

Finnish Architecture in China: Discourse and Practice

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Research questions

In the current discursive context, Finnish architecture has formed a clear consensus about itself, and its architecture is closely tied to the national image of Finland. Yet, buildings rooted in foreign lands inevitably respond to the local cultural context and may have changed some conventional perceptions of Finnish architecture. The detachment between the architect and the building context provides a new dimension of thinking about cultural complexity and possibility. The paradoxical questions emerge when Finnish architects are in a completely unfamiliar environment and, at the same time, working on iconic projects with symbolic meanings. Firstly, how may the architects reconcile their cultural values with the design? Secondly, how may the architects consider the relationship between their tradition and the foreign place where the buildings are located?

Also, architectural export per se can be an obstacle for the Finnish audience to understand Finnish architecture abroad. Exporting architecture demands architects to explore uncharted territory. When architects carefully study the local characters and embed the design into the local culture, e.g., landscape, climate, or cultural metaphor, the final output can be in many ways different from the buildings at home. Due to the discrepancy between the international practice and the domestic buildings in scale, semiotic motif, and topography, it increases the difficulty of observing the interconnections between the two categories. While the design may still derive from a Finnish cultural archetype, the social relations that realize a transnational building are far beyond the boundaries of a nation-state.

Therefore, the additional research question is: How may the Finnish architectural community understand a Finnish design produced by the international context? Can this understanding still be built upon a picturesque of lakes and forests? The place-bound discourses were inadequate to elaborate on the meaning and potential of Finnish architecture in a global context. In other words, once the tight connection between the architecture and the image of Finland is established, the picturesque architectural discourse is 'speechless' for international projects, especially for the buildings in the places significantly different from Finland or Europe. However, like Finnish architect Reima Pietilä once said: 'Reasoning does not work in architecture because it is material.'¹ Though buildings have a significant impact on the lives of people who use them, they are not necessarily to fix the theoretical dilemma but only to record all the design efforts, especially in a complicated environment of exchanging cultures. In a globalized world, the issues of national identities and the state-centric assumptions in traditional social studies have been challenged by an international sameness. In another perspective, they are also indicatives of academic studies to measure architectural thinking in the forthcoming future.

¹ Pietilä, Reima. *Unfinished Modernism: a dialogue with an Interlocutor (Roger Connah)*. Mikkola, Kirmo (Ed.), Alvar Aalto Vs. The Modern Movement / Alvar Aalto ja modernismin tila, Jyväskylä: Gummerus. (1981). p.87

Methodology

The approach is multidisciplinary, integrating the discourse analysis and case studies, in an attempt to capture the rich details and complexities of facts of Finnish architects' practice in China, and let them increase our understanding of the cultural implications of transnational building designs. In a Foucauldian way, a discourse is a group of statements which provide a language for talking about—a way of representing—a particular kind of knowledge about a topic.² With a method of discourse analysis, the study is to trace the existing language and practice in Finnish architectural export. As discourse can help the investigation to transcend the observational facts and to find the pattern of principles, the aim is to build an image of ideas and knowledge about the development of Finnish architecture in a globalized age and its responses to a Chinese context. On the one hand, architects may use discourses as a theoretical guide for assembling their own words, establishing professionalism.³ On the other, discourses also unfold architectural debates and critiques, thus providing us with evidence for dissecting architects' ideas.

The corpus for discourse analysis mainly refers to the Finnish architects' languages in use, which includes their articles, design descriptions, lectures, and interviews. One of the primary resources is the Finnish architectural journal *Arkkitehti*, which can be seen as the mouthpiece of SAFA, the archive of Finnish buildings, and the main forum for architectural debates in Finland for a long time. Information was also supplied by the consultation of a wide range of resources, including media coverage, academic articles, statistics, bid documents, on-site architectural surveys, and in-depth interviews with the principal architects or design decision-makers. The architects' discourses were subjective opinions with hints of times. By analyzing and categorizing the architects' words, the study is to juxtapose the opinions, which occur in different space-time, with the interpretations of a general sociological framework. The intertextuality of the discourses will be valued. By doing so, the comparison also displays how discourses are changed in varying social and political contexts. The discursive contrast helps to understand the connection between the discussions in two scales: 1) the detailed architectural debates that often refer to specific backgrounds; 2) the macro-sociological theories about global modernity that underlie all the empirical facts.

Based on multiple cases, the analysis of actual completed projects can form a cross-check with architects' discourses, allowing us to discover more facts hidden behind their subjective expressions. The data analysis was informed by three flows of activities: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.⁴ Following Miles and Huberman's guidance, the conclusion needs to be sorted out from the data to create a logical chain of evidence. And the conclusions should be held lightly, maintaining openness and skepticism.⁵ So, the analysis will be situated in a distant language, avoiding any architectural appreciation or spatial evaluation. The cases studied in this dissertation are all from the practice of Finnish architects in China, which includes both built-up works and competition schemes, as well as the exhibitions and academic activities. The projects of Finnish architects in China consist of a variety of building types and scales. As the ultimate aim of this dissertation is to study the cultural exchange and cooperation behind the globalized architectural practice, the main focus is on public building as an essential part of

² Hall, Stuart. *The West and the Rest*, in Hall, S. and Gieben, B. (eds) *Formations of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press/The Open University, 1992.

³ Larson, Magali Sarfatti. *Behind the Postmodern Facade: Architectural Change in Late Twentieth-Century America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. p.5

⁴ Huberman, A. Michael. Miles, Matthew B. *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994. p.11

⁵ *ibid.*

contemporary culture. This category contains both large cultural projects such as opera houses and small-scale buildings such as resort hotels, pavilions, and churches. The center of this study is on the encounter of Finnish design thinking and culture in China. Therefore, this dissertation does not focus on, for example, the housing design and the urban planning proposals produced in Finnish companies for the Chinese market, nor does the industrialized architectural products, such as small ready-made wooden buildings.

Structure of the dissertation

The dissertation is structured around seven chapters. Chapter 1 discusses the self-identity of Finnish architecture and the new reality that Finnish architects face from a globalized cultural homogeneity. In the context of an emerging Chinese market, it analyzes the necessity of exports for Finnish architecture, as well as the corresponding debates and challenges. Chapter 2 paints a general portrait of the practice of Finnish architects in China and discusses the cultural and academic exchanges that accompany the architectural practice. It outlines how Finnish architects arrive in China, and what are the historical backgrounds of different development stages. The second half of this chapter includes several case studies of different types of Finnish architects' Chinese projects. These cases allow us to identify their commonalities and connections and provide an empirical basis for the thematic analysis in the following chapters. The cases used in this chapter include the architectural installations in Shenzhen Biennale, the Villa No.20, the Church of Shadows, the Finnish Pavilion in Shanghai Expo, the Wuxi Grand Theatre (WTG), and the ICON Tower.

Chapter 3 attempts to illustrate the political, social, and economic underpinnings of China's booming cultural landmarks in which many Western architects have been involved. Because China is a country with a different political system from the West, Western architects are often caught between the competing discourses of two sides, especially concerning iconic projects with socio-political implications. Finnish architects are also inevitably confronted with this contested and complex discursive environment. However, this study attempts to move beyond such a simplified East-West binary thinking and provides an objective analysis, which helps to reveal the origins of these projects and to connect the sources and subsequent developments. It also helps to understand several basic issues encountered by Finnish architects in their practice in China, such as the contradiction between Finnish architects' insistence on human-centered design philosophy and China's expectations of scenographic city branding.

The following two chapters examine the approaches in which Finnish architects process cross-cultural communications: discourses and architectural materialism. Chapter 4 centers on the Finnish architects' discourses, namely how they introduce their designs to Chinese people and bridges the cultural differences by using a language that the Chinese are familiar with. The case study is based on the competition entries made by several Finnish architectural offices for the Sino-Finnish Center in Nanjing. Chapter 5 focuses on how Finnish architects can create the contextualism of their designs in China and its cultural connections through materialist means. The chapter details the Finnish architects' material experiments and research for their Chinese projects, respectively illustrated by a series of cases, such as the redesign of bamboo and the custom-made glass bricks.

Chapter 6 looks at how Finnish architects have developed a transnational way of working when dealing with Chinese projects. Within a project process, Finnish architectural offices, like many other Western architects, are 'idea-driven' firms that win projects through creative concepts in

competitions. Yet, for processing licensed construction design, Finnish architects need to work with China's local design institute (LDI), which are often mega-corporations with a different working culture and approach. This chapter will mainly analyze the cooperation between Finnish architects and the Chinese LDIs, as well as the difficulties, challenges, and compromises in globalized design practice.

In Chapter 7, I will use the example of the Straits Cultural and Art Centre (SCAC) as a case study to illustrate numerous aspects of Finnish architects' practice in China. This case study will incorporate all the main points discussed in the previous chapters. By investigating the rich facts in the huge project, the chapter can further our understanding of the complexity of Finnish architects' practice in China, and concludes the previous discussions from different perspectives. Finally, the dissertation ends with a discussion of the socio-political condition of China in the second decade of the 21 century and of the impacts of the possible opportunities for Finnish architects' practice in China.

In this doctoral seminar, I am primarily interested in getting feed back on Chapter 3.

Chapter 3. The political, social, and economic underpinnings of the Chinese projects

As Finnish architects began to reach out to the Chinese market, in 2007, the Finnish architectural journal *Arkkitehti* again set its sight on China with several articles and reviews. In his article, the chief editor then, Harri Hautajärvi, compared his first trip to China in 1987 across Siberia by train and his later trip to China in 2006. The epochal changes in Chinese cities and the sharp contrast with what came before have surprised him as much as they have confused him. Though China has undertaken major economic reforms and has embraced a market economy in its daily life, it has also continued its previous political system. The ruling position of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has not changed. Hautajärvi cannot hide his deep disappointment and expressed his mistrust about China's political institution. In his view, what has diverted Chinese people from their focus on political reform is a mindset that encourages self-enrichment and a tsunami of consumerism.⁶ Architectural critic Tarja Nurmi's article also cast a skeptical eye on China. She questioned how Western architects could maintain a sense of 'political correctness' when working there.⁷

This study is not trying to open political debate, not to mention that China and its positioning in the Western world are in a continuous state of development and change. Yet, Hautajärvi and Nurmi's comments reflect a broader discursive background.⁸ For Western architects, China opens doors to the world, but it also brings political complications, especially when filtered through the lens of journalism. This questioning of China's political institution also leads, by extension, to the field of Western architects' practice in China. The arguments mainly arise from the inseparable connection

⁶ Hautajärvi, Harri. *Every fifth person in the world lives in China (Joka viides meistä asuu Kiinassa)*. *Arkkitehti*. 2.2007. p.78

⁷ Nurmi, Tarja. *The Wild East of Architecture (Arkkitehtuurin villi itä)*. *Arkkitehti*. 2.2007. p.87

⁸ This opinion can be proven by many media articles as well as academic discussions. For example, Dorian Davis published *China's Building Boom Sparks Ethical Debate*, in the *Architectural Record*, 2008. Robin Pogrebin posted *I'm the Designer. My Client's the Autocrat* in the *New York Times* in 2008. Alexander Hosch published *Architecture and Morality, Buildings of Evil (Architektur und Moral, Bauten des Bösen)*, in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (South German Newspaper), 2010. The associate professor Graham Owen at Tulane University edited the book *Architecture, Ethics and Globalization*, which focuses on this issue and raises the ethical questions in his introduction.

between cities and networks of power.⁹ Throughout the ages, in both authoritarian and democratic social systems, architecture is used by political leaders to assert their authority, win public support, and gain governing legitimacy.¹⁰ China's urban beautification plan, which has attracted many global architects, has been regarded as a state-led and top-down strategy. For example, the CCTV (China Central Television) building, designed by Rem Koolhaas, is probably the most controversial work in a Western opinion. Through its visually striking form, the building has been seen as Chinese leaders to demonstrate their political influence, regulate their city's identity, and improve its position on the global geopolitical stage.

On the other hand, in all these political critiques, the diversity of China's internal discussions have been neglected. By importing architecture, China has become the birthplace of many grand designs, and its openness to global architects has not changed. More and more public functions in Chinese society are accommodated in foreign-designed, often cutting-edge structures. However, Xi Jinping, the president of China, mentioned in 2014, 'no more weird architecture' in a symposium on literature and artwork in Beijing.¹¹ Ironically, the speculation about what Xi refers to as 'weird architecture' usually relates again to the CCTV Tower designed by Koolhaas.¹² Xi's comment suggests that China's official tolerance of such international architecture tends to change upon leadership succession. Also, if China's landmarks are, as some researchers have argued, a visual way of strengthening power, it implies many variables beyond this simple linear correspondence. China's strong cultural traditions and years of experience under the socialist system have led contemporary Chinese society to exhibit an ambivalence towards imported cultures. According to historian and China expert Arif Dirlik, the particular aspect of China is because Chinese society has been through a grand experiment in human history, namely the historical experience from a socialist renunciation of markets and capitalism to incorporation into capitalism.¹³ To understand this ambivalence, we can consider it in two ways.

Firstly, it is clear that a kind of apolitical consumerism, expressed by various post-modernist buildings, has become widespread in China. Along with the individual iconic buildings, a flood of Western architectural symbols made by foreign and local designers occurred in Chinese cities, representing a poor imitation and superficial collage.¹⁴ For example, Sweco, the Swedish engineering consultancy giant, has replicated a 'Scandinavian Style' town in Baoshan District, a suburb of Shanghai. And the government building in Yuhuatai District in Nanjing is considered a rough imitation of the U.S. Capitol. And they are just a few examples of the countless kitschy

⁹ Numerous researchers have addressed the relationship between urban landscapes and power networks. For example, See: Massey, Doreen. *A Place in the World? Places, Cultures and Globalization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

¹⁰ Sudjic, Deyan. *The Edifice Complex: How the Rich and Powerful--and Their Architects--Shape the World*. London: Penguin Books, 2006. p.3.

¹¹ On October 15, 2014, Xi Jinping presided over a symposium on literature and the arts in Beijing and delivered a two-hour speech. According to official Chinese media reports, Xi suggested "no more weird architecture (不要搞奇奇怪怪的建筑)." See: <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/1016/c64094-25848060.html> Accessed on 20.8.2020

¹² As a response to this questioning, Koolhaas spoke in an interview in 2014: "I don't have the slightest difficulty in saying, or showing, or demonstrating, that CCTV is a very serious building. (CCTV) is a building that introduces new ways of conceptualizing, liberating, and realizing structure that did not exist in China before, and of which I'm sure Chinese culture and Chinese architecture will benefit." See: <https://www.dezeen.com/2014/11/26/rem-koolhaas-defends-cctv-building-beijing-china-architecture/> Accessed on 20.8.2020

¹³ Dirlik, Arif. *Markets, Culture, Power: The Making of a "Second Cultural Revolution" in China*. Asian Studies Review, vol. 25, no. 1, 03.2001, pp.1-33

¹⁴ Fan, K. Sizeng. *Culture for Sale, Western Classical Architecture in China's Recent Building Boom*. Journal of Architectural Education, vol.63, no.1,10.2009, pp. 64-74

buildings in China.¹⁵ The mimicry, while not a laudable act, speaks to the fact that China does not view the various foreign buildings and styles with a political perspective. It reflects that globalization is still primarily a Westernization, which has the dominant power of promoting its cultural forms.¹⁶ These transnational buildings and the flowing architectural images have, in fact, become familiar sights in the daily lives of Chinese people. According to Ren Xuefei, these architectural imports since the 1990s do not indicate a loss of control of the state; rather, it manifests how the global and the national are embedded in each other in shaping the built environment.¹⁷

Secondly, the impact of globalization and the imported buildings also result in discontent, resistance, and reflection among China's intellectual class. The local architects often complain that international architects tend to get the most prestigious projects, and China has offered an experimental field for their ostentatious ideas. Located next to Beijing's central axis and near the Forbidden City, the egg-shaped National Grand Theatre, designed by French architect Paul Andreu, is seen as a 'creative destruction' of the historic city skyline. Even though some competitions invite both foreign and Chinese architects, Chinese firms are usually reduced to a kind of 'backdrop.' There is a widespread desire in contemporary Chinese society to achieve not only economic growth but to complete a cultural renaissance. In many cases, this longing has spawned collage works based on unsuccessful historical reinvention. Still, there are Chinese architects, such as Wang Shu, Zhang Ke, and Liu Jiakun, who have gained high recognition even in the Western architectural context.¹⁸ And some Chinese architects have overseas education and practice backgrounds, such as Ma Yansong and his office MAD, that have also emerged to compete for highly visible projects and export their designs back to the West. So, China is more like a node in a vast global network of design consumption and production. Although, currently, the two ends of this consumption and production do not present a state of equals.¹⁹ The world cultures represented by the imported buildings, and the extent to which the buildings represent political power, have a more complicated and pluralistic relationship with Chinese society. And an ideological binary is conceptually ineffective when the scope of globalized architectural practice is considered in greater detail.

In such a confrontation and competition of different discourses and positions, Western architects practicing in China, including Finnish architects, are often caught in a sort of dilemma. On the one hand, many architects feel the need to engage China and access its vast population and market. The appeal of the Chinese market has even made some architects put aside their previous criticism and change their views. For example, Polish-American architect Daniel Libeskind once claimed in a speech in Belfast in 2008 that he would not work for 'totalitarian regimes,' and he advised architects should think 'long and hard' before going to work in China.²⁰ However, an overly arbitrary statement may put the architect himself in an awkward position of being accused of

¹⁵ In her book, American journalist Bianca Bosker specializes in the extensive architectural copycats of the West in contemporary China.

¹⁶ Mathews, Gordon. *Cultural Identity in the Age of Globalization: Implications on Architecture*. Sang Lee, Ruth Baumeister (Ed.). *The Domestic and the Foreign in Architecture*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2007. p.49

¹⁷ Ren, Xuefei. *Building Globalization: Transnational Architecture Production in Urban China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. p.40

¹⁸ Wang Shu (王澍) was awarded the Pritzker Prize in 2012. Zhang Ke (张轲) was the winner of the 2017 Alvar Aalto Medal.

¹⁹ Ren, Xuefei. *Building Globalization: Transnational Architecture Production in Urban China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. p.40

²⁰ Pogrebin, Robin. *I'm the Designer. My Client's the Autocrat*. The New York Times. June 22, 2008. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/22/arts/design/22pogr.html> Accessed on 9.5.2020

hypocrisy. In 2018, Libeskind completed his first project in mainland China, the Museum of Zhang Zhidong in Wuhan, with the collaboration of one of China's largest property developers, Vanke.²¹ On the other hand, globalized architects who have designed significant public buildings in China have been very careful to keep a distance as far as possible from any political misunderstanding, which is an invisible red line for them. Architects continuously emphasize that the grandiose form derives from a kind of urban publicness and accessibility. Swiss architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, who designed Beijing Olympic Stadium, believe their work will radically 'transform' Chinese society by increasing public space.²² Also, Western architects have developed discourses that are responsive to the complexity and sensitivity of the Chinese context. Architects need to advance the highly visible design in reality, while they have to deconstruct the design in their artistic narratives. (The discourses used by Finnish architects in China will be analyzed in the following chapter.)

One reason for this awkward situation, according to Kris Olds, is because globalized architects are situated in two overlapping networks: 1) the business networks of property developers and state officials, 2) the professional networks of the intelligentsia-managed institutions that help define the discourse of architecture.²³ The critical question here is, who should the architecture please? Is it capital and power or the millions of ordinary people in society? The ethics and the conventions of discourse within the architectural profession revere the designs that serve the common good. However, the external forces on which architects rely to realize new ideas are often beyond the architects' control.²⁴ In practical experience, it is difficult to win a competition if a significant cultural building does not have an impressive form. This emphasis on architectural image is occurring not only in China but also around the world. For many architects, they have tried to achieve both sides of the paradox at the same time, i.e., the real concept of architecture originates from a powerful gesture based on an urban public strategy.

When Hautajärvi expressed his criticisms and confusion in 2007, Finnish architects had not built anything influential in China. In contrast, to this day, Finnish architecture firm PES, for example, has been involved in the wave of China's landmark construction. Two performance centers designed by PES, the Wuxi Grand Theatre (2012), and the Strait Cultural Art Center (2018), are already in operation. Still, the grand buildings that PES has done are only a drop in the ocean of the massive cityscape construction in China. In almost every major Chinese city, there are several iconic buildings designed by Western architects nowadays. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Chinese market is equally attractive to a younger generation of Finnish architects. In his article published in the Chinese journal *World Architecture* in 2012, Antti Nousjoki mentioned that the typical motivation to enter the Chinese architecture market had been an ego-driven search for the unique and ambitious, well-funded public buildings.²⁵ Finnish architectural offices, ALA (Antti Nousjoki is one of the partners) and JKMM, have been invited to several competitions for significant public buildings in China. Undoubtedly, China's large landmark projects have been

²¹ Zhang Zhidong (1837-1909) was a critical chancellor who advocated the establishment of modern industries in the late Qing Dynasty. The museum, located on the historical site of China's first steel company, aims to recreate the memories of the founding of China's national industry.

²² Pogrebin, Robin. *I'm the Designer. My Client's the Autocrat*. The New York Times. June 22, 2008. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/22/arts/design/22pogr.html> Accessed on 9.5.2020

²³ Olds, Kris. *Globalization and Urban Change: Capital, Culture, and Pacific Rim Mega-Projects*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. pp.154-155

²⁴ Larson, Magali Sarfatti. *Behind the Postmodern Facade: Architectural Change in Late Twentieth-Century America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. pp.59-64

²⁵ Nousjoki, Antti. *The Design Present*. *World Architecture* (世界建筑). Vol.261. 03.2012. pp.30-35.

considered the most attractive arena for globalized architects. Yet, suspicions and worries about China remain. And the Chinese context, which is intertwined with Finnish architects' practice, has not been systematically discussed and explained. Many Western journalists often lack in-depth analysis and present a 'hit-and-run' attitude on Chinese urban issues.²⁶ To better understand Finnish designs in China's building boom, it is necessary to analyze the driving forces objectively. Although China may represent an ideology different from the West, they are currently intricately linked socially, economically, and culturally. At the policy level, China continuously practices a kind of relentless realism. A Western-centric reading and moral critique of architectural works through ideological opposites do not help increase the understanding of China.

The chapter aims to provide a multi-scalar sketch of the political, social, and economic underpinnings behind the Chinese projects made by Western architects, especially when it comes to high-profile buildings that have been built and are likely to be made in the future. This study tends to show that China's choice of importing international architectural design is the result of a combination of demands, including cultural consumption, state power, and capital accumulation. Also, this study attempts to answer how such a system has affected the practice of Finnish architects in China, and how might the situation develop? Although the factors analyzed in this chapter are not limited to the experience encountered by the architects from Finland and have, in fact, provided implications for many other Western architects, China's particular circumstances are crucial to understanding the complicated buildings Finnish architects have made.

3.1 China's political system and its influence on architecture

Historically, China has been a centralized power—a vast state was run under a sophisticated bureaucratic system. According to American political scientist Francis Fukuyama, China's political system has deep historical roots, dating back to the Qin unification (B.C. 221), and it should not be seen as a country that only emerged in the 20th century.²⁷ However, China's humiliations in its modern history has made modernization a common aspiration of the entire nation. In 2012, Xi Jinping's slogan 'The Chinese Dream' was, to a large extent, another response to this vision.²⁸ The Chinese government is, on the one hand, the main body of administrative management and, on the other hand, the leader of economic development. According to Wang Hui, developmentalism remains at the core of China's national policy.²⁹ The Chinese leaders see its legitimacy as stemming from its mission to grow the economy, guarantee employment, raise the standard of living, and ultimately achieve national revival and complete modernization. Lifting hundreds of millions out of poverty, or preventing as many people as possible from infection in the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, are the key aspects concerning the legitimacy of governance.

On that basis, China's decision-makers also have realized the importance of creating a seductive urban sensorium comparable with leading global cities, with a message of openness and social progress. After decades of rapid economic growth, nowadays, China is striving to build its cities with the expectation that they can join the network of command-and-control centers of the world

²⁶ Ren, Xuefei. *Building Globalization: Transnational Architecture Production in Urban China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. p.40

²⁷ Fukuyama, Francis (2020) *What Kind of Regime Does China Have?* The American Interest. <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2020/05/18/what-kind-of-regime-does-china-have/> Accessed on 31.05.2020

²⁸ China's rulers have been discussing this vision in detail and with specific timelines. In 2018, CCP made an official statement that the main contradiction in Chinese society is the 'contradiction between the people's growing need for a better life and the unbalanced and inadequate development.'

²⁹ Wang Hui (汪晖) is one of the most renowned contemporary Chinese humanities scholars.

economy.³⁰ Many places in China are not even content with a simple repetition of the developed world's cityscape but want to achieve a first-of-its-kind effect. In China's opinion, the old, dirty, messy, and impoverished areas of Chinese cities have become a way for the Western media to convey an image of China's strangeness. So, carrying out city beautification and creating a futuristic vision has become an imperative act of China's modernization and re-emergence as a great nation. The slogan of building an 'international-level metropolis' and 'landmark' has appeared in many provincial and municipal governments' propaganda and bid documents. The city is expected to benefit from attracting more tourists and international elites by updating its public image, stimulating the domestic consumer market, and creating a competitive investment climate. In recent years, along with rising incomes and the need to upgrade the industry, Chinese cities have been using online social media platforms to promote their images to attract overseas Chinese students back to work and start their own business. Thus, a visually attractive architectural look helps the internet media's need to capture attention in a short moment.

Furthermore, while the leading cities in China have erected architectural icons or processed grand urban plans, those smaller cities in subordinate positions follow the examples set by their superiors or even attempt to compete. The skylines in China's first-tier cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou have become models for many other smaller places to imitate. There was a wave of iconic buildings in China's second-tier, third-tier, or even more miniature towns since the preeminent cities made the 'flagship' effect in the past ten years. The iconic buildings are also known as 'face' ('mianzi' in Chinese) projects set up to showcase the credits of the local leaders. The initiation is primarily related to the appointment mechanism of government officials. In China, each governor has a specific term of office. After that, they will be moved to another position in another city. So, the frequent reshuffling of governors caused a sense of anxiety and urgency. To show their administration capabilities, they tended to implement visible improvements in the local urban environment.³¹ Many municipalities attempt to replicate the 'Bilbao effect,' which endeavors to improve its cultural content and tourism revenues by establishing an iconic building. They have become the primary art patrons of many cultural facilities, such as concert halls, theaters, art galleries, exhibition centers, etc. For a long time, economic development achievements have become the primary indicator for examining the behavior of local officials, especially in the early era of China's economic reform.³² Changes in the city skyline and brand new public venues provide an intuitive interpretation of personal achievements. The desire for place-making and the 'peer pressure' that compete with other cities have facilitated the building boom.

Meanwhile, China's centralized system enables quick decisions and fast construction of large public buildings. These new cultural projects are often directly managed by a government's subordinate agency and state-owned new district construction companies. These agencies have the ability and persistence to support the realization of the design. And for those responsible for managing the project, the completion of the building became an obligatory administrative task. The enormous new Beijing Daxing International Airport, for example, went from initiating design to

³⁰ Saskia Sassen, in her book, argues that the group of global cities have formed the command-and-control centers of the world economy based on the gathering of many specialized producer services firms, such as law, finance, and accounting.

³¹ Chen, Ting. *A State Beyond The State, A Study of Chinese State-Owned Enterprises' Urban Development and Transformation with the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone as Case Study*. 2015. Pp. 58

³² There is evidence that this situation is now changing. For example, Zhejiang is the fourth largest province in China (2019) in terms of economic volume. However, from 2015, Zhejiang Province began to eliminate GDP as an assessment criterion for local development. The weight of assessing the effective use of resources and environmental protection rose.

commissioning in six years. On the one hand, authorities' decisions allow these projects to move forward and ensure their eventual completion. The top-down decisions make the process of site selection, excavation, preparation, design, and construction smoother than in many democratic societies.³³ On the other hand, some arbitrary and ill-advised decisions led to repetitive buildings, the waste of public assets, and the inflated real estate bubbles. Like many other parts of the world, China has to face the problem of how to reuse the venues after a series of significant events such as the Beijing Olympics (2008), the Nanjing Youth Olympics (2014), and the upcoming Beijing Winter Olympics (2022). As China is still in urbanization, people are moving to major cities, where the increasing population eventually can utilize the public venues that have been built earlier. We can, therefore, be somewhat optimistic that these are projects that were made in advance. However, in smaller places where people are moving out of the area, there is a more significant risk that public projects would be left vacant.

The social change behind iconic projects

The more than four decades since China's economic reform in 1978 have been the longest sustained period of steady development in its modern history. The economy has snowballed, and a large middle class was born.³⁴ Especially in major cities like Shanghai, the new generation of young Chinese is educated, affluent, and effortlessly international but also firmly pragmatic and averse to radical political change.³⁵ From an outside perspective, many Chinese tourists in European towns and Chinese students in universities also help give another intuitive experience of this emerging social group. The urban middle class has created a massive consumerist demand. The emancipation of personal life has generated high expectations for diverse cultural, recreational, and leisure spaces. When the service economy dominates cities, aesthetics plays an essential role in urban space and lifestyles.³⁶ For example, a new generation of young Chinese parents who grew up in the reform-era (such as the Post-80s and the Post-90s) is more concerned about the quality of life and urban settings' livability. They are eager to find appropriate places and leisure skills in the city to spend their time with their children on weekends and holidays.³⁷

For a long time, China's economic growth relied heavily on fixed-asset investment and foreign trade. However, growth based on extensive investment in infrastructure was unsustainable. And in the post-pandemic era, with reduced demand from the world's other major economies, foreign trade's role in boosting China's economic growth has further diminished. Therefore, how to expand the domestic market and stimulate the growth in consumption has become a more significant issue for China. Considerable attention has been paid to the enhancement of public space in China's state-led urban construction. For example, Shenzhen, which has long served as China's Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and a model for urban construction and management, promotes the construction of six 'Urban Living Rooms.' The goal is to form multiple central areas of the city's public life. These areas include large green zones of parks and available cultural facilities such as theaters and museums, offering both open-air and indoor events. In the tender documents for large cultural buildings, social publicity has been presented as an explicit evaluation criterion. For

³³ Xue, Charlie Q. L. *Grand Theater Urbanism: Chinese Cities in the 21st Century*. Singapore: Springer, 2019. p.50

³⁴ According to the World Bank, more than 850 million Chinese people have been lifted out of extreme poverty. In 2011, China's urbanization rate exceeded 50 percent for the first time.

³⁵ Rosen, Stanley. *Contemporary Chinese Youth and the State*. *The Journal of Asian Studies*. Vol.68, No.2, 05.2009. pp.359-369

³⁶ Zukin, Sharon. *Landscapes of power: from Detroit to Disney World*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

³⁷ The Post-80s, or Balinghou (八零后), refers to the generation whose members were born in the 1980s in mainland China. Currently, this generation has been regarded as the young adults in China.

example, in 2020, Shenzhen hosted an international competition for the International Performance Center, located in Shenzhen's heart, near Shennan Avenue. In the design brief prepared by the local municipality, it is clearly stated that the creation of an urbanist public space should be one of the design principles.

*'The building should fully reflect the spirit of welcome and service to the whole society. Based on a public perspective, the space should provide sufficient activities, improve the accessibility, openness, and friendliness of the performance center. It should also form a place and atmosphere for public culture with adjacent buildings and city parks, provide shade and convenient services to the society, organize the visiting route, and create a friendly image.'*³⁸

To shape public space, these large cultural buildings are required to have a local distinctiveness, offer spaces for dining, shopping, and spontaneous activities to engage people of all ages. And among the many types of space, commercial space is placed in a crucial position. They have become an extension of the commercial function in addition to their own performance, exhibition, and other cultural programs. Through underground commercial spaces and transportation networks, these cultural buildings become nodes in the whole urban network.

In Europe's history, the idea of cultivating citizens through artistic and cultural activities, led by the state, was considered a way of contributing to modernization.³⁹ The social class changes also contribute to the occurrence of new 'cultural norms' and persuade society to accept new forms of culture.⁴⁰ For China, it still largely follows this path. With the transformation and upgrading of China's industrial structure, China is paying increasing attention to cultural industries, seeking to expand its influence and enhance its so-called 'soft power' by developing cultural products. The cultural development in China occurs in two dimensions: the increase in bottom-up activities and organizations, and the other is the encouragement of official policies. And an official cultural strategy is mostly tied to the city's beautification project, using the arts and entertainment as tools in urban branding. This public-private partnership focusing on increasing the service economy exemplifies what David Harvey has called 'urban entrepreneurialism.'⁴¹ These strategies include the transformation of existing industrial areas into spaces for art production and exhibition (e.g., the 798 Art District in Beijing), as well as the creation of numerous new projects.

Therefore, local governments see the invitation of international architects for the construction of new cultural buildings as a need for 'cultural infrastructure.' It reflects an official policy of seeking a quantitative enhancement of artistic output. China's large state-owned theatre management company, such as Poly Theatre, has continued to invite Western orchestras and opera and tours in its numerous theatres around China.⁴² These large venues have acted as a catalyst for new cultural forms, allowing musicals, operas, and classical symphonies, which were previously unfamiliar to the average Chinese, to gradually spread in China. Also, these cultural venues serve as educational tools for civilization campaigns. In many concert halls and cinemas, for example,

³⁸ Design Brief at Schematic Design Stage for the Shenzhen International Performance Center. p.16

³⁹ Cupers, Kenny. *The Cultural Center: Architecture as Cultural Policy in Postwar Europe*. Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians. Vol.74, No.4. 12.2015. pp.464-484

⁴⁰ Zukin, Sharon. *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982.

⁴¹ Harvey, David. *From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism*. Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography, Vol.71, No.1. pp.3-17

⁴² Poly Theatre Company is a subsidiary of the China Poly Group. The company operates more than 60 theatres in 60 cities across 21 provinces in China, with more than 130 auditoriums.

there are signs urging people to turn off their cell phones and keep quiet, to teach people how to behave like civilized citizens.

Meanwhile, many parts of China have their traditional local operas, and China's social development has called for the continuation and recreation of cultural traditions. The demand for the original repertoire is increasing. Spurred by such a demand for cultural consumption, various parts of China try to rediscover their original regional cultures and package them into new cultural products. For example, in the case of performance buildings, the metal and wood workshops, backdrop painting studios, etc. are demanded explicitly in the design brief. This allowed the theatre companies to produce their original productions. In 2016 for the Chuanchang River Cultural Gathering in Yancheng (literally 'Salt City'), Jiangsu Province, the local government intended to promote two intangible cultural heritages from that area, Huai Opera and acrobatics, by creating new performance spaces. So, the design scope included a traditional Chinese theatre, including a space for learning and rehearsing Huai Opera, as well as a theatre for the performance of acrobatics. Many cities aim to discover differentiated cultural labels as a part of the policies that promote cultural and creative industries.

The land logic of making iconic projects

Land in China is still nominally owned by the state.⁴³ In 1994, the tax sharing reform from China's State Council stipulated that land-use rights could be granted for a fee. The rural property belonging to the village collectives can be changed to urban development areas. The land-leasing transformed the land-use right into a commodity and made the real estate sector quickly become one of the significant sectors driving China's economic growth. The control over the land has allowed the local government to dominate negotiations with real estate developers in land concessions. With the massive development of the city, the scale of land grants was rapidly expanding. Local governments' reliance on land-leasing revenues has ultimately led to the so-called 'land finance' phenomenon. In some Chinese cities, the fee from transferring land rights can even exceed the local tax revenue. It enables cities to capture a lot of money from land appreciation and start the next round of development. Local governments can achieve their goals of rapidly expanding infrastructure, attracting investment, changing the face of cities, and developing economies.

Important cultural buildings, such as performance centers, exhibition halls, stadiums, often play a vital role as a tool of land appreciation. These 'cultural infrastructure' often appear before other buildings, since they represent an official commitment to a new regional development plan. The public buildings are expected to push up the property values in the nearby areas, which are often still under development or in the process of waiting for land-use rights to be leased. It is not uncommon in China to see a vast cultural building situated in an undeveloped area, surrounded by farmland and emptiness. The significance of the completion of these iconic buildings is not limited to themselves, but more importantly, they often represent the cornerstones of an entirely new district. The expropriation, development, and redistribution of land have become a model for the government-led gentrification. Led by the new iconic buildings and city planning, there is often an agglomeration effect on allocating the city's public resources, including education and health care. Well-known primary and secondary schools will set up branches in the new area, as well as the

⁴³ For housing, what Chinese homebuyers are buying is actually a 70-year lease. It is still unclear yet what will happen to these long-term leases when they expire. But demolition in China generally compensates for the size of the existing housing. The original occupants may get an apartment in the new building on the same site, or they may have to move to a more distant suburb.

brand new sports parks and hospitals. The consequent rise in housing prices has exacerbated the creation of new social hierarchies within the city. High housing prices make it difficult for many young Chinese to stay in the big cities, which largely counteracts the social mobility that the urban landscape tries to create. Likewise, this 'tabula rasa' strategy has led to new cultural venues often being built away from the city center. Before the new zones were fully developed as urban areas, people had to spend a lot of travel time to reach the newly built venues. The location makes it difficult for them to be adequately used, leading to vacancies and increasing operating costs.

Also, the state capital is directly involved in significant cultural projects by forming SOEs responsible for developing the new area. Local governments borrowing to invest in public cultural buildings will lead to increased financial pressure and debt risk. Though more and more projects are in a PPP (Public-Private Partnership) model for introducing social capital, operating a sizable cultural venue requires high costs. And the rate of return of cultural buildings is meager. The local government can recoup the money from the land value appreciation, while the long-time financial rationale appears to be less questioned. The projects often end up relying on subsidies and eventually lead to burdening local governments with debt.

Discussion: the impact on Finnish architects

For Chinese architectural competition organizers, inviting international architects with persuasive working experience and influential reputations is an approach to reduce internal discussions and disputes. Also, the choice of designer often represents the identity of the project and prospective users. By their influence on the media, the architects' reputation can help to have a promotional effect even before a building is built. These architects are already identifiable brand names and have even become some commercial properties.⁴⁴ According to Zhu Jianfei, a monopolistic alliance has been formed between the state with large capital and international systems of cultural production.⁴⁵ In many architectural competitions in Shenzhen, for example, these world-renowned architects can serve as members of the jury for Project A and compete in Project B at the same time.

Finland has left many positive impressions in China, i.e., merits in high-tech industries, ecological architecture, liveable cities, childhood education, and winter sports venues. The national image facilitates a media effect of promoting industrial planning and consequently translates into design expertise. Finland's strengths in these aspects form the basis for intergovernmental cooperation. For example, a team of Finnish architectural offices participated in the design competition for the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games venues in 2018, combining an image of Finland's own strengths in ice and snow sports. Finnish architects in China can experiment with the types of buildings that are difficult to achieve at home.

So, Finnish architects often find themselves with a demanding task in China. The Shenzhen branch of the National Museum of China (Guoshen Museum), in which JKMM participated in 2020, is a museum with a total area of about 120,000 square meters, with the ambition of making Shenzhen a model for urban design in China. Its design documents explicitly call for the museum to be a 'world-class, century-old classic comprehensive museum and city business card.' Like many competitions in China, the list of candidates for the competition is often a collection of many

⁴⁴ Zukin, Sharon. *Landscapes of power: from Detroit to Disney World*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991. p.45

⁴⁵ Zhu, Jianfei. *Architecture of Modern China: A historical critique*. New York: Routledge, 2009. pp.213-214

star architects. Globalized architects are invited to design precisely because the project itself is positioned as a break from the ordinary. Architects have always been chosen based on both their names and their work.⁴⁶ We have already discussed the importance of architects' prestige and expertise as entry barriers to the Chinese market in Chapter 2; both conditions are crucial for winning projects in China. Expertise builds a wall of knowledge that cannot be easily replicated by local architects. China provides not only practical opportunities but also a heuristic site to explore the possibilities of architecture.⁴⁷

By the same token, for many projects like residential buildings and schools, because the design development of such facilities does not require much know-how, Chinese clients often take an economic point of view to obtain a preliminary design sketch from foreign architects. Then they hand it over to local design institutes to further design and complete the subsequent parts. In other words, globalized architects do not obtain a comparative advantage over local Chinese architects in terms of overly common building types. On the other hand, within Finland, its architectural discussions focus on providing comfortable housing for all, preserving and renovating historic buildings, and designing day-care centers. Finnish architectural community has the value for everydayness, concerning the living quality of everyone's ordinary life. These projects reflect the 'spatial structures' of Finland as a democratic and welfare state. As a result, there is a partial agenda difference between the domestic architectural discourse in Finland and the issues encountered by Finnish architects in China.

This discrepancy presents several challenges for Finnish architects working in China. Firstly, there is a different kind of context compared with Finland. Instead of any real urban structures, the forthcoming building site is often totally flat land, and the context is often merely urban planning on paper. As many new towns aim to transform the green field into urban districts, the urban density is missing for many architectural design assignments. The design strategy, usually adopted by many Finnish architects to take advantage of the urban fabric to generate the architecture forms and make narratives, is no longer viable in such a context. These buildings' remote location makes Finnish architects particularly concerned with the operation and maintenance of large cultural buildings after they have been put into use. So, the design proposal includes not only the building itself, but numerous program rationing and operational advice.

Secondly, for China, a strong and compelling architectural form remains critical. Salminen, one of the Finnish architects with the most experience in Chinese projects, argues that Chinese clients are more easily attracted to the building's overall shape. In ranking the three architectural norms, namely function, sustainability, and form, the last one is probably the most important in China. For Finnish architects, the origin of an actual design concept is often an urban strategy. Architects need to strike a balance between architectural form and publicness. As Salminen once commented:

"From the Finnish perspective, a Chinese client's approach to a project often seems superficial: what will it look like, what does it cost, and finally, how will it work? We prefer to present these considerations in a different order. On the other hand, we have come to understand the significance of stories and powerful symbols in Chinese culture and its approach to architecture. A

⁴⁶ Zukin, Sharon. *Landscapes of power: from Detroit to Disney World*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991. p.46.

⁴⁷ Ren, Xuefei. *Building Globalization: Transnational Architecture Production in Urban China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. p.57

*Chinese client does not assess a project primarily from the viewpoint of efficiency, functionality, or ease of maintenance. Even major decisions are often based on an image, so that ultimately it is the skill, sense of responsibility and perseverance of the architect that ensures a successful end result.*⁴⁸

Third, the lack of respect for professionalism has led to an unpredictable evaluation process for Chinese projects. The authoritarian decision-making system is characterized by inconsistency and non-transparency. The decisions of local government officials have a decisive influence on the selection of public projects. It inevitably undermines the fairness and professionalism of China's architectural competitions. For the professional jurors, their choices are more of a recommendation than final decision. In many cases, the panel of experts would submit multiple candidates tied for first, and the final decision would remain with local officials. As laypersons for the architectural profession, the officials may be more caught up with the external architectural appearance. This has resulted in Finnish architects having to experience winning competitions, but ultimately missing out on projects. For example, in 2015, Salminen won the limited competition for the Nanjing Performance Center. The jury assembled by professional architects thought the design proposed was functional and cost-effective.⁴⁹ Yet this decision was overridden by the local party secretary, who commented the box-like architectural form was like 'tofu nuggets.' Such decisions, made by non-professionals, often make the buildings' symbolic value outweigh their actual functions. Designs with exaggerated forms were more likely to win out from the final candidates.

⁴⁸ PES-Architects in China, Exhibition Book for Helsinki Design Week. 09.2013

⁴⁹ The comments from the competition jury.