

BEIJING BEYOND THE OLYMPICS

IN 1978 CHINA EMBARKED UPON A REFORM ERA WHICH HAS PROBABLY DONE MORE TO CHANGE THE LANDSCAPE OF THE PLANET THAN ANY OTHER SINGLE POLITICAL PERIOD IN THE COURSE OF HUMAN HISTORY. FOLLOWING DENG XIAOPING'S DICTUM, "**LEARN FROM FACTS**", CHINA EXCHANGED "**CONTINUOUS REVOLUTION**" FOR "**MAXIMISE ECONOMIC GROWTH**". THE MEANS: TURN LOW PRODUCTIVITY FARMERS INTO HIGH PRODUCTIVITY URBANITES. URBANISING FORCES HAVE RADICALLY RECREATED BEIJING OVER THE PAST 30 YEARS. BUT THE TRANSITION TO A XIAO KANG SOCIETY IS STILL ONLY HALF WAY COMPLETE. THE OLYMPICS IS NO CONCLUSION. IN FACT MID-SWING IS EXACTLY THE POINT WHERE THINGS ARE MOVING FASTEST ...

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HIGHER HORIZONS (BUT DON'T FORGET WHO'S BOSS)

"If the economy cannot be boosted, over the long run we will lose people's support at home and be oppressed and bullied by other nations throughout the world. A continuation of such a situation will only lead to a collapse and disintegration of the Communist Party."

Deng Xiaoping

Beijing is neither China's largest nor its fastest growing city. It isn't the oldest or, in spite of its standing among world capitals, the most polluted. It is however the one which will be the most seen on tv over the next couple of weeks, and as such, has been very consciously prepared as the venue for China's global coming out party.

After a failed bid for the 2000 Olympics, Beijing 2008 has been regarded by the Communist Party as the rightful acknowledgment – this time – of China's ascension onto the world stage. The intensity with which the city has been refitted has accordingly been characterised by visionary objectives, grand budgets, and unilateral planning processes. The direct fiscal outlay for the Beijing Olympics is over twice that tabled for London 2012 (in PPP terms, taking into account China's cheaper local environment, this is equivalent to something more like 6x the spending power). It has proved enough not only to buy buildings like the Bird's Nest and the Water Cube, but also to clear 8.5km² of relatively central Beijing to set them in (roughly equivalent to rubbing out Primrose Hill, Camden and Kentish Towns, and a slice of Holloway for a new Olympic District). 30 foot trees from surrounding areas have been dug out, trucked in, and stood upright to present a rich verdure walling along surrounding roads. An astonishing urgency has driven architectural projects across the city to complete at least their exteriors, allowing Beijing to present to visitors the glazed miles of its business district, including the Escher-like knocked quadrangle of OMA's CCTV tower. Three-shift 24 hour construction

programmes have likewise been deployed on infrastructural expansions, including an extended Airport Expressway, 85km of new subway line, and the colossal Foster + Partners' Beijing Terminal 3 (four times the size of Heathrow Terminal 5 and built in one fifth the time). The design, as Chief Executive Mouzhan Majidi describes with zeal, is weighted toward the arriving passenger's experience. Rather than stepping off the plane into consecutive corridors and subhalls, you emerge directly into the vast interior space. The entrant is placed at the highest level, beneath an endlessly undulating roof, and looking out over a million square metres of shining floor, all bathed in red and yellow light. This is your gateway to China. Tens of thousands of people have been shunted around to make the moment, so best enjoy it.

However, while Olympic Beijing betrays an enormous and highly aspirational coordinated effort to produce a moment of city-as-spectacle, this is only the curtain raiser. It is widely agreed that the Olympics have exerted a catalytic rather than redirectional force upon the city's development, and that the frenetic activity of the last eight years has all been taking place beneath a higher horizon. The official Beijing 2020 Masterplan, as released in 2004, envisages continued rapid development for at least a further decade, focused notably on two strings of satellite cities to the east and west of the centre. These satellites, 14 in total, form the basis for the "Two Axes Two Corridors – Multicentres" scheme, by which both downtown congestion and outerlying sprawl is to be curbed by moving out densities into compact pre-planned packages, positioned along semi-continuous arcs or "urban corridors". The principle to "develop transportation infrastructure first" is also in evidence, with proposals for a further massive upscaling of the roads, and a tripling in length of the subway network from its 2008 state.

Yet what is striking about the Masterplan is less the scale of its ambition than how out of touch it is with current and in truth much more dynamic and aggressive realities. The Beijing Municipal Commission of Urban Planning has long suffered from a peculiar form of immediate obsolescence, by which statements for future growth are regularly exceeded by contemporary conditions. Proposed footprints tend to be smaller than the city they seek to contain, and anticipated population figures are frequently below real estimates. The masterplan's notion that Beijing in 2020 will not break the 16-18 million people mark, based on calculations of water availability, is most likely already out of date. Independent calculations, which include the informal population, posit a Beijing of upwards of 24 million within the next ten to twelve years.

This mismatch can be largely attributed to an obscure and frequently contradictory regulatory environment. Ever since 1949, all land in China has been held by the state. However, market reforms aimed at introducing land value efficiencies have allowed local

mayors to create and trade land leases. The tax reforms of 1992 further encouraged mayors to "act entrepreneurially", thus sparking the prevalent practice of Beijing district mayors partnering private developers on for-profit projects, with profits accruing both to local government and to the officials themselves. Incentivised in this fashion, local mayors frequently make decisions (e.g. to pursue more and more profitable development) which contradict central planning objectives, thus creating the plan/reality disjuncture. The mayors can then trump planners' objections with reports of boosted economic growth, which remains the ultimate bottom line in China.

As the mayors enjoy near irrecusable power within their districts, this makes for more of a rule of man than rule of law environment, in which much rests upon the particular preferences of singular persons. Possession of good *guanxi*, loosely translated as personal relationship, with local leaders is the most important asset for anyone looking to spark a new project. Speaking on the subject of this 'all important person of the mayor', Will Alsop sighs that there is a lot of bureaucracy and relationship building, but that it's rather nice to be able get rid of the lawyers.

At the same time that mayoral entrepreneurialism is pushing the urban envelope with quasi-legitimate – or greyish – new projects, a deeper level of even less legitimate entrepreneurial activity is further transforming Beijing. The city is home to an enormous population of migrant workers, who are officially unrecognised, but clearly essential to the urban dynamic. As such they are ignored by planners, and tacitly acknowledged by authorities. These floating millions inspire a bottom layer of completely unregulated constructions – generally regarded as "illegal yet tolerated" – which spring up across the city and into the periphery, forming the backbone of a thriving and fully grey economy.

This greyness covers much of Beijing, obfuscating procedures and frustrating city-wide efforts. The relationship between central and local bodies remains tense and unclear, as does that between local bodies and on the ground bottom-up activity. All this makes for a stunningly unstable environment, characterised by overbearing bureaucracy operating in concert with weak regulation. The result is a paradoxical mix of anarchic energies, unpredictable complications, and sudden absolute decisions. Corruption is endemic – as is fast-tracking and associated efficiency gains. Compellingly, the conditions of volatility and speed, which together do so much to define the new Beijing, actually necessitate each other, after the fashion of a Chinese dragon racing around in a loop, tail in mouth. The uncertainty of the policy environment, and the absence of a realistic long-term scenario, enforces a capitalise now mentality. For architects the pressure to draw and build is intense, with pattern book-derived tower blocks typically spending less than two days in an architecture office, and urban designers push-

ing out upwards of ten masterplans in the course of a single year. In turn, this mercurial advance of new development creates extremely uncertain physical environments, where the complete absence of a relevant context (who knows what will be there in a year's time?) plucks on the need for ever more speed, while quelling concerns for the wider area. Ironically, at the same time that China is proclaiming visionary horizons out to 2020, progress toward those horizons is being made through chaotically atomised operations, each determined by excessively short-term interests. Large parts of the city are rapidly devoured, developed, and progress moves on, nose to the ground.

The upshot of this for the Beijing 2020 Masterplan is that it is doomed to failure fairly much irrespective of its design. The new infrastructure and designated satellites will no doubt be built, but the clearly delineated blocks of density are almost certain to give way to a thick and jostling rabble of informal developments and local partnership projects. These together will take full advantage of the improved transport opportunities and the interstitial holes in the expanding city fabric, and in this way Beijing is likely to continue developing after the fashion it ever has – fondly described by Beijingers as the *tandabing*, or big spreading pancake.

Not that the *tandabing*, stretched and accelerated to megacity proportions, is by any means a death knell for Beijing. Ole Scheeren, OMA's partner-in-charge for CCTV, notes how Beijing's identity exists in the face of – perhaps even in the act of defying – its apparent dysfunctionality; what he calls a 'magical coherence despite incoherence'. Not only is Beijing capable of resisting disjointed planning efforts, but its success and dynamism are in fact the products of the extent to which it is capable of flouting masterplans, and boisterously breaking ground in direct response to market – black, white and grey – opportunities.

Few will lament the demise of the 2020 Masterplan. In many ways the particularities of excessively planned environments – especially those attempting separate out or prescribe ratios for living, work and leisure spaces – are themselves approaching obsolescence. The take-up of digital technologies is increasingly redefining conventional ideas of separation, and beyond integrated developments, single environments are being used to fulfill a variety of different programmatic functions. This is nothing new in China, where for centuries the urban fabric has exhibited exactly this kind of complex cross-weaving, whereby traditionally higher density levels and a greater incidence of home entrepreneurialism have led to almost wall-less fusions of streets, restaurants, children's play areas and private rooms. The current and oddly indeterminate planning environment of China today actually enhances the possibilities for this kind of fluidity, allowing both for experimental ideas to be designed in, and for spaces to be left

open. Chic mixed-use compound neighbourhoods typically incorporate clubhouses, shopping, small office facilities etc. into their schemes; but more interestingly, all types of development are subject to surprise start-up enterprise, with hairdressers suddenly opening in what were thought to be apartment blocks, or bike store areas unexpectedly becoming communal kitchens. In many ways the sheer density levels in Beijing ensure vibrant environments almost irrespective of architecture, with even the most forbidding silhouette-skylines of towers rapidly filling with people, and the informal sector responding with pancake stands and small retail. Thus the crudeness of big developments and the summary fashion in which they are executed forms a curious marriage with speedy low-level organic innovation. Beijing's formal front end, and its suggested reintroduction of *le grand architecte*, belies the hectic environments to which it gives birth.

For foreign architects wishing to practice in China, the implications of so much flux are clearly high risk - high return opportunities, where the risks and the returns operate on many levels. Practitioners in China all stress the importance of picking projects wisely. Will Alsop, with offices in both Beijing and Shanghai, describes China as being 'full of pitfalls', cheerily adding 'contracts are meaningless'; Mouzhan Majidi equally stresses the need to 'be very careful'. At the same time, the possibilities glitter. Not only can projects with the right connections bull their way through to on-site activity much faster, but once there, construction itself tends to be stunningly fast and effective. The sheer volume of building taking place in China has given rise to enormous construction companies (some employing upwards of 80,000 workers), with the resources to carry difficult projects to completion on time. In addition to labour weight, a quality supply infrastructure has developed, from which even high prestige international projects source the vast majority of their parts. The related cost savings have significant design implications - in effect facilitating far more daring approaches. Notably the demand for high floorplan efficiencies is significantly eased as developers are not counting each square metre of built space while gripping their wallets. Furthermore, Majidi opines that Chinese steelwork is the best in the world. Thanks to a combination of lower costs and higher ambitions, the most challenging elements of the Airport Terminal and the Bird's Nest were not engineered out, but duly milled and welded. In China, where there is the political will, there is also the affordability to achieve projects the likes of which are unlikely ever to surface in the UK.

But political will is an inevitable prerequisite. It would be a mistake to think any work done in China isn't on some level done for the Party, or that, for all its market-trappings, China isn't still a nation defined by state capitalism. In the Deng Xiaoping quote at the top of this article, boosting the economy is singled out as the primary ambition. Certainly this has been the chief in-

strument reshaping Chinese society for the past three decades, and will continue to be so most likely for as long again. However Deng's motivation is more revealing still. Boosting the economy is seen as desirable less for the benefits that accrue to the Chinese people, or for the global political clout it engenders (though both of these have certainly been forthcoming), but for the continued existence of the Party. Architecture in China enjoys a place where it can look out to higher horizons than elsewhere in the world, and even perhaps divest itself of many of the worries about stale or shrinking generic cities, but it can never forget who's boss.

2020 MASTERPLAN (tucked beside the graphics)

The 2020 Masterplan, released in 2004, is a cool repudiation of current concerns. All problems are to be comprehensively met through the promulgation of stringent and guided countermeasures. Air quality will be "superior", development "balanced", social and economic progress "harmonised", and – close to the heart of many Beijingers – "traffic problems solved". All this is to be achieved through "continuously strengthening and consolidated innovative processes", and "guided by the scientific concept of development in an all-round way". It is a masterpiece of Chinese official speak: bombastic opacity shot through with perplexing statistics ("200 measures in 12 successive phases", "64.1% improvement in blue sky" etc.). Supporting the rhetoric is a proposal of remarkable bluntness. It is based on the notion of decongesting the centre by moving people out, but fails to acknowledge market forces shaping real development.

The "scientific concept of development", or more generally, "scientific development", is a favoured term of the current Party leadership, frequently appearing in official statements, and featuring prominently in the Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-2012). Its precise meaning however remains elusive. Over the Olympics, traffic problems will be solved by a system of alternate days, by which cars with even number plates are permitted to drive on one day, and those with odd the next. Government officials, who have long been allowed to remove their number plates, enjoy exemption.

Trials of the alternate days system have been very popular, leading to speculation that it may become a permanent (scientific?) feature. Those who can afford a second car are considering exploiting the potential loophole of owning both odd and even plated vehicles, thus facilitating driving every day.

SWORD IN THE MIST

In China the exalted importance of personal relationships, and the lesser relevance of contracts and statutes, generates an atmosphere of low transparency. Beijing's redevelopment is best known for its ability to cut through lengthy planning and consultation procedures, with closed door discussions resulting in rapid clearances and quick new build. Indeed, when in 2005 the Beijing Urban Planning Museum revealed its enormous 1:750 model of what the city would look like in 2020, residents flocked to see whether or not their homes would still be there. This is the sword-side of a lack of clear rules and regulations. But for all the projects which enjoy terrifically accelerated narratives, there are others which stravage and stumble in the mist.

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BEIJING AIRPORT

An international design competition for the new terminal at Beijing Airport was held in 2003. The Foster + Partners bid was selected in November, and within two weeks they had an office in Beijing. After four weeks the scheme was submitted; the tender after ten weeks; and on the 27th of March 2004 construction started. The 1.3 million square metre terminal and transportation building opened in February 2008. This astonishing pace was achievable only through radical organisational streamlining. At the start of the project, and well aware of the Olympic deadline, Foster + Partners requested that approvals and decision-making processes to be cut down from any number of committees to a single individual. One man, referred to by Mouzhan Majidi as the "commander in charge", slept on site, and approved every step of the project, supported by only six project managers. It's an example of how in Beijing an empowered client can fix a course, and then set 50,000 construction workers into action. Witnessing this, Majidi described himself as 'gobsmacked'.

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GAOBEIDIAN

In 2005 the Chinese furniture and interior design company Boloni bought a lease in Gaobeidian (east Beijing beside the fifth ring road), intending to build a furniture factory. Within one month zoning of the Central Business District (centred around the east third ring road) was extended out, and factory development prohibited. Forced to rethink, Boloni's CEO Cai Ming hit upon the idea of building a "creative district" instead. This found favour with local officials, who granted Cai Ming a 50 year lease on a further adjacent piece of land to expand his proposal. Residents were cleared, the site flattened, and a design competition held. However, progress stalled as Cai Ming was distracted by preparing Boloni for its 2008 IPO on the Hong Kong stock exchange. In the meantime, plans were revealed to build a new exit from the fifth ring road leading down into Gaobeidian, effectively quintupling

the value of the land. Local officials, frustrated by Cai Ming's failure to develop such a potentially lucrative site, applied increasing pressure, eventually forcing Cai Ming to submit a scheme within ten days. But by this time the tide had turned: in spite of Cai Ming's presentation (including a hotel from Ma Yansong), officials withdrew his lease, and opted instead for a partner promising more immediate returns. Cai Ming was reimbursed for the RMB8m he had spent on compensation packages for former residents, and within months Gaobeidian was transformed into a traditional Chinese market. One storey design and speedy construction enabled an opening just in time for the Olympics. Remembering his experience, Cai Ming says: 'For two years I had so much pressure. I had a stone on my heart. Now my heart is heavy. But I am relaxed.'

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798

798 was built as a military electronics factory district – the product of a Maoist era collaboration between the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) and what was then the German Democratic Republic. In its communist heyday 798 was the home and workplace of over 10,000 Beijingers. However in the reform era the grotesque inefficiencies of many state owned enterprises were revealed, leading to the demise of much of the district and the abandonment of numerous factories. A grass roots artists' movement in the 1990s led to their rehabilitation, with many of the original Bauhaus buildings lending themselves to studio and gallery conversions. As 798 gained international recognition as a leading cultural hotspot, it attracted the attention of local government, who were also becoming increasingly aware of the previously overlooked commercial value of the land. 798 is located in north east Beijing, near the Airport Expressway, and as such presents considerable possibilities. The 7 Star Group, a profitable body holding the 798 land lease rights and operating under the auspices of the PLA, was awarded backing by local government for a "Creative Business Zone". A government-sponsored committee was established to liaise between artists and the 7 Star Group, membership of which was reserved exclusively to 7 Star Group representatives. Granting itself committee approval at every step, the 7 Star Group embarked upon the process of ejecting troublesome grassroots artists through selective rent hikes, and garnering profitable development projects. 798 is now widely regarded as Beijing's leading contemporary art district, and is expecting hundreds of thousands of visitors over the Olympic period.

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Chinese-style unilateralism in Beijing is an impressively agile force, responding nimbly to changes in circumstance, and expediting development at opportune moments. Patrick Schumacher, a partner at Zaha Hadid Architects, compares its operations favourably to a European environment in which 'every stone has to be turned

over three times' (a process whose benefits to the final outcome Schumacher remains sceptical of). However, while Zaha Hadid Architects has seen the action of the sword, with the Guangzhou Opera House progressing apace, it has also erred in the mist. Hadid's design for a two million square metre development in south west Beijing collapsed due to problems related to securing land lease rights, the precise nature of which are likely to remain obscure.

The continuous flux that Beijing presents results in both flashes of progress and unpredictable switches. As the above examples demonstrate, strong government can drive projects through to completion, cut them down unexpectedly, or co-opt them just when they thought they were going somewhere else – and all with laconic equanimity. It is no doubt for this reason that architects with experience of China stress the need for caution over a "Wild East" attitude. Most suggest that involvement in China will require a committed on the ground presence in order to comprehend and operate effectively in so opaque a context. For Will Alsop, offices in China are a critical component of being a 'safe pair of hands'. Similarly, Ole Scheeren promotes the importance of integrating the design process, meaning an OMA office in Beijing with a 50/50 ratio of Chinese to international staff.

Contemplating all of this, Alsop talks of China as a 'wonderful place' which is 'very exciting', then adds 'but would you work there or would you not?' Given that he has offices in both Beijing and Shanghai, it is hard for the answer not to be yes. But that he poses the question is telling, and indicative of a larger question mark out lingering in the mist over Beijing itself.

TIANTONGYUAN - DONGXIAOKOU

Unlike say New York or New Orleans, new Beijing is being built right where old Beijing used to be. Voracious market conditions (up to 30% annual increase in property values) have inspired developers and officials alike, and many "traditional neighbourhoods" have given way to office, commercial, and upmarket residential programme. Over the 1991-2003 period an estimated 500,000 Beijing families were relocated from downtown "Transformation Areas". To accommodate this outward flow, enormous volumes of "affordable housing" (i.e. housing within the realms of relocation compensation packages), have been rapidly erected beyond the third ring road, and on into the rural-urban fringe.

At the same time that people are streaming outwards, Beijing is equally subject to terrific inflows in the form of millions of migrant workers. Accommodation for this group is severely constrained by the inflexible *hukou*, or household registration system, by which citizenship rights are tied to place of official residence (for migrants, their home towns and villages). Thus excluded from the formal sphere, migrants frequently rely on the informal sector for their housing needs. Villages around Beijing have rapidly urbanised in response to this demand, with farmers taking advantage of loose building regulations to become the migrant-landlords of ramshackle shanty towns.

Tiantongyuan is a new development to the north of the Olympic District housing 300,000 people (including many relocated families from the demolished hutongs in the centre of Beijing). It offers a clean modern environment, but far out on the 5th ring road, and comprised overwhelmingly of 12 storey residential slabs, it lacks vitality and local services.

Tiantongyuan was built almost at a stroke. Through a home town connection with the then Deputy Head of the Department of Construction and Industry, a single developer learnt early of plans for the Olympic District and supporting infrastructure. Realising the development potential of the land to the north – at the time an unpromising-looking rubbish dump – he quickly bought up leases and built the slabs.

During construction, the nearby village of Dongxiaokou rapidly became a thriving hub for migrant workers. Local residents erected informal housing, and developing through an organic bottom-up logic of its own, Dongxiaokou has now become a source of much needed dynamism in the area. However, restricted by their lack of the appropriate *hukou*, it is difficult for migrants to consider settling on a permanent basis. As a result there is little stakeholder interest in Dongxiaokou, or incentive to invest in a higher quality environment.

As an unauthorized piece of the new urban fabric, Dongxiaokou exists under the continual threat of demolition. While home to many thousands of migrants and their local businesses, it lacks proper sanitation or electrical infrastructure, and the majority of its buildings are thrown up without reference to fire regulations or qualified engineers. As a result, such developments can come to be regarded by local officials as blots upon their jurisdictional maps. In the summer of 2005 Dongxiaokou was partially demolished to make way for a prospective new development. However as soon as the bulldozers left, the peasant construction teams re-entered, and Dongxiaokou was rapidly rebuilt for a new wave of rural-to-urban migrants.

FORBIDDEN CITY? FOREIGNER IN BEIJING

The new Beijing is China's statement of itself to the world. All the more curious then is the ubiquity of foreign influence. Landmark national projects, such as the National Centre for the Performing Arts (Paul Andreu's Egg), the Beijing National Stadium (Herzog & de Meuron's Bird's Nest), the China Central Television Headquarters (Rem Koolhaas' CCTV), and so on, all represent the architectural efflorescence of European designers working in league with Chinese state cash and power. The reform era opened China up to the world, and Beijing to a flood of foreign architecture.

Yet foreignness has penetrated Beijing far beyond the footprints of its new world icons. A deep Europhilia was prevalent in China as it emerged from the grinding poverty of Maoism, and played a prominent role in the development of a new aesthetic. Guo Yue, a celebrated Chinese flutist, remembers how when growing up in the ruins of the Cultural Revolution it seemed as though 'even the moon was rounder in the West'. The sentiment is reflected in many of Beijing's upmarket residential developments, which are typically given such names as *Somerset Fortune Garden* or *King's Garden Villas*, where a sense of luxury, prestige and profitable exclusivity is achieved through an aspirational application of Westernness. Architectural Eurostyling is common, by which otherwise bland tower blocks are adorned with rococo motifs, and incongruous Grecian tympani sit atop twenty seventh storeys. Going several steps further, in 2008 Laffitte Castle opened on the outskirts of Beijing – a full-on US\$50m Versailles built by Jiang You Chen.

That said, Eurostyling is today in decline. Over the last fifteen years a strengthening confidence in Chinese identity has been shifting the matrix of demand, and the sense of what is appropriate for the nation's capital. Sinostyling has risen in prominence, with equally surprising adornments decorating the city's high rise – most notably a Chinese "hat" or curved roof plopped on top of a square-ended tower. In the south west of the city, in order to protect the "Chineseness" of a bureaucratic area, it was mandatory for a spell in the 1990s for new developments to incorporate "Chinese characteristics" into their exteriors. Simultaneously in the east, an expensive low rise development based on the ideal of the Chinese water-garden surfaced beside the embassy district, specially aimed at offering internationals a more "Chinese" residential experience.

But both Euro- and Sinostyle are now giving way to the global sophistication of "modern world architecture". Applications of Western or Eastern heritage are increasingly regarded as being locked in inevitable cycles of emulation, while the contemporary mood is gearing itself toward a more future-orientated desire for technological competitiveness.

Unsurprisingly, the pursuit of international ultramodernism has involved international firms. In part this is a direct product of being a young catch-up economy. China had the fiscal means to mount a world architecture platform before it had the homegrown expertise, and accordingly, many of Beijing's large scale projects were contracted out. Ole Scheeren, when talking of the *auf-bruchstimmung*, or sense of departure, in Beijing of the 1990s, points to the legitimate need for international skills and participation, especially considering the magnitude of the projects proposed. Yet the parameters of architecture are such that its emergence is destined always to be an expression of an era already past. Any major new building is, upon opening, at least several years old. Because of a construction time-lag, the foreign efforts now baring their Olympic leaves to the sun are in fact the yield of an advancing season.

China is ardently cultivating its own architectural expertise, and looking – in this field as in so many others – to develop Chinese firms to rival those of the West. A potentially landmark moment came in 2006 when Ma Yansong, the first Chinese starchitect, won an international competition for a prestigious residential tower in Mississauga, Canada – thus demonstrating how China is learning the skills it was initially importing, and learning to export them too. There is a general feeling among foreign architects in Beijing that internal criticality to foreign projects is growing, and Will Alsop goes so far as to suggest that in ten years time foreign firms may find themselves being squeezed out by local competitors.

As the previous decades of Europhilia come under question, and China develops new possibilities in response to its own unique condition, it is appropriate to ask how it will view the current crop of Western-influenced buildings. In a sense there is no necessary difficulty – after all, is it a problem for the French that Paris' Pompidou Centre was the product of the Italian-British partnership of Rogers-Piano? Patrick Schumacher, partner at Zaha Hadid Architects, is ready to proclaim that there is no longer space for regional architecture in any meaningful sense, and if Beijing has become a platform for world forms, that is because there is no genuine alternative. It may be that in the globalised future of world cities, Beijing will be just as foreign and as familiar as anywhere (everywhere?) else.

Ole Scheeren offers a more intriguing possibility. In its transition from forbidden city to global metropolis, Beijing has had cause to question its previous status quo, and gain exposure to foreign architecture in its most gregarious and hyperbolic incarnations to date. The future role of these buildings will be to inform a fourth phase of building Beijing. Post-emperor, post-Mao, and post-OMA et al, the global projects of today will enter into a

discourse currently emerging among the new generation of Chinese architects. As much as China is now asking questions of the West, the built presence of the West in China will serve to make China ask questions of itself.