

Press release
Dornbirn, November 2010

China – formidable variety and strength An interview with Kai Cui and Sherman Lin



B1 | China's building boom continues - many European offices are also active in the Middle Kingdom. Already very renowned in China, the architects Sherman Lin and Kai Cui are not yet that well-known in Europe.

With more than 1.3 billion inhabitants, the People's Republic of China is on the brink of becoming a global power – in some areas, this has already happened. Sunrise industries such as solar and environmental technologies are clearly among the strategic goals of the Chinese planned economy which is hungry for success. Even today, one third of all solar cells newly installed all over the world are made in China. In 2008, China invested almost \$ 35 billion in alternative energy sources, demonstrating that it has understood the challenges of the future – even if implementation in this huge country is not always successful yet.

No other country has seen so many construction projects since 2000: spectacular buildings such as the Olympic Stadium or the new TV Centre in Beijing, trade-fair halls, sports stadiums, gigantic bridges, impressive museum buildings, even entire cities for hundreds of thousands of inhabitants. Expo 2010, the first world exhibition to be held in the People's Republic of China, which closes on 31 October 2010, was an exhibition of superlatives involving overwhelming architecture and enthusiastic visitor response. This clearly indicates that Zhōngguó (the 'Middle Kingdom' in Chinese) is currently reinventing itself in terms of architecture, setting unique landmarks, while at the same time

trying to preserve its national identity. A number of European architects' offices are also busy working on projects in China. What do Chinese architects think about the current situation? What connects and separates East and West? Lightlife asked two renowned Chinese architects to participate in an exciting exchange of ideas on future and tradition in China.

In your opinion, what is the crucial difference between the eastern and western worlds of architecture and design?

Kai Cui: European architectural tradition has brought forth buildings which emanate something solid, lasting, symbolic, something very powerful, which gives people a feeling of battling with the forces of nature – indeed, there is a kind of 'idea of civilisation' behind it. It is always a fight with nature for limited resources. Therefore, the most important buildings are churches and public buildings; they use lots of stone, very elegant columns and portals. Asian architecture on the other hand, is very clear and light, based on an intelligent approach to the building and to nature. The preferred building material is timber, everything is functional. They are two entirely different concepts. At present, I can perceive a shift towards European architecture. Clients, developers, even government officials all want architecture that is inspired by



European traditions. They want very solid, very elegant, huge buildings, using lots of stone – they want to use architecture to express their ideas of power, importance, wealth. I think there is an interesting exchange taking place on the conceptual level.

Sherman Lin: The entire cultural background is completely different, which is also expressed in architecture. From my experience, Chinese designers are currently learning a lot from Europeans. Many Chinese designers learn from European architects because their way of thinking is – how shall I put it – more contemporary. Chinese design is more traditional. Today, many investors are attracted by this completely new approach – they simply want to differentiate themselves.

Do you expect changes in the design approach?

Kai Cui: In the last century, European architects have learned a lot from Asians – they came to realise that any space that communicates with its natural environment is much more interesting. Therefore I think that in philosophy, we see a shift from European ideas towards Asian ideas, and I think that globalisation, which increasingly spans the entire world, considerably facilitates communication, and that China is now becoming a huge showcase for the architects of the world.

Sherman Lin: I am convinced that in the future, civilisations will re-focus on their own values to a greater extent. In this multicultural age, China should preserve its typical culture and tradition. Yet Chinese designers should adopt some of the technologies and also some cultural elements of European design.

Are aspects like sustainability, protection of resources, or energy-efficient buildings an issue in China already?

Kai Cui: All people are concerned when it comes to environmental issues, we have to join forces to look for solutions. This is not about form or style, but about human civilisation itself. This is something that unites us all. In the last decade, the Chinese government has indeed published a new code for the building and construction industry on the issue of energy saving, which has become part of the procedure for granting a building permit.

Sherman Lin: With the Shanghai Expo, China has demonstrated how important the subject of sustainability is to us. Especially in my work with European architects I have again and again experienced that looking for the best solution in terms of environmental compatibility is a matter of course during the planning process in Europe. In China, we have an incredibly high number of inhabitants who have to share a limited amount of space. And this is where the real challenge lies: we have to learn how to use the available space most efficiently.

In your opinion, what can European architects learn from Chinese architects?

Kai Cui: At present, it is rather the Chinese architects who should learn from the European architects. If I look at contemporary architecture, I see Chinese architects who work very hard on a number of projects, creating a great number of designs within short periods of time, at a very low price – I do not think that European architects should learn anything of that kind. I think open collaboration is what is required, so that European architects can find out more about Chinese culture through projects carried out in China, to increase their understanding of our way of thinking. We have many methods that are well-suited for dealing with local materials and the local conditions on site.

Sherman Lin: We differ considerably in terms of mentality. For the Chinese, traditional values such as family are much more important – the design elements should reflect this as well as local aspects. This is where we differ from Europeans. I hope that a symbiosis of our attitude and the European lifestyle will result in exciting new designs.

Do you consider globalisation a chance or a risk? Will it result in a loss of cultural identity, or will it enhance our lives?

Kai Cui: The last century has seen a modernisation of architecture and Europe's international style has become a problem in the process. If you create the highest building, it has to look exactly like this or that, always the same, with boxes all over the place, in a 'matchbox' kind of style. Many people complain about this situation and want to change it. Among Chinese architects, we have been discussing the question of how to preserve our identity, our culture, our tradition for many, many years.

Sherman Lin: Globalisation is generally a positive development. It is, however, important for different civilisations to preserve their individual identities. We see a great variety of European styles in China, and I personally think there are too many American style influences here. We have to find our own way. For it is precisely the differences which will continue to make our world an exciting and wonderful place.

Can you think of an example of this development in China?

Kai Cui: The new airport terminal 3 designed by Norman Foster is a project which, to my mind, reflects this development perfectly. It reflects Chinese culture; it has a very beautiful roof and ceiling. I like the colours and the natural lighting. It is amazing – just one look at this building and you know at once: this is China.



B2 | The exclusive Chimelong Hotel in Guangzhou is one of Sherman Lin's most famous projects. (Photos: Newsdays)



B3 | Sherman Lin, interior designer and President/Creative Director of Newsdays, one of China's biggest interior design firms, is Professor at the School of Urban Design, the China Central Academy of Fine Arts, Vice Director of the China Institute of Interior Design and provided the design for the Armani shop in Hangzhou, China. Sherman Lin's office engages mainly in projects involving hotels, restaurants and residential buildings. At present, he is working on a project involving a new residential complex in Guangzhou, in collaboration with David Chipperfield Architects.



B4 | Kai Cui, architect at China Architecture Design & Research Group, Beijing, Vice President, Chief Architect, National Design Master, has won many national and international awards. He was the Chinese architect in charge of building the new Olympic Stadium, together with the Basel-based architectural firm Herzog & de Meuron.



B5 | Kai Cui's Shangdong Radio & TV Center combines eastern and western elements. (Photo: Architecture Design & Research Group)

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