

In China you don't really have these two poles of urbanism; there's a whole range of different formulas leading to the physical environment, from the evolving villages to self-organized commercial forces. With so many forms of social transformation, there are many different types of projects and ways to practice. Architects in that sense seem to be more engaged with what our education has led us to. With the ethics—the social commitment, the activism—it seems like there are more opportunities in China where architects can engage in a very authentic way.

I have thought about how an architect can react to the condition that is the U.S.—or Houston, which is your own concern. We probably should start to reimagine how the profession is formulated. In other words, architects may have to become more creative not in their design, but in how they organize their own business.

There are cases where you can be a developer. You can also partner with other trades. You can use architectural knowledge as equity in the formulation of a company and start to really occupy the upstream segment of the professional food chain, right? We're now finding ourselves more and more downstream: all other intelligence and knowledge come before us when the project is being formulated.

JM | Do you feel as if there is a mechanism or a route that you know of (or anyone who is doing it) to change the relationship of the architect to that process?

QM | My practice is very much driven by that possibility—to be a planner of a project more than just a designer of it, whether it's on the strategic side or on the financial side or in other areas of service that traditional architects don't embrace. I'm very conscious of that. That has proved successful in China, and in Los Angeles as well, because we've started not as a design office, but more as a consulting business to developers who have to engage with different communities. I also help them to finance projects and to engage in the public dialogue.

So, my message for all young architects is, as soon as they feel they can't stay in the big firm forever, they should start testing out new businesses. They should just form a business of any kind, make money, and then use the money to return to architecture or reinvest in it.

JM | Make money to make design—I think there's an uncomfortable relationship between this idea of architecture as an art and architecture as a business. We could talk about this split in this country, but it's also clearly in China, because architecture is big business there, and when you're doing business of any kind...

QM | ...there are other rules...

JM | Other rules and a lot of that is compromise—in a way that art is not supposed to compromise.

QM | Yes…I think architecture is a business. I'm very clear about this. As soon as you become an independent architect, it immediately is a business. You have to watch that what you spend is less than what you make. You have to be responsible to who pays you and who uses your product, and you have to be responsible to society as a business owner.

JM | Some would be highly uncomfortable with that model. They believe architecture doesn't need to be a business. And if it's a business, are you compromising too much by even engaging in the system that way? Wang Shu has a very different approach. He clearly says, "This is what I'm about, and this is one of the things I don't want to participate in." What do you think of his practice? Also, is there value in that kind of oppositional approach to the market?

QM | Well, that's not a business. That's a practice that has its own principles.

JM | Separate from the economic concerns of business?

QM | Right. In Western terms it's a "critical practice," right? I think there's a great role that critical practice plays, but the success of it in Wang Shu's case is really specific to him. I think it's unique. I commend him for contributing to the scene with that. But it is not a paradigm that most young designers can follow in developing their own practice.

I'm running a participative practice, where I participate in the flow of society in the hope that my practice can help formulate the right direction for that flow. I'm very conscious of being in the mainstream. I don't reject it. That's my philosophy. I welcome everything until the time when they fire me.

Wang Shu works as an individual name. I work as a group: MADA s.p.a.m. is a whole bunch of us. I was the MA, but I brought people on board to work. Someday, I'll call you. If I translate it into Chinese, *pan* is a whole cohort of people, actually a community...

JM | Collective.

QM | It literally means when the horse arrives, it arrives as a group, not as one horse. One horse gets nowhere.

JM | This whole conversation about research and participatory practice and compromise makes me think of OMA. I know you have a longstanding relationship with them and have done a lot of work with them. Rem Koolhaas, very early on in a very savvy, brilliant way, coupled his interest in working within the market with theorizing about it in an almost architectural way, a revolutionary way, saying to the academy, this relates to you, this reinjecting of business into the academy.

I really appreciate the way you're so clear about your practice and about the opportunities that it gives young practitioners, and that it's different from critical practice. But are you interested in theorizing in those grand ways like Koolhaas, to say "my business is theory"?

QM | I think I am less interested in theorizing about my practice. I am more interested in demonstrating its real success by operating it. Rem can't stay away from that theorizing realm. By theorizing, you have a certain euphoric sense of fantasizing its success...

JM | Utopianizing it...

QM | Yeah. In that sense Rem is still very traditional. He is still a traditional prophet of architecture, and his willingness to break through, to lead young practitioners to another level by theorizing, I think, has failed to make a difference. On the other hand, if you notice the successful young architects that have emerged from his office, you will see that their success is mostly not because of his theorizing, but because of how he operates. He actually didn't realize that.

What I really want to do is make the operation successful, so I can come back to you and say, "Okay, this is how I did it," instead of theorizing about it.

Rem did it. I don't have to do it again.

JM | Those who can't do, talk. Regarding the building boom in China, in my mind there are three elements that allowed this growth. One is the growth in GDP because of the rise in the quality of life; two is cheap labor; and three is the public ownership of the land, right?

QM | Yes.

JM | I read an interview where you talked about how public ownership of land should continue and was good for urban development. Also, last night you spoke about how if capital is held publicly, it means there's no single client whose finances are at risk. This allows for a flourishing of ideas because every decision-maker is protected in a certain sense. There's value in the collective, in a lack of market forces. So how do you reconcile that with architecture viewed as a business? Are you worried about a future without public ownership of land?

QM | In China we are in an extremely fortunate phase of society where—this sounds like a cliché, but I'm gonna say it—two systems are happening simultaneously, and I hope we can learn the best of each. In all the business models that are successful in China, if you really investigate them, you will find that the business always has a general understanding of the public nature of the enterprise. For example, the public land—if you develop it, how are you going to do it? You need to front load your cash flow.

"IN CHINA YOU DON'T REALLY HAVE THESE TWO POLES OF URBANISM; THERE'S A WHOLE RANGE OF DIFFERENT FORMULAS LEADING TO THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT, FROM THE EVOLVING VILLAGES TO SELF-ORGANIZED COMMERCIAL FORCES."

JM | Because you're not going to make a profit from selling the land.

QM | Well, yeah, you don't own the land, and your sons, your grandsons, may not have it.

JM | So if you don't own the land, then quick turnover is what makes sense essentially. In Houston, because of the lack of planning, there's quick turnover, which means that everyone's very focused on their own property and making a profit. It's problematic because you lose the connection to a larger vision beyond anyone's personal risks.

When sustainability was first becoming extremely popular, I remember thinking about how big building developers were worried about first costs. For example, solar panels are marketed by focusing on life cycle costs: you pay this much for the solar panel, but this is how much you get back every year. And after 50 years, you've paid off the price of the solar panel.

But the developers are thinking, "I'm not gonna be here in 50 years. I'm gonna sell my building in five." Trying to constantly shape all your larger goals for society to the time frame of profit can be limiting. Are you concerned about that?

QM | That's really a difficult question. I think the public good is really not the responsibility of any business. I'm sorry; that's the job of government or whatever form of civic society is in place to do that. And if the civic society doesn't have that capability or finances to do it, that means that civic society has done something wrong.

Business is not for that. Business is organized to survive. I have to make sure that a hundred employees can get paid on time and go back home to a good, secure family. That's my responsibility.

JM | Going back to architecture and young practitioners, you said Rem was old-fashioned in his prophesizing. But it's so central to the practice of architecture, the idea that you are going to change the world. So is it still architecture if, as a business, you're giving up this responsibility to a larger vision of a better world?

QM | In the West, in the U.S., they tend to split things into academic and practitioner realms. Architects in each realm follow different rules, but they're also critical to each other. If you don't exclude the other, then you don't hold to your core mission, right? That's the Western thinking. In China, everything is blurred.

In Eastern thinking, the simultaneity of things is the model. You don't have to be only one thing. I see myself as following that kind of social practice. I think we've already realized how the Western model brings us to a very sad, frustrating condition. But I think the second model hasn't really been given the chance to flourish yet.

JM | I want to ask you one more question. As a dean, do you talk to students about this question of business and theory? It's still largely unaddressed in education in this country, and this dichotomy can be really frustrating when you get to a certain point in your career. So, do you talk to students about this?

QM | I talk to students a lot about this and, in fact, to colleagues as well. But it's not in the curriculum; I don't think I have much interest in just bringing all this into the curriculum. The students must be curious enough to explore the question on their own.

Interview continued on page 43...

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FREEDOM

AN INTERVIEW WITH FEMINIST ECONOMIST AMARTYA SEN

by Raj Mankad

When Amartya Sen won the 1998 Nobel Prize in economics, the announcement from the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences made clear he had earned the prize multiple times over. Much of his work involves complex mathematical equations but the central questions are clear. Among them, what are fair and effective ways to include individual preferences, especially of those who are least fortunate, in the decisions of a society as a whole? Many of his discoveries are, as he points out, common sense.

For example, Sen links food and freedom. He showed that famines are caused not so much by a lack of food but by unequal distribution and suppression of information. He connected the absence of demoncracy and a free press in Maoist China to upwards of 30 million deaths during the famine of 1958-61.

Sen also brought light to what is arguably the worst of all genocides. He compared ratios of men and women in different countries to reveal more than 100 million missing women. Of those, 50 million are missing in China, where the ratio of women to men has been as low as .94. Why these women are missing has become a research field of its own that considers selective abortion, nutrition, land rights, dowry, social norms of patrilineal descent, and other factors.

Sen also theorized what has come to be called the Capability Approach and helped implement the Human Development Index (HDI), an alternative to using Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and average per capita income to compare nations or regions. First of all, averages hide inequality. Secondly, while growth can improve a society, the good largely depends on what is done with increased public revenue. The HDI treats money as a means not as an end, and it emphasizes outcomes like female literacy rates and life expectancy.

Sen's attention to gender inequality is longstanding. Sen considers himself a feminist. He serves as an editorial board member of *Feminist Economics*, a journal founded by Diana Strassmann at Rice University. I came to know Sen during the five years I worked at that journal.

He also serves as an advisor to a leading Chinese university and as recently as 2011 he published his insights on the country. In "Quality of Life: India and China," Sen points out that India's growth rate is now approaching that of China. Does that mean the two giants are equals? The measures used in the HDI tell a different story. He writes:

> Life expectancy at birth in China is 73.5 years; in India it is 64.4 years. The infant mortality rate is fifty per thousand in India, compared with just seventeen in China; the mortality rate for children under five is sixty-six per thousand for

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN EARLES

Indians and nineteen for the Chinese; and the maternal mortality rate is 230 per 100,000 live births in India and thirty-eight in China.

Though Sen is as ardent a supporter of democracy as it comes, he chastises the Indian government for its failures and praises the Chinese government for investing in health, and education, while reminding us of the potential drawbacks of authoritarian government, like catastrophic famines.

Shortly after returning from China, Sen visited Houston in October 2011 to give talks at the Rothko Chapel and Rice University's Baker Institute. I volunteered to pick him up from the airport. I didn't hold up a sign. I knew I would recognize him. I have had the privilege to meet him three times, once at a feminist economics conference in Oxford where he spoke about the great 19th-century philosopher of human rights, Mary Wollstonecraft, and twice in Houston. Like my own father, Amartya Sen typically wears his suit coat, dress shirt, and slacks a size too large. His shoulders stoop a little from age but he remains spry and rolled his own bag.

He sat in the passenger seat of the car and called up his assistant at Harvard, Chie Ri. While I drove, Sen dictated correspondence to editors and scholars. He spoke a prose gracious and rounded out in style like the paper letters people no longer write.

At one point, his assistant read out an email I had sent a few hours earlier, which parlayed a question from the Baker Institute. Did he want Indian flags at the stage where he would speak? He was in fact born in what is now Bangladesh but at the time was British India.

Sen turned to me and laughed. He said he was a proud citizen of India but did not require the flags.

When we reached the hotel front desk, he pulled out his wallet and searched for the appropriate pieces of plastic. I have never seen a wallet so packed with assorted IDs. One writer called Sen a man of many hats but no one wears hats anymore and it is the bulkiness of the wallet that gives our complexity away. He lives on three continents. He is both an economist and a philosopher. He is listened to both by prime ministers and activists on the streets. He is an Indian citizen, as he said, but he used his Nobel Prize money to start a training program for women journalists in Bangladesh.

The sight of Sen's wallet reminded me of a key passage from his landmark book, *Development as Freedom*: "the same person can be, without any contradiction, a South African citizen, of Asian origin, with Indian ancestry, a Christian, a socialist, a woman, a vegetarian, a jazz musician, a doctor…" If the wallet is a metaphor for Sen's thought, we might ask, how might we design a wallet (or a building, a city) to accommodate the many identities of single individuals (or for the societies we make up together)?

I had a chance to probe that kind of question with him. I caught up with Sen again just before a lunch with Rice students in the Poverty, Justice, and Human Capabilities Program. This time I had his undivided attention for an interview. He preferred not to have the full transcription published so I summarize it below with quotes. My questions all aimed to connect his ideas to architecture and urban planning.

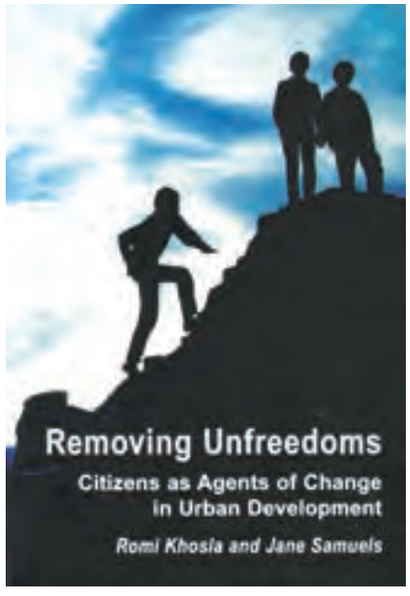
The Human Development Index and the Capability Approach are often used to compare nations, but the analysis can be brought down to the level of cities, neighborhoods, and even specific developments. I asked him to connect the Capability Approach to architecture. He informed of the architect Romi Khosla who he said answered just this question in his book *Removing Unfreedoms: Citzens as Agents of Change in Urban Development*, written with Jane Samuels. (See inset.)

Then Sen added, "In architecture, there is a question of aesthetic beauty, of course, and the freedom to enjoy the beauty of a building is itself something. At the same time, you're also concerned with two things, one which may give the most ability or capability to a person. And secondly, how much opportunity it gives to the person to change their mind on what they would like to do with their life."

He then gave an example from his own life. Sen was an avid runner and has had to have one of his knees replaced with a titanium joint. He now needs a railing when going up stairs and complained about how often he must climb up to podiums without anything to hold on to. At an Italian building he described as "gigantically beautiful," he tumbled down seven steps. He hit his head and developed a hematoma, though, fortunately for him and the world, he lost none of his acumen.

The question of access is one that all U.S. architects have had to take on since the Americans with Disabilities Act passed 20 years ago. However, as Kelly Moore wrote in a contribution to the Spring 2011 issue of *Cite*, wheelchair accessibility is perversely most uneven in "walkable" neighborhoods.

Sen's point about access and capability, I would argue, goes far beyond railings. We can ask more broadly, does the physical configuration of the city give the same capabilities to elderly GLBT individuals, disabled veterans, single parents, children, etc. as it does for able-bodied men? The community college surrounded by a moat of parking on the edge of the freeway comes to my mind as symbol of imperfect access. I think of my grandmother alone in a giant house and nobody with whom she could share her thousand songs and stories.



"A compassionate city needs to blend two aspects of urban living—the static physical and the kinetic perceptual aspects," writes Romi Khosla with Jane Samuels in *Removing Unfreedoms: Citizens as Agents of Change in Urban Development*. The static city is the skyscraper and city hall, the law and order, the city of elites. In the same place are the slumdwellers and homeless, the improvised lives of the subaltern. He argues the quality of life in the latter city, what he calls the "middle city," can be improved by focusing on five instrumental freedoms drawn from the work of Amartya Sen.

In Houston, we know we are good at creating money. We are a city of entrepreneurs, inventors, speculators, hucksters, and hustlers. We don't just love money, though. We love liberty. So how can we know how well we match up with other cities in terms of freedom and capabilities? I asked Sen to comment on looking not only at per capita income but at other measures of what people can be and do.

"Mainly, it's very obvious," he said. "Income and wealth are not what we're seeking. We're seeking them for the sake of something else which we really value. Secondly, there are many other things you have to do in order to make use of the income. And that's where the whole idea of organized thinking about architecture and town planning [comes in]—organized thinking about sanitary facilities, organized thinking about educational opportunities. With the same per capita income you could produce vastly different results in terms of human freedom depending on how that money is spent." In a city without zoning, "organized thinking," as we know, is a critical challenge.

I tried to get at questions of freedom and architecture more directly. Checklists have transformed architecture through LEED certification and I asked if a certification checklists might do for freedom and human capabilities what they have done for environmental sustainability?

Sen became a little agitated. He has been associated with rankings because of his landmark work on the Human Development Index, but he has had to stress over and over again that a single numerical indicator—like the ones LEED certification produce—are insufficient. In addition, his work on the Capability Approach was developed by Martha Nussbaum, but they diverge on whether to set out a list of capabilities. It is talking about and debating issues, with the help of math and statistics, that he encourages instead of fixing a universal list.

"What about checklists as a means to discussion?" I asked.

He responded with great verve, "Begin with the checklist, then critique the checklist, then modify the checklist, then think about more than a checklist way of thinking about the problem." 文明

Learn more about Sen's ideas by visiting the Capability Approach Wikipedia entry, written by a student in Rice's Program in Poverty, Justice, and Human Capabilities.

Cultured City 文明城市

FORWARD TO THE PAST: THE POLITICS OF REAPPEARANCE IN SHANGHAI

Words and Photography by Steven Lewis

Why does Shanghai seem to celebrate its pasts—traditional, colonial, socialist, and reform-era—as much as it glorifies its illustrious future? Hong Kong scholar Ackbar Abbas offers an explanation for why in Shanghai the image of the past is the key to understanding the vision of the future, and here I provide photographs of advertisements, political posters, and signs collected from Shanghai's streets, neighborhoods and subways in November 2011 to test his theory.

"Let me offer the following hypothesis: Preservation in Shanghai is motivated by something quite different from the usual pieties about 'cultural heritage,' which, given the city's colonial past, can only be ambiguous. It is motivated more by anticipations of a new Shanghai to rival the old than simply by nostalgia for the past… This paradox of the past as the future's future also throws a particular light on Shanghai's urban development, which, like preservation, takes on a special quality: Shanghai today is not just a city on the make with the new and brash everywhere—as might be said more aptly of Shenzhen, for example. It is also something more subtle and historically elusive: the city as re-make, a shot-by-shot reworking of a classic, with the latest technology, a different cast, and a new audience. Not 'Back to the Future' but 'Forward to the Past.'

….In this context, the state's interest in preservation, via municipal policy, makes a lot of sense. Not only is preservation well within the competence of the state; it is also a way by which the state can enter the global market through promoting the city's past—that is, through the heritage industry. It is an implicit assertion of the state's involvement in and contribution to the future development of Shanghai—a way of mediating the need of the state for legitimacy and the demand of the private sector for profitability. By a strange twist, the state's interest in preservation is an assertion that it is still a player in the new global game. Hence, the entirely different relation to preservation in Hong Kong and Shanghai: in the one, ad hoc and linked to anxieties about the city's disappearance; in the other, state-planned and related to the city's reappearance as a soi-disant 'City of Culture.'" — Ackbar Abbas, "Cosmopolitan De-Scriptions: Shanghai and Hong Kong," *Public Culture*, 12, No. 3 (2000). 文明

OLD HUANGPU

NANJING ROAD [facing] *Giant text "Build a Beautiful District" competes with giant figures in commercial ads on the city's main shopping street.*
OLD HUANGPU *Even the Socialist-era political ideals are maintained nostalgically. Decades of sub-district signs and plaques attached to working-class homes promote the ideals of socialist community: serving the people, collective security, and public safety.*


欢迎来到
文明城区


到长宁
和谐
你我同创!
新华社区（街道）党工委
新华街道办事处


手拉手争当文明 市民心连心共建文明城区
和谐
新华社区（街道）党工委
新华街道办事处


人人参与杨浦国家创新型试点城区建设
人人服务杨浦国家创新型试点城区建设


落实国家创新战略
建设国家创新城区

FORWARD TO THE PAST [preceding spread and facing page] *Chinese Communist Party district and sub-district committees place large public-service ads on the walls around construction sites, placing Socialist slogans above photographs of both Shanghai's colonial-era buildings on the Bund and modern single-family homes and apartment towers, extolling families of* 市民 *(city residents) to "chip in to build a* 文明城区 *(cultured district)." Here, Shanghai's official imaginary of the future holds great wonders: picnics for families with two children, windmills in urban parks, jet planes and clouds in the shape of the Motherland!* YOUTH *In the commercial advertisements of Shanghai's rapidly growing subterranean subway system, contained in large backlit billboards that sit across the tracks from the train platforms, Youth is King. Young folk hawk cosmetics and hip clothing, high-tech headphones, books on Amazon, and the finest white linens, while Korean male pop icons dimple on demand to demonstrate the suppleness of their adorable cheeks (thank you Mentholatum!).*

保存中国民居建筑特色

TAMING *the* CONCRETE DRAGON

An Interview with Scott Slaney
by Thomas M. Colbert
and Raj Mankad

SWA Group Houston
Wednesday, February 16, 10 a.m.

Cite | What are the big differences between working as a design firm in China and in Houston?

Scott Slaney | There are three primary differences. One is the greater scope and scale of our work in China; the second is speed; projects happen at an incredibly fast rate; the third is design depth. We take most of our work in China only to a design development level then work with a local design institute who will prepare construction documents, seal drawings, and provide some construction observation, though typically pretty light. Taken together, greater scope and scale, speed and relatively shallow design depth, the net result is that building projects that live up to our quality standards is a real challenge. Meeting this challenge is one of the key reasons our SWA Shanghai office has been established. The good news is that more and more clients are asking us to get involved in construction to ensure that the design intent is realized in an enduring fashion. We characterize our role as "design oversight during construction."

Cite | How did SWA Group get involved in China?

SS | In the late 1990s a Chinese-speaking professional joined our Houston office. She earned a bachelor's degree from Beijing Forestry University, then came to the U.S. to get her master's in landscape architecture from Ohio State. About the time we hired her, friends she had made in college were moving up in influence within various Planning Bureaus in China. She had one classmate who became a Planning Bureau Director for a district east of Shenzhen and through her relationship and our credentials a project opportunity came our way. Concurrently, *World Architecture Magazine*, a Beijing-based publication, published an issue on SWA. That issue became very popular; they couldn't keep enough of them printed. So personal connections, coupled with name recognition, led to the first significant design commission, Da Meisha, led by Kevin Shanley, SWA's CEO. It began as a design of a coastal highway, like U.S. 1 along the Pacific coast, to access previously undeveloped land east of Shenzhen. In the process land-use suggestions were made for one valley particularly well suited for development, with two mountain streams dropping into the sea. A plan had already been created by a large international AE firm, which would have buried the two streams in box culverts under the valley floor. We argued for a plan that daylighted the

BEIJING FINANCE STREET BY CHRISTOF SPIELER; ALL OTHER IMAGES THIS SPREAD COURTESY SWA GROUP

streams and that multiplied the waterfront property ten-fold; 18 months later the landscape infrastructure was built—roads, lakes, bridges, beachfront parks, palm trees, everything. People then came along and bought parcels for prices greater than downtown Shenzhen land. Michael Graves designed hotels, Gensler designed an iconic tower, WATG has designed and built housing, Steven Holl has designed and built corporate headquarters, etc. The Premier of China sited Dameisha as a model for new economically successful and environmentally sensitive development in the country. This Planning Bureau Director talked to another in Nanhai, that gentleman talked to another. Most of our work in China has been, and still is, from referrals and repeat clients.

Cite | Sounds like you are on an amazing adventure. You sound excited.

SS | Houston is a young city still defining itself; the opportunity to do things that help a city define itself while improving quality of life, environment, and economic vitality is every designer's dream. The same thing is true in China. It's wonderful to work in cities that are established, but for design professionals, the impact you can make on cities that are very mature is somewhat limited. We are interested in bigger gestures. China, like Houston, offers these.

Cite | Is there an actual interplay of design ideas between your work in China and in Houston?

SS | I'll give you one small example in China. We have been exploring the idea of shared-use streets: people, bikes, transit, and cars all coexisting in one "great street," streets for people that have a visual quality, identity, and character that allow them to become a "defining" element within a city or district. In Houston we've explored some of these same ideas under the leadership of the Uptown Development Authority as well as other high-density private developments. If they work for the density of traffic and pedestrian use that you see in China, they will certainly work in Houston.

Cite | Tell us about a completed SWA project.

SS | In Hangzhou, China, we were asked to create a redevelopment master plan for the 1.5-square-kilometer historic Hubin District. Hangzhou is a really beautiful city, probably my favorite place in China. There is a lake in the center of the city called the West Lake. It is a World Heritage Site, green hills dotted with preserved temples built by dynasties long gone. As the city was modernizing, the fabric of the district was being bulldozed and replaced with a car-oriented, suburban development fabric—big wide boulevards, huge blocks, and "really big" commercial development. Our client, a real estate developer, had purchased six blocks within the historic Hubin District. The client felt that the direction in which the district was headed was not a good thing. So the city, our client, and other private developer stakeholders partnered up to create a redevelopment authority. The redevelopment authority then asked us to create a master plan for the Hubin District fronting West Lake. The master plan focused on reconnecting the city to West Lake and preserving the historic fabric of the district and its rich pedestrian environment while accommodating new development and related mobility needs. The equivalent of a Westheimer Road had been constructed along the lakefront separating the district from West Lake. Its function was to carry through traffic. Its impact was to totally cut off pedestrian and commercial connectivity to the lake, the cultural and economic engine of Hangzhou. It was clear to us that the city had to be re-connected to the lake and that through traffic must go elsewhere. During one workshop in Hangzhou we recommended that a two-kilometer-long, six-lane tunnel be created under the lake to divert through traffic. The tunnel was built in nine months. The entire area was redeveloped in 18 months; it is now Hangzhou's top-ranked tourism attraction and Hangzhou is now China's top-ranked tourism destination. In 2005 the project was awarded the "ULI Global Award of Excellence," the first project in China to receive this level of international acclaim. Pretty rewarding.

Cite | What key project in China do you think our audience should know about?

SS | There are many being added to China's landscape every day. A lot of people know about Xintiandi in Shanghai. The architect was Ben Wood. It preserved a fairly good stock of historic Shikumen architecture and repurposed it into retail and entertainment uses. Coupled with adjacent park and public realm improvements, a catalyst and placemaking device was established that spawned other mixed-use development around it. The project is beautifully designed, constructed, and operated. Its success has brought substantial attention to the value of historic preservation in modern China.

Cite | What should we be telling the Houston community about China?

SS | China is in the process of making great cities, cities that function, places where people will want to visit, live, and work, near and long term. It's wonderful to see how a bit of vision, long-term planning, strategic investment in infrastructure, private development, and placemaking in the public and private realms are quickly transforming cities in China into global centers of economic growth coupled with a

"WE ARGUED FOR A PLAN THAT DAYLIGHTED THE STREAMS AND THAT MULTIPLIED THE WATERFRONT PROPERTY TEN-FOLD; 18 MONTHS LATER THE LANDSCAPE INFRASTRUCTURE WAS BUILT—ROADS, LAKES, BRIDGES, BEACHFRONT PARKS, PALM TREES, EVERYTHING."

ABOVE Dameisha Waterfront.
BELOW Beijing Finance Street.

> A SIGNIFICANT PORTION OF SWA'S CURRENT WORK IN CHINA DEALS WITH AGRICULTURE, HOW TO PRESERVE IT, HOW TO INTEGRATE IT INTO URBAN SYSTEMS, HOW TO KEEP IT PROXIMATE TO POPULATION CENTERS, HOW TO RESPECT THE "CULTURE" OF AGRICULTURE.

desired quality of life and environment. No doubt there's much to accomplish but China is headed in that direction. Soon, if not already, Houston and other U.S. cities will be competing with cities in China for the best and brightest. Houston needs to continue to invest in itself in a serious way or it could easily fall from consideration based on a sub-standard quality of life and be relegated to a Wal-Mart status, competing on its low-cost way of life alone.

Cite | That's a marked shift from the story we normally hear. We read about rates of urbanization that are exhilarating but also scary. China seems to be teetering on the edge of major environmental collapse. The country can no longer grow enough food to feed itself. Are there examples where architecture supports rather than obliterates ecology and agriculture?

SS | Improving environmental quality and preserving precious agricultural lands are two of China's current urbanization challenges. Both are receiving a good deal of attention, creative thinking, and investment. A significant portion of SWA's current work in China deals with agriculture, how to preserve it, how to integrate it into urban systems, how to keep it proximate to population centers, how to respect the "culture" of agriculture.

In far southwestern China, near the border with Myanmar (Burma), there is an incredible little town called Tengchong, not unlike Aspen: it's at an elevation 2,000 meters above sea level. Around it are mountains that reach way above that. It is in a beautiful valley. The Flying Tigers were stationed there in World War II, positioned between Myanmar (Burma) and China, shooting down Japanese airplanes ferrying supplies to their forces in central China. It's a fascinating town with only 600,000 people, which by China's standards is small. The central government in China is trying to promote development and tourism in western cities of China. The migration over the past 20 to 30 years to China's eastern seaboard just can't continue. So the government is trying to invest in the western cities and Tengchong is one of them. We are doing two projects there. One, Mayu Valley, is a 13-square-kilometer site with mountains that surround a verdant valley. The area is like a National Geographic photograph, terraced agriculture cascading down mountain slopes, plots of rice and corn. There are about nine historic villages on the site and the government's goal was to populate it with hotels and golf courses, displacing villages and the agricultural land the villagers have worked for generations. The tack we have taken is to embed planned tourism facilities on the margins of the site, in previously disturbed forest areas overlooking agriculture, preserving villages and their related agricultural lands. OK, simple enough, but how do you preserve the "culture of agriculture"? How do you convince farmers working fields today and for

LEFT Beihai Wetland Park
BELOW Mayu Valley

ABOVE Hubin Waterfront street and landscape diagram.
TOP RIGHT Hubin Waterfront aerial view.
BELOW RIGHT Shanghai Xintiandi.

generations to come to continue farming? How do you incentivize agriculture? This is really a social design problem.

Working together with our client and the government, we found a way for the developer to become the purchaser of everything grown on the site at a good price—one that will guarantee a good income. We are designing two new villages, or town centers, that are at the outer edge of the site and will serve as markets. Everything grown on the site will be taken to these markets. People who are vacationing or living in Mayu Valley or Tengchong can buy fresh produce and proteins, have dinner, catch a movie, be entertained, and have fun. Profits over and above the developer's "guaranteed price" will be split between the farmers and the developer.

Typically with a tourism destination development, the hook is golf. In the original land plan, there was golf all over the site displacing agriculture. After seeing the site, we said, "What's wrong with agriculture? It's beautiful." And it's amazing for anybody who hasn't spent life in an agricultural setting to see people working fields, maintaining the vertical faces of terraces, planting and harvesting rice, or tending water buffalo. Let's find another place for golf or abandon it all together; agriculture will be the hook.

Fortunately, we had an enlightened client who agreed and government representatives who saw the social and environmental wisdom in the approach. While the government in China owns all the land, improved private property rights have made the cost of relocation quite high; preserving agriculture avoided an enormous relocation expense. Agriculture is being preserved, and new architecture within the site is being planned to be scaled and arranged to be similar to that of existing villages. Villager and tourism circulation is separate allowing each to go about their lives without interruption. The Banyan Tree Hotels have now purchased three of the six planned hotel sites and have begun physical design based on master plan principles.

The second project, in the adjacent valley, is a 15-square-kilometer site, one of China's National Parks called Beihai National Floating Wetland Park. It has an amazing story. Millions of years ago, there were volcanic eruptions and lava spilled into the valley, creating a dam resulting in a five-square-kilometer lake. The ash from the volcanoes was pumice, which settled on the lake creating a one-meter-thick mat of what are now floating ecosystems. However, in the 1950s, the natural dam was breached to expose arable land for farming. The wetland shrank from five square kilometers to 0.5 square kilometers and a good deal of the floating wetlands vanished along with the water. But now the government is rebuilding the natural dam and the lake will be restored to original extents and in partnership with a private developer. We hope to create one of China's great eco-tourism destinations. The park will be made accessible to the public, park attractions, and environmental education. Wetland museums will all be developed and adjoining lands will see private tourism facilities away from the view of the wetlands.

Like Mayu Valley a series of historic villages will be preserved along with their related agriculture. Tourism and villager traffic will be separated. Three hotels will be embedded within the site. Fortunately, it's a big valley with huge mountains around it and the wetland park in the middle. There is a "pop up" mountain that comes out of the southern end of the wetland. From that point on, it's a whole separate watershed, so all the intense development is planned to reside in the second watershed avoiding water quality issues for the wetland. The area around the wetland is mainly preserved vegetation or agriculture serving as a buffer to the park.

One person who toured us through the wetlands grew up there as a young boy. He used to go out with a machete and cut out a three-square-meter piece of the wetland. A bunch of his friends would get on it with some bamboo poles, and they would scoot around the lake all day. They would disembark their wetland canoe and leave it for the next day. He also talked about cutting out a bigger section and getting their water buffalo onto a piece of floating wetland. All the kids would get on the back of the water buffalo and just float around the lake. We hope to provide future park visitors with just these kinds of delightful experiences together with an education about this precious ecosystem. The first-phase visitor center is now under construction and scheduled to open in the summer of 2012, just in time for the annual blooming of native iris. 文明

THE WHISTLING LEAF-BLOWER

One Million Acres & No Zoning
(by Lars Lerup, Architectural Association Publications, 2011, 272 pages, $39.95, hardback)

by Kayte Young

IN LARS LERUP'S *One Million Acres & No Zoning*, the leaf-blower takes its rightful place in the Houston landscape and in the psyche of its inhabitants:

> "The hysterical rattle of a two-stroke engine and the reek of fuel disguise the emblematic significance of the leaf-blower—best seen in action blowing leaves and other vegetal matter onto the neighbour's property. The utter futility of erasing any sign of decay, the obsession with 'clean,' the reckless expenditure of energy and absurd reliance on technology to accomplish the simplest of tasks; ultimately the suburban arsenal of behavioural attitudes comprises 'passing of the buck.' Together with its operator, the leaf-blower forms the most synthetic 'weapon' of suburban existence." (144-5)

Lerup served as Dean of the Rice School of Architecture from 1993 to 2009. His new book builds on a career of unconventional and witty observations printed in numerous journals and books, including *After the City* (2000, MIT Press). His view of Houston, whether from a condominium tower or from behind a car window, has all the benefits of an academic's clarity and all the drawbacks of academic distance.

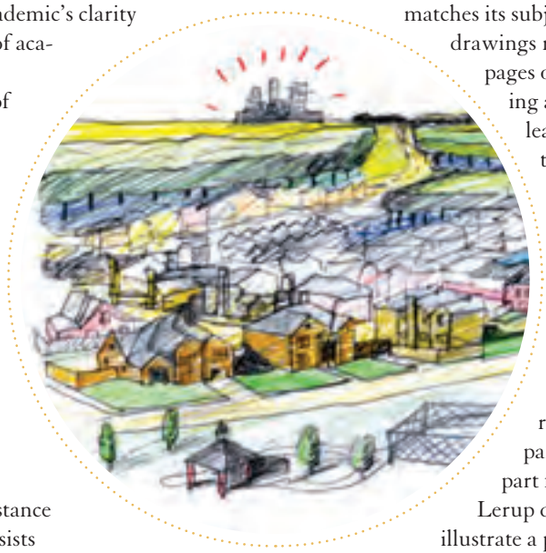
The poetic portrait of the leaf-blower, along with an unremarkable photograph of a landscape worker with the machine strapped to his back, appears in the middle section of the book, which he calls *Abecedarium*. A catalog of elements, both natural and manmade, thoughtfully ordered by Lerup, the *Abecedarium* offers assistance in reading a city that resists comprehension: "…these elements… form clusters of human invention worthy of investigation."

As Lerup undertakes the daunting task of articulating a chaos that otherwise cannot be contained, he finds that ordinary language will not suffice. He creates his own set of terms for indexing this strange field, some familiar, others invented: speed zone, frontage roads, zoohemic canopy, streamers, middle landscape, mega church, moist prairie, Kirby corridor, holey plane, mega shape, SUV, American distance, alphabet city, attractors, turbulence, cul-de-sac, gated community, white collar prison. The terms offer footholds in the swirling storm of the American suburban city. Lerup's lexicon offers paths of discovery for a complex and ever-shifting urban reality, though he refrains from urging a clear path of action.

As he guides the reader on this tour of Houston, he keenly notes that from the car window, we take in the city filmically:

> "Cars are the movie cameras through which one constantly scans the built environment. Whoever wields the automobile must have an audio-visual memory, perceive in a filmic manner, and possess the human analogues to slow motion, rewind, erasure, jump-cut, juxtaposition and fast-forward technology." (83)

Lerup's *One Million Acres & No Zoning* is best seen as a collection, a gathering of impressions, terms, tours through the city, analogies, suburban elements, relationships, drawings, proposals, diagrams, and stories. The book's lack of cohesion matches its subject. Stunning drawings run through the pages of the book, offering another tool for learning about Houston. I imagine him drawing from his condominium looking down at the city's canopy, cut through by freeways and punctuated by clusters of high-rises. Part diagram, part architect's sketch, part fine art print, a Lerup drawing serves to illustrate a point, to clarify a relationship, but primarily (I suspect) to dazzle the reader. The collection of drawings stands on its own, as a complete (and brilliant) body of work. This is a book not only for architects, but also for poets, planners, and concerned citizens.



Lerup examines the relationship between the artificial and the natural, between big oil/capitalist development schemes and state planning, and finds himself caught in what blogger Andrew Sullivan calls *hathos*—a condition where you find something appalling and yet cannot look away. Lerup is both enamored of, and disgusted by, the shape Houston has taken as a result of corporate interests run amok. He then cedes the role of theorist to developers, with the inclusion of biographies of Frank Liu and others.

What I find most surprising—and, I must say, refreshing—in the chapter "Obstacles and Opportunities," is Lerup's refusal to spew pat responses to the cry for sustainable development. "Utterly bewildering" are the words he chooses. He continues, "…plagued by ideology and self-righteousness… [i]ts fundamental vagueness shrouded in moral overtones, sustainability will always undermine our confidence: There is no way to know with certainty what is sustainable…" (242-3).

However, what he offers up instead of the call for sustainability is no less vague nor any more realistic or attainable. He's fond of J.B. Jackson's suggestion to build a manmade environment that is "as natural as possible," and then goes on to describe a scenario in which government, private interests, and ordinary citizens work together for the betterment of Houston. He wonders if the bayous could be recognized for both their infrastructural value (channeling runoff) *and* their rich and complex ecological importance. He conjures up a sea change in public opinion, but there is nothing in sight to spark such a shift. Perhaps the hundreds of millions of dollars invested in the bayous by the Flood Control District over the last decade, often complemented by park enhancements funded by private donors, fulfills Lerup's visions?

Lerup suggests that those seeking change not lose sight of the self-organizing principle under which Houston has always operated. He identifies the leftover spaces (lacunae) resulting from leapfrog development patterns—patches of raw moist prairie in an otherwise paved landscape—as breathing holes and wonders if they may hold the key to the future. Again, the specifics for how any of this can come to pass are missing. Lerup himself seems unconvinced: "In Houston, a city dominated by individual concerns and only incidentally by the public good, the change needed is truly radical…" (242). Indeed, to give just one example, according to the EPA's latest Toxic Release Inventory, Harris County (where Houston is located) topped the list for air pollution.

Lars Lerup should leave the future alone and stick to what he does best: looking. His insight is deep; his wit is sharp. He is not an urban planner nor a social engineer, and he doesn't need to prescribe. The book is no manual for activists. When observations are as astute and insightful as Lerup's are, it is enough simply to point—and so reveal this sprawling metropolis in all its unruly absurdity and hidden beauty. *One Million Acres & No Zoning* invites us to take a closer look and offers a brilliant set of tools with which to do so. c

DRAWING COURTESY LARS LERUP

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CONVERSATION WITH QINGYUN MA

Continued from page 29...

You also have to think of the ages of students. When they are in college, they're 18 and 19, right? They are like animals. No, I'm sorry, how can you let them loose in the wilderness, imagining that they all will become leaders? They need to be trained, and training is limiting, right? You train them so that they become a part of society. In the end it's still how to make sure the middle zones of the society are stable.

JM | Which actually is not necessarily a disservice, because there's this idea that every student is gonna become Le Corbusier.

QM | Exactly.

JM | But at a certain point, you want a life and a job, you don't want to be saying, "Oh, I went to school to become Le Corbusier, and I'm completely unequipped to make a living, so I took to drinking."

QM | Absolutely… Really, I'm much more of a humanist in that way. I welcome all forms of joy. That's why I'm confused every five years. I'm so extremely tired of the practice. You know, I'm not practicing in my office anymore. I just form another company out of it. You do a building, and it's so celebrated. You do a second one—"Oh, it's good, it's good!" You do a third one, and it's boring.

No, really, I'm bored. So when I see Rem and Frank Gehry, I say, "Are you bored? You must be bored. You're flying around the world to talk to the same people, and you come back to your office with the same headaches. You scream the same screams every week. C'mon, you're much better than that. Just stop doing it." So Rem…after the CCTV, I actually strategized Rem's career. I said, "Rem, after the CCTV, you should close your office."

And what you do from now on, I told him, is you travel around the world. You work with other firms, right? It will be Rem, you work as a music director. You go to...

JM | Yes, a producer.

QM | Rem with Beijing Design Institute; Rem with AECOM Los Angeles; Rem with Gensler in Shanghai. You create a new model. You don't carry the baggage of your own office. If you really want to educate and influence society, this is the way you do it, right?

But Rem didn't do it—that was six years ago. After that, I said, "Rem, you're now completely not cool anymore." He does another building and another building. I said, "Rem, let me create companies. You'll be the independent board member, and you'll be paid because of your name. Let's just form a business around you." 文明

THE FARMER IS THE MAN

Community Supported Agriculture Grows Up in Houston

Words and Photograph by Shannon Stoney

We're All BasketCases! Unless, of course, we're not. But I vote yes…to being BasketCases with love for ourselves, for our friends, for the world. Lots of contradictions…or maybe none.
— David Cater

I GREW UP IN THE FIFTIES AND SIXTIES, WHEN THERE WERE TWO KINDS OF CHEESE, VELVEETA AND CHEEZ Whiz, and two kinds of olives, the green ones with red things in them and the black ones that you put on your fingers at Thanksgiving. So when I go to the new Whole Foods on Waugh or the Lake Flato-designed HEB in Montrose, the variety of cheeses and olives, and the diversity of their provenance, seems like something out of the febrile fantasies of a bunch of starving orphans in a Dickens novel. I think to myself, "Peak Oil may have been last week or last year, but this has to be Peak Food."

A different kind of cornucopia, dazzling in its variety and novelty, is available now to the 50 or so Houston households who subscribe to David Cater's weekly delivery of locally grown produce. We gather in the dusk at the Black Hole coffee house on Graustark and wait for Cater's truck to pull up its trailer full of greens, squash, okra, peppers of all colors and shapes, and surely some vegetable we've never seen before. David is a tall man in his early forties eager to share cooking tips and even growing advice with his customers. The weekly pickup has generated a kind of community that the shiny new Whole Foods, with its wine bar and high prices, could never hope to create.

The variety of food that is available in Houston on any given day in ordinary supermarkets is already amazing and probably unprecedented in human history: we can buy exotic fruit from all over the world. But this local food is impressive in a different way. We sample raw winged beans and crunch fat okras and peppers in the parking lot, while discussing how we cooked them last week. He throws in hibiscus leaves for brewing tea and little red peppers that look exactly like habañeros but are only slightly hot (local chefs have come to love the way they perk up the color on their plates without scorching your palate).

As omnivores and as 21st-century consumers, we can eat almost anything. But as Michael Pollan pointed out in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, this poses a problem: if you can eat anything, what should you eat? His answer? Eat food, mostly plants, not too much. By "food" he means something your grandparents would recognize as food, not the overprocessed pablum on offer in the center aisles of the supermarkets.

A more recent refinement on the answer to the question, "What should we have for supper tonight?" is, "Something grown within 50 miles of here!" Local food aficionados point to the high environmental cost of trucking and flying exotic fruit from all over the world to Houston when Texas itself grows some of the best, tastiest citrus in the world. And indeed the satsumas from Cater's Utility Research Garden have a sweetness that grocery store fruit cannot match. But another motivation behind Community Supported Agriculture (CSA for short) is the idea of community itself: that individuals can work with a farmer to provide needed capital at the beginning of the growing season by paying the farmer up front for a season's worth of food, sharing some of the risk, and then benefit from not just the harvest, but also the community that grows around the farm.

Cater has hosted several gatherings at his Utility Research Garden, where he lives with his workers in a yurt. When you visit there, you find out why all of the produce seems to have a green light inside it, shining and beckoning you to eat it. It's partly the place—the *terroir*, as the French say. When Cater went looking for a farm, he had a copy of the state soil survey in hand. He wanted alluvial loam, warm winter temperatures near the Gulf, and adequate rainfall. The 24 acres he found near Jones Creek, Texas, satisfied all those requirements (when there's not much rain, there's a well for irrigation). The original idea was to grow bamboo for the nursery business, and Cater has clumps of about a hundred different kinds of bamboo for sale. The hard freeze of 2010 hurt his bamboo plants, however, and his emphasis has shifted to growing vegetables for neighbors, including Houstonians.

He devours books on organic agriculture, soil health, and healthy communities. Like most of the organic farmers I know, he loves to talk about soil microbial life and how delicate it is, how easily it is disrupted by conventional agriculture. Huge compost piles take up almost as much space on the farm as crops do. Four water buffalo add their manure to the compost piles every day.

Cater grew up both in urban Houston and in rural Waller County, spending summers on his grandfather's conventional farm there. He became a farmer later in life because it seemed like a simple and powerful way to make a good, ethical life. It's a "simple exchange," he says. You start with your own soil and homemade compost, add some seeds and water and labor, and two months later hand a bundle of kale to a friend—kale that tastes better than any she's ever cooked before. It's the least alienated labor one can imagine.

Yet Cater has no illusions about the capacity of 40 or so local farmers to feed the whole city of Houston. And he, too, has to use oil and gas to run his tractor and get his produce to market. His work, however, is not just about running a viable business now. It's also about researching and recovering the knowledge that future residents of the Gulf Coast will need to live here in the post-petroleum, post-supermarket era. We live on the cusp of a momentous change. Fortunately, some farsighted farmers have a foot in both the old petroleum-based food industry and in the local human- and animal-powered horticulture of the future. I'm betting on the water buffalo. c

Learn more about the David Cater's CSA at utilityresearchgarden.com.

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