

PARADOX AND COMPLEXITY IN SHANGHAI'S 20TH CENTURY ARCHITECTURE

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ABSTRACT

Shanghai is a trading city, exchanging power and commodities down the centuries. In Shanghai, power has shifted between foreigners and Chinese since foreigners first extracted territorial concessions from the Chinese after their defeat in the Opium War of 1842.

The period of the foreign concessions in Shanghai lasted exactly 100 years, from 1843 to 1943. During this period there were three distinct governments in Shanghai, one managing the International Settlement, one the French Concession and the third managing the Chinese city.

The British dominated the International settlement, and their trading houses were built in the style of the empire, displaying their power. The British traders had not come to Shanghai to learn about China, but rather to trade and make money. They did not learn Chinese and did not build with any reference to China. Their homes and business establishments reflected the styles of 'home'.

The missionaries, however, had other agendas, and sought to build in a style that reflected a western understanding of the east. A hybrid missionary style emerged in the early 20th century, using a western style carcass for the building with Chinese ornamentation attached.

Chiang Kai-shek, head of the Chinese Nationalist government, developed the missionary's hybrid architecture for his own political ends. His planning of the City of Greater Shanghai in northern Shanghai, incorporating western planning with a Chinese essence, was an attempt to curtail the powers of the foreign concessions.

This paper explores notions of nationalism, imperialism and internationalism as reflected in the architecture and city planning of early 20th century Shanghai. By concentrating on the city of Greater Shanghai in North Shanghai, developed in the 1930s, the paper seeks to demonstrate how a city's architecture can embody conflicting values and political aspirations over many eras; - how it can be loved, unloved and then loved again!

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Anne Warr is an architect who has lived in Shanghai since 2003. A graduate from the University of New South Wales and the University of York, UK, Anne worked for a number of years in Australia in the field of heritage conservation.

Since living in Shanghai, Anne has written articles for local and international magazines about Shanghai, been commissioned by Watermark Press to write an "Architecture Guide to Shanghai" (published Dec 2007), taught Western Architecture at Tongji University and started a tour guiding business, www.walkshanghai.com. She is one of the founding members of Explore Shanghai Heritage, a volunteer group producing walking tour brochures of little known areas of Shanghai. Anne and her partner, Tim Schwager, run the Shanghai Office of the Australian Architectural firm "AJ+C", www.architectsajc.com.cn.

Shanghai the trading city

Shanghai has been a trading city for more than a thousand years. It was to Shanghai that goods were brought from the Yangtze delta to trade with foreigners, Japan being an early trading partner. Western companies such as the British East India Company began trading with Shanghai in the 17th century. However, the British use of opium grown in India as a trading medium eventually led to the banning of opium by the Emperor and the commencement of the Opium wars which ended when the British sailed their gunboats up the Huangpu River and took control of the city of Shanghai in 1842.

On 29 Aug 1842 the Treaty of Nanking was signed giving the British their desires; -the opening up of 5 treaty ports, Shanghai, Canton, Xiamen, Fuzhou and Ningbo and the cession of Hong Kong to Britain. In for the kill, the United States and France extracted similar concessions from the Chinese government. For the next hundred years Shanghai was to have 3 governments; - the British/American, the French and the Chinese.

The Bund as the centre of British trading power

The Bund was the heart of colonial Shanghai from the moment Britain's first consul, George Balfour, stepped ashore in 1843. It was here that the British 'hongs' established their first warehouse/residences. By the end of the 19th century, Shanghai had become the leading centre of foreign commerce in China. By the 1890s, the move was on amongst the British interests to upgrade, consolidate and extravagantly display the power of their empire. During the early 20th century, the trading houses with a foothold on the Bund were building neo-classical edifices to rival ancient Rome, the HSBC premises, completed in 1924, being the grandest of all. When the Bank's architects, Palmer & Turner, requested a further \$1 million to continue decorating the building, the reply was "spare no expense, but dominate the Bund".

However, when the Cathay (now Peace) Hotel was completed on The Bund in 1929, the Hotel's change of exterior mood from neo-classical to art-deco marked the first chink in the British neo-classical armour, hinting at the fall of empire to come.



Figure 1 The Bund in the 1930s

The internationalization of Shanghai

The completion of the Cathay Hotel for global capitalist Sir Victor Sassoon, ushered in an era of internationalism when Shanghai was to become a world financial centre to rival New York. Shanghai's first American style art-deco skyscraper rose on the Bund just as the American economy was collapsing and Shanghai was about to enter its most dynamic decade. At the end of the 1920s when Europe and America were experiencing a financial depression, ship-loads of unemployed workers arrived in Shanghai seeking their fortune. In three years, Shanghai's foreign population almost doubled, from 36,500 in 1930 to 70,000 in 1933. Architects abandoned the neo-classical styles of the earlier decades and whole-heartedly embraced art-deco and modernism. The internationalization of the architecture mirrored a breaking down of the nationalist enclaves. There was a greater mixing of foreigners and Chinese. Single women, like American journalist Emily Hahn, came to work in Shanghai and wrote openly about their relationships with Chinese men.

Missionaries develop a hybrid architectural aesthetic

The majority of foreigners in Shanghai were interested in trade and profit, with their buildings reflecting initially a desire to replicate 'home' followed by a desire to reflect the growing internationalization of the city. However, certain missionary groups arriving in Shanghai in the early 20th century, notably the YMCA, developed ideas about architecture which reflected a different philosophy towards China.

The YMCA debates the use of a Chinese nationalist style of architecture

In early 20th century United States, YMCAs had sprung up in central business districts as 'manhood factories' where middle-class men would practice Christian behaviour within an efficiently managed building that usually included an athletics club. Outwardly the buildings were finished in a conservative Beaux-arts styling. Around the same time, this 'environmental evangelism' began to be exported to places with existing missionary activity such as China.

In Shanghai, the International Committee of the YMCA debated the correct aesthetics for their new buildings in China; - should they be in a foreign, a Chinese or a hybrid style? Would the Chinese style make the buildings more acceptable to their Chinese users, or would the foreign style bring its own cachet, denoting 'progressiveness'? In the end, aesthetic questions were over-ridden by financial pragmatism, the elaborate roof structures required for the Chinese styles proving financially unacceptable. Thus the majority of the first YMCA structures in China, including the National Committee of the YMCA in Shanghai, were built using western paradigms. Two major exceptions to this were Shenyang's YMCA (1926), designed by Johannes Prip-Møller; and Shanghai's Chinese YMCA (1931), designed by Li Jinpei.

An American architect develops a Chinese nationalistic style of architecture

Architect Henry Killam Murphy first came to China in 1914 working for the Episcopal Board of Missions and the Yale Foreign Missionary Society. He earned a reputation for designing educational establishments throughout China in a style that incorporated elements of traditional Chinese architecture with modern methods and amenities. Buildings completed by Murphy in China in his adapted Chinese architecture include Yenching University Peking, Ginling College Nanking, Yale-in-China Changsha, Fukien University Foochow and Lingnan University Canton. It was the success of these college groups in demonstrating the adaptation of traditional Chinese architecture to modern needs that led to the appointment of Murphy as adviser to the Nanking Government in the design of its new buildings in 'adapted Chinese architectural style'.



Figure 2 Ginling College for Christian Women, Nanking, 1923, H.K. Murphy

The Chinese build a city to rival the foreign concessions

When Chiang Kai-shek proclaimed himself Generalissimo and head of the Guomintang Party in 1927, he ushered in a decade of nationalist rule, known as The Nanjing Decade. During this period, the clashing concepts of nationalism, imperialism and internationalism were being reflected in the architecture of the city. Internationalism from New York was permeating Shanghai in the form of Manhattan skyscrapers and the latest Hollywood movies, while the imperialism of Japan was invading every corner of the city.

From the moment Chiang Kai-shek assumed office he was planning ways to curtail the powers of the foreign concessions. Firstly he consolidated the various local Chinese offices, guilds and chambers of commerce into one Municipal Government of Greater Shanghai – having a single authority over all the Chinese sectors of the city. It was a clear signal that the Chinese could manage Shanghai without foreigners.

A Chinese Nationalist Architecture

In the planning schemes for Nanjing and Shanghai, Chiang Kai-shek stipulated the use of traditional Chinese forms (*Zhongguo guyou zhi xingshi*) for public buildings; - they should employ not only “scientific principles developed from Europe and America” but also the “excellent aspects of the artistic tradition of our nation.” Architecture was to combine a Chinese cultural ‘essence’ with the ‘practical use’ of Western technology; - the famous *ti-yong* combination. In 1929, Henry Killam Murphy was employed as advisor to the Nationalist government because of his development of this concept in his educational colleges.

In 1928, a young Chinese architect, Dong Dayou, returned from studying and working in the United States to take part in Chiang Kai-shek’s vision to develop a sense of Chinese nationalism through city planning and architecture. Dayou’s American Beaux-Arts education at the Universities of Minnesota and Columbia facilitated Chiang’s eclectic design combination. The first Chinese nation state supported the emerging Chinese architects of the 30s whose buildings in turn reflected the aims of the nationalist government.

Not all Chinese architects at the time, however, agreed with this prescriptive design approach. The Professional Journals of the Chinese architectural bodies (*The Chinese Architect* and *The Builder*, both commencing in 1932) debated these design approaches and the use of modernism and the national style. Fan Wen Zhao (Robert Fan) in particular regretted his early designs ‘using western patterns for the body, and Chinese patterns for the roof’, and appealed to other architects to “correct these faults”.

Architect Tong Jun wrote an article in 1937 likening Chinese temple roofs over modern structures to the burdensome pigtail. *“The Chinese roof, when made to crown an up-to-date structure, looks not unlike the burdensome and superficial pigtail.”*

Tong Jun then goes on to describe how a building should be designed... *“Whether a building has a Chinese or modernistic exterior, its plan can only be one thing: a logical and scientific arrangement of rooms according to the most up-to-date knowledge available. Naturally the façade, a product of the plan, could be nothing but modernistic. Any attempt to give it local ‘colour’ will require study, research, and originality.”* (Tong Jun, “Architecture Chronicle”, *T’ien Hsia Monthly* 5, no.3 (October 1937): 308-12.)

The master plan for the New Shanghai

In 1929, a City Planning Commission was established with a brief to draw up a Regional Plan for the new Shanghai; - the first time that an overall plan for the urban development of Shanghai had been formulated. The Commission was staffed with foreign-trained Chinese as well as foreign experts. Shen Yi, with a doctorate in engineering from Dresden Technische Hochschule, was the Chair of the Commission, while Dong Dayou was the architectural advisor. The Plan proposed a new city to be built halfway between the International Settlement and a proposed deep-water port on the Yangzi River, the “Great Port of the Orient” envisioned by Sun Yat-sen to eclipse the treaty ports. According

to contemporary records, the proposals caused a great deal of panic amongst Shanghai's foreign communities.

An international competition was held to design the centre-piece for the new city, the Civic Centre. However, when none of the entries was considered to adequately fulfill the brief's requirements for combining traditional Chinese forms with the 'practical use' of Western technology, Dong Dayou was promoted to Chief Architect to the Planning Commission and went on to design all the major public buildings in the new city.

The plan meshed Beaux-Arts symmetry with Chinese Imperial axes to reflect the required balance of power. The Mayor's Office, or Civic Centre, resided at the north of the main axis, flanked by government bureaus. On the cross axis, the Museum and Library faced each other like ceremonial gateways to symbolize the past and the future. Radiating out from the central axes, were the commercial / industrial and residential districts.

The Greater Shanghai Civic Centre, Shanghai Library, Shanghai Museum and Jiangwan Stadium were built in succession from 1931. The Civic Centre was completed first in 1933, followed by the Museum and Library in 1935, grouped around a twenty-acre plaza and reflected in an artificial pool of water a third of a mile long. The Museum and Library faced each other like ceremonial guardian gateways on either side of the main municipal building, symbolizing the past and the future. The three buildings were based on the ancient Bell and Drum Towers of Beijing. The stadium ensemble, of outdoor stadium, swimming pool and indoor sports hall, was the last group to be completed, also in 1935, sited to the west of the symmetrical grouping.

The planning of the whole area demonstrates elements of both international city planning of the time, and traditional Chinese axial cities. The individual buildings are excellent examples of the '*ti-yong*' aesthetic.

A total of nine public buildings had been planned including a municipal auditorium, and a courthouse. However, the war with Japan destroyed large parts of the area, and put an end to any further public buildings in the new Shanghai.

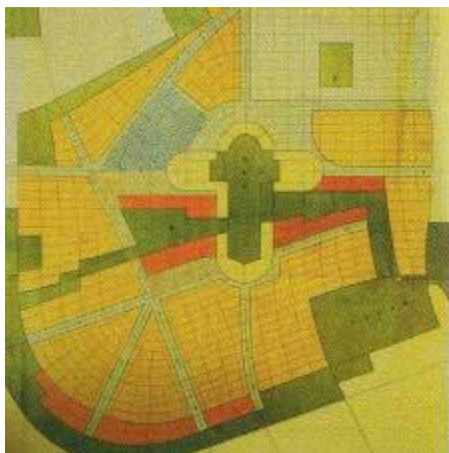


Figure 3 Greater Shanghai Civic Plan 1930

The Greater Shanghai Civic Centre

The Greater Shanghai Civic Centre was sited at the centre of the New Shanghai Plan, at the intersection of the south-north and east-west trunk roads. It faced south across an open plaza, towards the Library and Museum. The four-storey civic building of steel and concrete construction supports a traditionally shaped, green glazed tiled roof, as required by the architectural guidelines for the New City. Internally, the building contained western amenities such as an elevator, lavatories, and water heaters.

Today, the building is used as offices for the Shanghai Gymnastic College, with the plaza used as playing fields, allowing the relationship of the building to its ceremonial plaza to remain evident. Unfortunately the link with the Library and Museum has been severed, with only glimpses of these adjunct buildings being possible from the upper floors.

The former Shanghai museum building

The former Shanghai museum building was sited to the east of the Municipal building, facing west, towards the past. Its form is based on the Drum Tower in Beijing, dating from 1272. The steel and concrete structure, with a traditional two-tiered Chinese hip roof in the centre has an area of 1700 square meters, (3430sq metres of construction area). The main entrance door is arched, emulating the central arch of the Drum Tower. The two side wings project forward of the central tower, forming an entrance enclosure in the traditional pattern of palaces, temples and compounds.

The ground floor of the Museum included an entrance hall, cloakroom, offices, and lecture room, with exhibition rooms on the second floor - ancient bronzes, porcelain and chinaware, jade carvings and royal seals. The entrance hall and exhibition room have red pillars, terrazzo flooring and traditional coloured paintings on the caisson ceiling, which has a central roof-light.

When opened, the first Shanghai Museum displayed the widest range of exhibits in China, particularly in bronzes. In its first year, the Museum hosted the first Chinese Architecture Exhibition, an unprecedented event which attracted many visitors. It is now part of Chenghai Hospital.



Figure 4 Former Shanghai Museum, 1935

The former Shanghai library

The former Shanghai library building was sited on the west front side of the Municipal building, facing east towards the future. Like the Museum Building, it has two flat-roofed wing buildings and a central building topped with a double tiered Chinese roof, also based on the Beijing Drum Tower of 1272. Unlike the Museum Building, the Library has ceremonial balconies over the main central arched entrance and at the two side wings, addressing the entrance courtyard. The southern side wing housed the library stack and reading room and the northern side wing now houses the school's auditorium.

Internally, the library hall, exhibition room and registry office feature red pillars and a decoratively painted ceiling of traditional Chinese design. It is now part of Tongji High School.

The Shanghai Stadium Group

The Shanghai Stadium Group consists of an open-air stadium, swimming pool and indoor sports hall, sited to the south west of the Civic Building.

The indoor sports hall is a face brick, barrel-vaulted, steel-trussed hall with sky-lights. It is a utilitarian structure fulfilling its requirements with simplicity, elegance and economy of materials.

The stadium's large oval sports field is ringed by a masonry wall supporting viewing bleachers on the inside. Two large, covered viewing platforms dominate the centre of the stadium, with shops and facilities for athletes located underneath.

The swimming pool's rectangular structure is surrounded by a concrete block perimeter wall of engaged piers and arched openings. At parapet level a decorative frieze of traditional roof tiles is supported by a 'tou-kung' or bracket set. Decorative cast concrete urns, imitating ancient bronze vessels, adorn the side piers. Originally open to the sky, the pool was covered over in 2006.

These sporting venues were important symbols of the emerging new Chinese man and woman, hosting the Sixth National Sports Meet of the Republic of China in 1935 which prepared Chinese delegates to take part in the 11th Olympics in Berlin, only the second time Chinese athletes had participated in an Olympic Games.

Chinese Aviation Association

Designed in the shape of an aeroplane, this building housed the headquarters of the Chinese Aviation Association, along with an aviation museum and library.

The entrance to the building is through the 'nose' into a three storey circular atrium topped with a circular dome studded with coloured glass tiles in the shape of the Guomintang emblem. Two stairs wrap around the drum leading to the various levels which housed the museum and library. The 'body' and 'tail' section of the plane held the offices of the Association.

The literal interpretation of the Aviation headquarters as an aeroplane extends the existing philosophy of Greater Shanghai's buildings using an external symbolic 'essence' combined with practical functioning spaces. The building also reflects the aeroplane shape of the overall plan for the Civic Centre.



Figure 5 Former Chinese Aviation Association, 1936

Post 1949

After the Liberation of Shanghai in 1949, the new government chose to use the former British Bund as its seat of power, rather than continue with the Nationalist regime's grand city, which gradually became forgotten.

While only fragments of the urban plan are evident today, all the major public buildings have survived and are protected as heritage items, while the whole area was proclaimed one of Shanghai's 12 conservation zones in 2004.

Creative Clustering Spaces, 2005

In 2005, the Shanghai Municipal Government established a planning tool to control development in certain areas containing groups of historic buildings and to give life to these areas by nurturing creative industries within them, seen as 'new economic engines'.

Since the first Creative Clustering Space was created at M50 along Suzhou Creek, a dozen more sites containing clusters of historic buildings have been transformed into Creative Clustering Parks, catering to a targeted 'creative group' such as architects, artists, media etc.. One of the most recent is located adjacent to the Shanghai Stadium Group. Known as the *The Knowledge and Innovation Community (KIC)*, the site is being developed by Shuion Land with masterplan by architects Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, LLP (SOM). The site area of 84 hectares is targeted for completion by 2010.

Conclusion

Shanghai is a city accommodating multiple viewpoints and multiple stories. Each of the city's distinct phases held its own balance of power which left an imprint on the built form. This is a city built on trade and power with an architectural legacy unlike any other. It is a city of contrast and paradox.

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