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The tradition of lightness in high speed Chinese urban architecture

A dialogue with Qing Yun Ma from MADA s.p.a.m.¹

Judith E. Klostermann
Pascal Müller

trans: Chinese metropolises keep changing in the constant process of modernisation. How do you distinguish between the collision of old and new urban fabric?

Qing Yun Ma: I am a big believer in flexibility and temporariness. I think nothing is permanent. Even history should not be everlasting. When history has no reason to exist anymore it should just pass by.

There is a fundamental notion in Chinese tradition and way of thinking. We - Chinese people never believe in things which are visual or objective, because nothing is really objective. As Confucius taught us: 'If it has to go – just let it go'. What really has intransigence is not the object, it is not the building, it is not anything new, it is morality, it is relationship, it is the people, it is everything that is beyond the physical, which always will change. That is why we don't care about buildings. We know it is not going to last. Throughout the whole Chinese history you can see nothing has ever been really preserved. Temples have burned ten times in thousand years, and every new emperor burned the last emperors' palace before he took over control. Only the Great Wall is preserved because it protects us. Everything should exist at its specific time and location in the universe. Time is relative and so is existence. By preserving it we appear in the wrong time. This is why the Chinese people are in a constant state of flux and flexibility.

trans: On what kind of traditional strategies were major cities like Beijing and Xi'an planned? Is there any significance of such urban strategies in today's planning? Can these old cities serve as a role model for the current development, or is there a divergence between the old and the new?

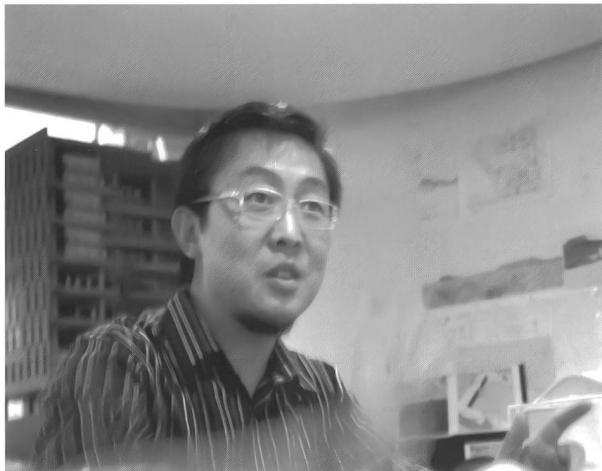
QYM: Beijing and Xi'an are examples of both extreme order and rationality in urban strategies. But the real vitality of these two cities does not derive from these qualities. For Beijing, it is the constant violation of the grid, the unexpected incidence amongst the order that makes the city un-penetrable and attractive. The Forbidden City in Beijing with the lakes and the squares - break up the order. For Xi'an, life is the limit, the border. The city wall, the blunt distinction of interior and exterior creates a strong exchange between them. The city cannot expand. What can expand is not a city! All these

propositions are extremely important to urbanism in our work; we constantly transform them into our strategies and solutions.

Historical heritage, in terms of preservation, is a very difficult question - particularly at this moment of the Chinese urban process. It is extremely dangerous to think of one method only to transform old structures. There have been numerous attempts to do so. But the result is the same: old structures are killed more rapidly. We must establish two complete antithetical realms between the old and the new: whilst the old is precisely old - and the new is authentically new. Both – old and new - disappear when they are neither precise nor authentic. Attempts to either blend them or clone them should be strictly prevented.

The City is the economy! What does the relationship between the old and the new imply in this economical machine? The old and the new should become the motor. They should be forever polarized. Chinas modern approach might be the most controversial topic in architecture being discussed in the Western world, because the image of Chinese architecture is always linked to a strong tradition. If we understand *old* and *new* as being two extremes, then we should be a little bit more relaxed, because the role of polarity is to mobilize other things, not to mobilize themselves.

¹ s.p.a.m. – (strategy) is MADA's approach to a problem starts from a full spectrum investigation of causes and consequences of a given problem in order to find the most effective way to reach the goal. Strategy is a combination between imagination and rationalization. It precedes every arrangement corporeal or temporal. – (planning) Master plan to us is an indiscriminate arrangement between nature and man-made, existing and emerging, big and small. It is a structure that stipulates parts but does not stiffen them. It simultaneously projects a lifestyle through physical juxtaposition. – (architecture) We see architecture as a process that selects and configures material, technology and finance. We see it as a construct of ideas as well as products. We also see it as a form of knowledge gained through experiment and readjustment. – (media) Architecture is but not the end of representation. Therefore there is the media that continues the attitude and proposition architecture takes. As our environment becomes increasingly non-physical, architecture must reform itself, or even deform to it to define our environment in a way unseen before.



Qing Yun Ma, photo, 2004

trans: The high-speed development in China seems to lack consideration about long-term effects. Is there any demand for long-term thinking, concerning sustainability and the quality of the environment?

QYM: Things come and go. Permanence is in fundamental opposition to sustainability. Thus the Chinese believe that only temporality and flexibility are sustainable, or in your terms: embody long-term-ness of life. This way of life is also the quality of the environment. If long-term or permanence means one form of existence in negation to another or in sacrifice of new ones, we should collectively break with it. The very notion of change and flux must find its expression in lightness. Lightness of material², lightness of presentation³ and lightness of life⁴ are the ultimate key to sustainability. What is mistaken in the West is that the strong wish of mankind to continue to control and consume nature. Meanwhile nature is demanding to yield long-term obedience. In this light, sustainability takes control over the environment, instead of cooperating with the environment. Sustainability is a cycle: easy to use, easy to recycle, easy to dissolve, easy to disappear. Why is such a simple fact not known to everyone everywhere? To find its new means and materials is the current challenge for China. Industrialization and the so-called modernization seemed to have only invented instrumentality and technology to support a heavy-handed Western life. China has to find its own resources and materials, which go along with its' weaker and lighter identity. Maybe at this point it is time for science and technology to refocus on what Chinese life needs.

trans: Is Chinese construction not long term oriented?

QYM: Chinese construction is even more sustainable. But I'm taking it of course one step further than the normal kind of thinking. But I think it's very urgent, that we learn this and quickly turn our attention into a united kind of belief in flexibility and scientific research. So how do we keep things light, that is the question? We were totally intrigued by the tropical situation, when we did this strategic study for Hainan Island⁵. A simple shed, to live in, will be destroyed in every Taifun-season. This lightness of construction facilitates the tropical people to rebuild their habitats immediately. This is

very sustainable! It's forever changing; it's light. That's the kind of lightness and temporality that interests me.

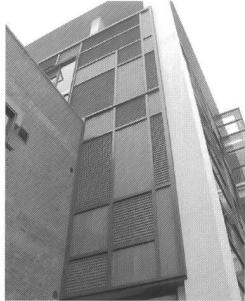
But for the urban habitat and environment this is, of course, a different question. Material, consumption and the energy part of the building, everything is extremely light - light in terms of cheapness and in terms of tolerance. Such buildings as you see them all over Shanghai and China; these skyscrapers do for sure cost 1/10th of a building of the same kind in the West. You save 9/10th but, of course, it uses more energy.

It would be interesting to make a calculation on the lifetime duration of 'light' buildings: After how much time of existence does the cost of energy, including the 'light' building construction, equal the initial cost of a 'heavy' building? In any case flexibility and short living is the essence of lightness. They should tear down the building before it has wasted too much energy. I think that the use of energy is the true problem. Because we all, the circle of Chinese architects, just don't care about this. Only design is of importance. Either way it's very urgent. If we, China and the West, cannot promote a new form of energy and if scientists are not urgent in their search, it will be us, in ten years, going to war with Iraq over oil.

trans: If you say the Chinese architecture and the Chinese way of life are so light and so flexible, don't you think it should be easy to get adjusted to the new situation? In other words, to look for that lightness would it also mean to look for an own Chinese identity in society and architecture?

QYM: Lightness is the Chinese identity. Moving fast is Chinese identity. And only when things are fast they actually lead themselves to efficiency and evenly control. Speed is the eternal unifier. To make big things work they have to be fast. China is fast because it is big. So I think that's Chinese-ness.

trans: Regarding that speedy draw you just mentioned, is there any chance for vernacular architecture to survive in the future or even influence contemporary architecture?



MADA s.p.a.m., *Y-Town*, Ningbo, photo, 2004



MADA s.p.a.m., *Longyang Residential Complex*, Shanghai, photo, 2003



MADA s.p.a.m., *Father's house*, Lantian Xi'an, photo, 2003

QYM: The chance is dim. The global economic machine is too impatient to realize that what has been prevailing in the West is not suitable to Chinese life. China is in a hurry to adopt the world's provisions and rules come along with it. As a result, vernacular architecture will be unable to take any influence. We can just get rid of it - Chinese historical buildings should go when there is no life anymore. If time is an eternal circle, then every moment in history is equal. No part of history is more important than another.

Now the Chinese authorities are eager to preserve the highest state of history only. But who is there to decide on which is the highest state of history? And why should only the highest state of history be preserved? Immediately history becomes a choice. So once you make a choice, obviously there is a political and a hidden agenda. In my opinion, you cannot accurately choose. All parts of history should be treated equally.

In an ideal world, I would propose to preserve all historically significant structures, but I am totally against rebuilding the new according to old principles. But if an area is picked out in order to achieve a financial goal in the old district, I would propose an act of finding or creating the opportunity to insert the new. This opportunity exists on all levels. For instance, in Ningbo *Y-Town*⁶, it is very clear we tried everything to achieve that.

We cannot sacrifice modern life for historical reasons, which are not even related to us anymore. The passion of historical preservation is completely post-modern and idea-less-ness. Of course we have to preserve the old, but the fate is almost equal, you always end up with: tourism – boutique shopping – and all the same other things, in Zurich, Milan, Barcelona and every place that has nice old city centres. The buildings are being used by the same people: Gucci, Prada, etc..

In the debate about keeping existing ancient buildings as 'museum' like artefacts I argue: If a museum is needed, then it is perfectly okay to keep an existing ancient building. But if all ancient buildings were museums, it

would be a disaster. It is a typical Western view to think modern China is breaking with the past. In reality, we can never break with our past. As I said before, the past is not a representation of things. The past is a mixture of morality and life attitude.

The future of Chinese architecture should be perceived in a non-object related trend, based on anti-materialistic concepts, light weighted, short-lived, constructive philosophy and technology. It is temporal, transformable, and destroyable. This is to find its way back to its own roots, the wooden architecture.

trans: Western pictures and brands have a big influence on China's architecture at the moment. How do you see the contradiction of regionalism and internationalism? Is there a truthful form and typology for today's architecture in China? And how can it be generated?

QYM: Yes, images and brands are travelling ever faster. Images are de-materialized information, non-classified abstraction, or even a hallucination composite of industrial product. Therefore, they are neutral and exchangeable. The real contradiction between regionalism and internationalism happens when we get rid of their images. The conflict in China is not serious, I don't think we have a particular regionalism and we are not afraid of internationalism. Therefore some people see a scary lamination of the two (or elimination of both). The truthful form of anything in China is the notion of *Ti* with *Yong*. *Ti* is formality - *Yong* is utility.

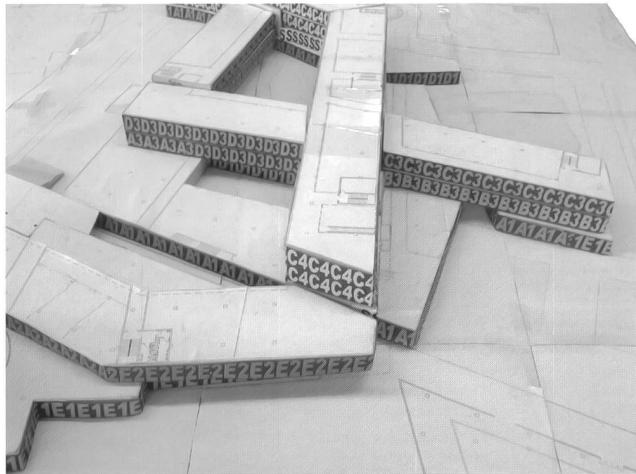
2 Lightness of material: transformable and degradable

3 Lightness of presentation: anti-monumentality or romantic expressive

4 Lightness of life: subject to weather and other natural forces

5 Qing Yun Ma, *Hainan Island "tropical paradise"*, strategic study, 2004

6 Qing Yun Ma, *MADA s.p.a.m. on site*, AEDES Verlag, 2003. *Y-town* is the design for a dense, small-scale development with commercial areas and a museum. MADA has applied a precise set of divisions between the two ends is applied: from preserving original to re-presenting it, to reformatting, to deviating, and to rejecting. All these strategies are closely related to the specific site locations. At the same time, to avoid the danger of precision, the project extracts its programmatic organization and spatial configuration from the urban environment. In this project, architecture takes on the courageous role in leading the process.



MADA s.p.a.m., *Shopping Maze*, facade work model, photo, Wuxi, 2004

trans: Currently we observe in the Western world the phenomenon of shrinking cities, while international debates tend to focus on the expanding megalopolises. Is the growth of the Asian cities based on a different basic requirement than the Europeans? Will Asian cities distinguish more and more from the European and American cities in future times? How do you see the ongoing alteration of Chinese urban spaces?

QYM: I don't have enough knowledge to discuss Asian cities. But I can imagine that most Asian cities are more or less experiencing the same forces that have transformed European cities. However, I would like to point out that Chinese cities are fundamentally different from European cities. We are facing an unseen pace of urbanism and social transformation. This urbanism bares a series of factors that are unique and unfamiliar to a typical post-modern era:

- The population is still controlled (or, to see the positive side, intervened).
- City and country are still strategically divided.
- Finance and construction are still planned in terms of urban development.
- Property is still a public asset.
- The Chinese are an agrarian people in nature.

These aspects undoubtedly make Chinese cities essentially different from European and also American cities, even today, not only in the future!

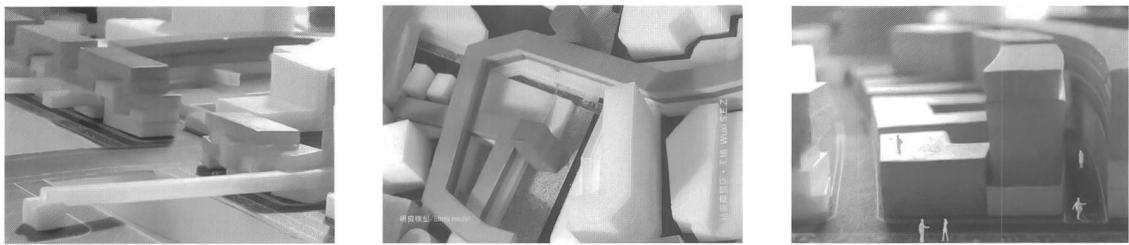
In one word, Chinese urbanism is still very much an integral part of its social/political totality, following the natural course of its social transformation. Which is less natural when it is exposed towards global circuits of finance, trade, and production. Is the delayed and unsynchronized Chinese urbanism something new? As it is not necessarily a result of capitalistic development – is it something we are not prepared for? The search for an

answer is urgent. Because if we fail to discover the hidden paradigm and let it go and catch up, we may forever miss the chance to find an alternative. We will then end up with an urbanism that becomes increasingly frustrating and betrayed. I think it is inevitable that Chinese cities are getting more and more similar to any other cities, sadly so. At this moment, the planning agencies and city managers everywhere are equipped with the same tools, the same dogma. My hope is with the people or otherwise the result is that cities all over the world will become more and more the same. The question is, whether the task of planners is to maintain a specific life of a city, or to search for beautiful city forms?

trans: Suburban expansion in the agglomeration of China's major cities is absorbing land in a vast amount, also to satisfy the upcoming demands of individual traffic. In your opinion, what are the strategies to prevent the new areas from all the problems (e.g. loss of human scale) of the urban sprawl?

QYM: First of all, it is wrong to call it *Suburban Expansion*. China does not offer any suburban model and can never afford it. What is happening around major Chinese cities is still urbanization. Before the 80's, we had cities and provincial capitals, but they are mainly a mixture of commerce (what a true city is constituted of) and production. From the venturing point of form or name, they are cities. Only a part (or in fact slightly more than half) of the whole city property can be considered as the true urban portion. *Thin City* is an urban fractal that did not fully turn into a city. This is an important phenomenon, which might be called *Loose City*.

Here, the major portion of the population is condensed but not urbanized. What happened after the 80's can be seen as a continuing urbanization of the not-yet urbanized portion of the *Loose Cities*. But this time it happens outwards, a completely new phenomenon that can be called *Reversed Urbanization*. We have hypothesized



MADA s.p.a.m., *Shopping Maze*, photos of study models, Wuxi, 2004

two strategies: the *Urban Steroid* and the *Urban Cavity*. First, the *Urban Steroid* is an attempt to provide an instant density and diversified urban core in order to hold the 'Reversed Urbanization' and prevent it from loosing density. *Urban Cavity* is a device to enable the reversed urbanization and protect its original density. It is artificial and clinical. *Urban Steroid* is the counterpart of *Urban Cavity*, which both signify an attempt to keep and reserve the *Voids* created by obsolete components that are spatial juxtaposed in an urban configuration, but refuse to participate in urban totality. The common understanding of this phenomenon normally causes a single-minded solution to till the void. On one hand it eliminates the difference of the cities inner parts and on the other hand devalues the cities' spatiality.

trans: Your architecture speaks its own language. How significant are style, context and concept involved in your design process? Where do the ideas of your architecture have their origin?

QYM: I personally do not think there is a fixed language in my work. What is apparently common in them is an extra energy in which form and context are being negotiated to reveal and manifest a set of new possibilities and problems. In other words, architecture is not treated as the end of the problem. They are viewed as the starting point of problems. 'Concept' is the most significant element in our design process.

The ideas only come from two sources: one is life, my everyday life, and the other is history. It's nothing about theory it's nothing about style, nothing about whatever nationality. It's always about the way life informs me or history informs me. Actually a lot of ideas in architecture are re-circulated, and re-appear. You know nothing is new in architecture. The challenge is up to the architect to detect where the work has been originated. This needs study and knowledge. We don't try to prove an already existing idea on a conceptual level, we take it and see

how useful it is in the design process. The process of discussion is ongoing, through the whole project, it ends when the project might already be changed again, or even pulled down. In our practice, we gave it a name: *Dynamic Deciding!*⁷ As we currently handle it in the *Shopping Snake* project in Wuxi.⁸ That is why China is in a completely luxurious position right now. Ideas that have failed in the West could work and if we are careful now, we could actually resolve real problems.

trans: Thank you for this conversation.

Judith E. Klostermann and Pascal Müller are architects in Shanghai.

⁷ The general contractor continues with the design development by himself on basis of certain rules and programmatic orders that have been defined by the architect.

⁸ It is based on the idea from Alison and Peter Smithson *The Golden Lane*. What they promote is this continuous non-disrupted urban flow, that's somehow binding all segregated parts of society. They have proposed to use their concept under a residential building, which is technically very problematic and more dividing than uniting. We have taken that idea but we have adopted it to our own situation. And the utopia now has become reality.