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Illuminating Penn's Role in the Rise of Modern Chinese Architecture and Planning

By Matthew Singer



Photo Fangfang Tian courtesy Atelier FCJZ

China has nearly 115 urban areas with populations of more than a million people—a figure on par with the combined totals for the United States and the European Union (source: Demographia.com). The growth of China's urban population from less than 20% of the country's total in 1980 to more than 60% today (source: Statista.com) quantifies a process of urbanization unparalleled in human history. Born and raised in China, Associate Professor of City and Regional Planning Zhongjie Lin (MS'04, PhD'06) has witnessed this transformation firsthand. He earned his graduate degree in architecture from Tongji University in Shanghai, China's largest city, before earning his degrees in architectural history and theory from Penn. Lin's recent work expands upon a little-known but massively influential tradition extending back to the 1920s, when

Penn's reputation for excellence in architectural education attracted Chinese students who became their country's first generation of modern architects.

Opening on January 28, the exhibition *Building in China: A Century of Dialogues on Modern Architecture* is organized by Lin in collaboration with fellow architects and educators Ming Tong and Xiangning Li. Lin is completing a new book, *Constructing Utopias: China's Emerging New Town Movement*, and is teaching Site Planning and a new course on Asian new towns.

In an interview, Lin shares his perspectives on *Building in China* and the complex and nuanced innovations emerging in Chinese architecture and planning today.

What inspired the idea to organize *Building in China*?

I began to conceptualize this project in 2019 and received a grant from Penn Global's China Research and Engagement Fund for a three-year project beginning in 2020. I wanted to do something that would open at Penn and then travel to China, showing American and Chinese audiences the historical progression of modern Chinese architecture as well as the current state of Chinese design and cities.

I grew up in China and went to college at Tongji University in Shanghai before coming to Penn. I still go back almost every year. So, I have a familiarity with current-day architecture in China and its history, as well as the tradition of collaboration between US and Chinese universities—Penn most especially. In 2017 and 2018, one of my collaborators, Professor Ming Tong of Southeast University in Nanjing, organized three exhibitions—in Nanjing, Shanghai, and Beijing—around the theme of the first generation of modern Chinese architects who graduated from Penn. This cohort of Penn graduates were the pioneers of modern architecture in China from the 1920s onward—they founded the earliest architecture programs at Chinese universities; they established prominent firms and designed many significant public buildings for the emerging modern nation; and they devoted their lives to the preservation of China's architectural heritage.

Professor Tong and I decided to collaborate. We wanted to do a new exhibition that not only presents a historic review of 100 years of modern architecture in China but gives US audiences a strong sense of contemporary architecture and urbanism in China and demonstrates the linkage between that history and the current state of architectural innovation in China. We wanted to craft the historical component to focus on the work of these early modern Chinese architects after they returned to China from Penn in the late 1920s. Their projects were completed during the 1930s through 1950s and many, to my surprise, hadn't been studied before. They deserve more attention from scholars as well as general audiences, and that alone would make visiting the exhibition worthwhile.

The second portion of the exhibition focuses on contemporary architecture. We decided to choose two very influential individuals—Yung Ho Chang and Shu Wang—who are both leading practicing architects and educators, as were their early modernist predecessors. Their work represents the cutting edge of contemporary architecture in China and demonstrates deep consciousness of the interplay between pursuing modernity and exploring Chinese cultural identity.

China has become the largest architectural market in the world over the last three decades. An impression of most Western audiences, however, is that Chinese architecture is all about tall buildings or super-block neighborhoods at the centers of big cities like Beijing and Shanghai. In this exhibition, we want to highlight alternative thinking and practices in China that reflect greater awareness of local identities and use more sophisticated approaches that take into account the interrelationship between globalization, universal technologies, and local culture and community life.

How did the organizing institutions (Southeast University, Tongji University, and Penn) and curators come to work together on this project?

The three of us have been colleagues and have collaborated in the past. I have known Professor Tong and Professor Xiangning Li since the 1990s when I studied at Tongji University in Shanghai. Professor Li is an experienced curator—he organized the exhibition *Towards a Critical Pragmatism: Contemporary Architecture in China* at Harvard Graduate School of Design in 2016 and he was a curator of the Chinese pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2018. There was a good foundation for three of us to work together despite the fact we are based in different institutions and even different countries.

Cross-border collaboration is central to this project. It is more difficult to carry out such international work nowadays due to the travel limitations and political barriers, but collaboration is key to address these challenges and tackle the current dilemmas. We have to further the dialogues between the US and China on many fronts, with the built environment being an especially important one—it is related to many other issues, including climate change, migration, sustainable development, and response to technological revolutions. We face these common issues in the US, Asia, and other countries in the world.

One key focus of the exhibition is the role Penn has played in the development of architecture in China. How did that come to be—and is it reflected in contemporary China?

Penn was a leading center for architectural education in the early 20th century. The Beaux-Arts educational system was well established at Penn because of important figures including Paul Cret, so Penn attracted many brilliant architecture

students. Many of the Chinese students who came to Penn were well informed about the US educational system because they had previously studied at Tsinghua University in Beijing, which was modeled on the US educational system, or other institutions with Western influence. These students excelled during their studies in the US—many won grand prizes in student competitions. This group of Chinese students contributed to the reputation of Penn’s architectural program. They were some of the most brilliant students at Penn in that period of time.

Penn continues to play a role in the built environment of contemporary China. More and more graduates from the Weitzman School of Design have contributed to explorations in architecture, landscape, and planning practices in China since the country reopened the door to the global world in the 1980s. A new generation of architects and designers finds China a growing market with abundant opportunities for independent practices. Many multinational firms are also directed by Penn graduates. For instance, Aedes, a leading international firm headquartered in London, currently has more than a dozen designers who are Penn alumni in its Beijing office alone. Our graduates are helping shape the skylines of Chinese cities.

Building in China is a two-part exhibition. How is it structured?

We conceptualized the exhibition as a dialogue across cultures and across time. The scope of the exhibition and its two-part design—one historic, one contemporary—were informed by the particulars of the spaces in which it’s being shown at Penn. The Architectural Archives’ Kroiz Gallery will house the historical section, the contemporary work will be displayed in the main reading room of the Fisher Fine Arts Library, but they are connected because both venues are in the same building.

We wanted this show to be presented at Penn because the University itself is a large community with many people interested in China, Chinese architecture and development, as well as East Asian societies in general, and so is Philadelphia. This exhibition will have a global audience but we wanted to open it in Philadelphia specifically because of the historical connection in the field of the built environment between China and Penn.

Is there overlap in subject matter or a dialogue between the exhibition and your new book, *Constructing Utopias: China’s Emerging New Town Movement*?

The “new town” movement in China is a product of China’s rapid urbanization over the last three decades. That is the background and backdrop for my review

and critique of “new town” planning and design in contemporary practice. In both the exhibition and the book, I want to examine the challenges facing Chinese cities and how architects and planners address these questions of urbanization and social transformation.

For example, the exhibition presents Shu Wang’s design for Wencun Village in Zhejiang province, which was conceived as a prototype for better rural life in China. We want to demonstrate how local identity and community can be incorporated in urban design in order to balance mass urbanization and the top-down planning mechanisms that were dominant in China for decades. Chinese cities are changing faster than their Western counterparts. The amazing thing about China is that it has compressed into just a few decades the process of urbanization that took place over centuries in the US. People of my generation or older living in China today have experienced the drastic transition from a socialist state to one that represents concurrent and differing forms of economic development, a process in which Western society serves both as models and as contrasts.

Is there a particular building project—or projects—presented in the exhibition that you find particularly fascinating and instructive?

We want to draw attention to early designs in China by the first cohort of US-educated architects. Their designs for theaters, residences, and hotels from the 1930s through ‘50s rival the masterpieces of modern architecture built elsewhere during the same period. Although these architects started by learning Western styles and design methods, they soon developed their architectural language shaped by their individual and collective Chinese identities.

The contemporary section includes design projects for two museums, one each by Yung Ho Chang and Shu Wang. The Jishou Art Museum by Yung Ho Chang with his firm, Atelier FCJZ, is located in the small, inland city of Jishou where most residents are minorities. It is shaped like a bridge over the Wanrong River, which runs through the town. In addition to being a museum, it is a functional piece of infrastructure for everyday life and serves as a community center. Its form recaptures the region’s tradition of covered bridges.

The Ningbo History Museum by Shu Wang, Lijia Lu, and Amateur Architecture Studio is a municipal museum for Ningbo, which is a prosperous city on China’s east coast. It uses an atypical approach that demonstrates the architects’ critique of urbanization. They used roof tiles and bricks from houses torn down during earlier urbanization projects to construct the new museum. It’s a contemporary large-scale, multi-story public structure, but is constructed in a way that appears to be handcrafted.

Is a publication planned?

We will publish a catalogue including the exhibition and papers derived from it. We are also preparing a special issue of the magazine *Architecture China*, for which Xiangning Li is the editor-in-chief.

Does the show point to new directions for architecture and planning in China?

Architecture in China is moving toward more localized solutions with greater awareness of culture and community. More and more big-name architects and the largest firms are paying attention to smaller projects that might suggest ways to influence the ongoing process of urban regeneration and rural revitalization.

What inspired you to become an architect? How did you come to study, and now teach, at Penn?

I wanted to study engineering when applying to college, but became attracted by the architecture program of Tongji University when I browsed the catalog. Located in Shanghai, a Chinese city at the forefront of modernization and international exchange, Tongji's architecture curriculum has been quite open and up-to-date. I.M. Pei became an honorary professor the year I joined Tongji.

I studied and worked in Shanghai for ten years and experienced firsthand its urban transformation, which was very exciting and encouraged me to dive into the relationship between design, the built environment, and social process. Planners and architects were at the forefront to grasp and manage the impacts of such a dramatic transformation.

Urban design was a very young discipline in China at that time—there wasn't an existing educational curriculum in place to teach designers how to design a city and its public realms. So I decided to pursue doctoral research in urban design. I came to Penn because of [Former Dean] Gary Hack, Jonathan Barnett [professor emeritus of city and regional planning], and other prominent urban-design scholars. The history between China and Penn was another factor in the decision.

How did the experience of studying at Penn, and now teaching here, inform or shape your perspectives, interests, and practice?

By studying at Penn, I was able to assess differing perspectives on modern Chinese architecture and urbanism. Penn is one of the greatest places in the

world to study classical theories of architecture and use those theories to examine contemporary phenomena. Looking at contemporary subjects with a historical lens continues to be my working method.

I earned my doctorate in architectural history and theory but now I am an associate professor in city and regional planning. My studies and experiences at Penn directed me toward an interdisciplinary career path that offers a deeper awareness of the relationships between design, policy, development, economics, and the environment. Planning is a very diverse field with many individuals with different areas of expertise working collaboratively.

Is there an overarching thought, or thoughts, you'd like visitors to *Building in China* to take away from the exhibition?

The history of China's pioneering, US-educated modern architects is very well known in China but not the US. One thing I hope visitors will learn and appreciate is the tradition of Penn's engagement with modern Chinese culture. I hope, as well, that visitors will develop a greater understanding of multiplicity in Chinese society—it isn't a singular discourse in architecture or, more broadly, social development. And we want to celebrate a new generation of Chinese architects. There is a very large number of independent architects introducing extraordinarily innovative new design approaches and interventions.