



MAD Architects

Beijing

MAD is a Beijing-based architectural design studio. In their work, they are examining and developing a unique concept of futurism through current theoretical practice in architectural design, landscape design, and urban planning.

In 2006, MAD was awarded the Architectural League Young Architects Forum Award. In the same year, MAD was shown at the 'MAD in China' exhibition in Venice during the Architecture Biennale, and the 'MAD Under Construction' exhibition at the Tokyo Gallery in Beijing. MAD's conceptual proposal, Super Star - A mobile China Town was exhibited in the Uneternal City of the 11th Architecture Biennale in Venice.

Ma Yansong received his Master of Architecture from the Yale University School of Architecture in 2002. Prior to founding MAD in 2004, Mr. Ma worked as a project designer with Zaha Hadid Architects and Eisenman Architects. He also taught architecture at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. In 2008, one of his built works, Hongluo Clubhouse, was nominated as one of the 100 designs by the London Design Museum. He was also nominated as one of the 20 most influential young architects today by ICON.

DESIGNING THE REALIZABLE UTOPIA

Ma Yansong in interview

David Bauer: Having founded your office in 2003, you were already invited to the Venice Biennale in 2009. Right now you are building all over China and other locations, such as Canada. How would you explain your rapid success?

Ma Yansong: Actually we started in 2005 in China, but right after my graduation in 2003 I got registered in the United States. At that time I didn't have my own office and was still working for other people. After two years we decided to work as an office. During the first two years we were doing competitions just like every other newcomer. You had nothing built yet and no commissions. We weren't successful, I have to admit, until we won the competition for the Absolute Towers in Toronto. That was the first competition out of one hundred that was successful within these two years. The good news was that with this entry we became the first Chinese architects who actually won a major project outside of China. By that time—this was in 2006—the whole country was preparing for the Beijing Olympics 2008, but all of the important design commissions were given to foreign architects. This practice was criticized by many Chinese architects who claimed they were ready to handle important projects in China themselves. So, our victory in this Absolute Tower Competition suggested the opposite and gave rise to a lot of discussion within the Chinese media as well as internationally. People from outside saw in this incident a perfect example that Chinese offices can do something on an international stage.

Quickly after that, the government as well as private investors invited us to different competitions and with that offered us the chances to prove ourselves. That notion changed our situation dramatically. I think we were lucky, because it was a very unique period in the modern history of China. At that time the whole



Fig. 1: The Absolute Towers.

country basically changed. People earned more money and everybody demanded more exciting projects but couldn't find a Chinese architect to do that. It was a big opportunity. We proposed a lot of buildings from then on and some of them became real projects. On the international scene a lot of people pay attention to the Chinese development now, and not only in view of politics. That is mainly where this attention comes from.

DB: Pictures of your work are spread over many different architectural blogs in the net. Do you think that the new media such as the Internet have accelerated the growth of your reputation?

MY: Yeah, I became aware of this growing importance of architectural images. The big advantage of the Internet is that it can be updated very quickly and frequently, so one is able to come up with new images way faster than in the usual print media. With that on the other hand, there comes a growing demand for fresh pictures day by day.

Many young architects who are aware of this either tend to show their daily work and their process or they begin to produce work especially for the Internet.

DB: Since you marked a turning point by winning the Absolute Tower competition, what is there for other young Chinese offices to expect?

MY: Right now, more and more young architects go abroad to study with the intention of returning and running small offices here. So I think it will be more.

DB: At the end of the International Bauhaus Colloquium Kari Jormakka argued that what matters is not architecture as an abstract entity but the actions of architects. With view on moral and social responsibility, how would you see your work and how would you define the role of the architect?

MY: China is full of opportunities and challenges and after I graduated and decided to come back I wanted to take them on. Challenge means that you have a problem and as an architect you have the chance to propose what you think is best

Fig. 2: Beijing 2050. Floating Island over the central business district.



or at least better. Architecture for me is just a language to express my inner interests and give my opinion. If I weren't an architect I would still have my opinion and an urge to say what I think about society.

Especially in China, young architects have a lot of responsibility because we actually have a lot of power, more power than architects in other countries, because many politicians or decision-makers in China give orders to architects and expect architects to be their tools. If we have a group of mature architects who are able to strongly express their own opinion and negotiate differences within ideologies, politicians might listen to them. If we reach that point, we can on the one hand help to make a decision and also use our power critically.

Young architects, however, are always looking for opportunities, because they are not old enough to be that mature.

To sum this up, I think we are aware of our responsibility and trying to find our way to transfer this into our practice to make our ideal society happen.

DB: That is a good point. You call your Beijing 2050 Project in your publication Mad Dinner, a "realizable Utopia". Do you see this just as a platonic proposal, or do you regard this as an upcoming building project? Could you describe how you propose a solution for different social agendas with these examples?

MY: We did this Beijing 2050 Project in 2006 without any commission. It was just an expression of the daily problems we were facing. In the project we proposed a new Tianen Square, covered with a forest, as well as a Floating Island above the dense city center. At last we designed bubbles in the old historical, the Hutong quarter. I have been talking about those concepts in many interviews with the local media before, because we tried to transfer our thinking into images, so that more people in the public could easily understand it. Then we showed it in Venice, to gain attention for the different problems at an international level. At that time everyone was focusing on the Olympic buildings and the massive urban change in China. To be clear, I didn't think of realizing these big changes. The bubbles, one could say,



Fig. 3: Beijing 2050. Bubble occupying a historical courtyard.

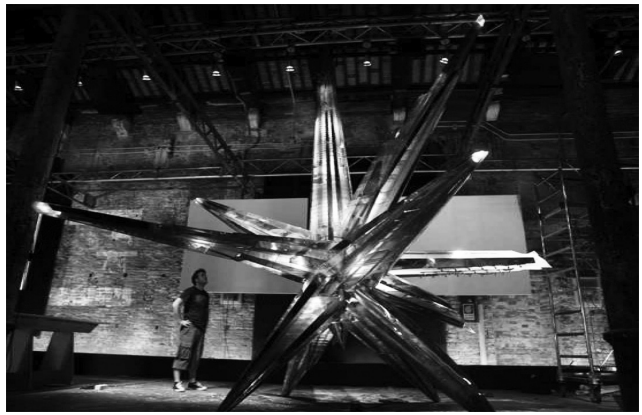
might have been a realistic issue but were only there to point out the problem of the dilapidation of the quarter. It was mainly to raise awareness and I was happy enough after that proposal got so much media attention. When I finish my drawing and can show it to people, it is already perfect to me, because others can see the new possibilities and from that point they can discuss it as an issue.

The interesting thing was that after we showed it, more and more people wanted to help us realize these things. One man who owned a courtyard wanted to build one of those bubbles, and told us, “Why do we have to wait until 2050? We can do it right now!” I was also asked by some officials to show Tianen Square Forest to the congress. My way of thinking is, that if you show your proposal and if it is the better thing for the city, more people will help you to get it through.

DB: Another projects of yours, the Superstar, was shown at the Biennale. Does it also illustrate a utopian ideal?

MY: I would call Superstar an artwork. It is not an architectural proposal. In 2006 the Chinese pavilion showed this strange installation with a very historical topic. At that point I thought that this had nothing to do with the real contemporary China and its actual issues. At the same year the Danish pavilion won the Golden Lion award. The funny thing is that the whole exhibition was dealing with urban issues in modern China. In 2008 we wanted to make an explosion in a literal way. The star was our explosion. It is also called a modern Chinatown, because in many ways it feels like contemporary China. The power and the boom we have are very massive. Basically it was a design out of context, in a physical as well as a historical and cultural sense, something we could put it in everywhere we wanted. This was our impression of the real China, which is why I would call it an artwork rather than an architectural project. Of course, it looks very much like a city, which is probably why some people refer to utopian ideas from the 60s. It has nothing to do with a city though; more with the issue we want to raise out of the context. That might be a bit unclear.

Fig. 4: The Superstar on display at the 11th Venice Architecture Biennale.



DB: Would you consider yourself a Chinese architect or rather a global one?

MY: I talked with the German architect Jürgen Mayer H. He said that there are no jobs for him in Germany and so he is mainly building internationally. For me it is similar. Of course, like I earlier said, I try to pick up as many jobs as possible in China, but I would like to build more projects around the world. The project in Toronto was the first one, but we did proposals for Dubai and Malaysia as well. They almost became real, but eventually did not go through. Next month I will be in Belgium where we were offered a very small project. But to be honest, Europe or America is full of good architects. Nobody has ever heard of Chinese architects and few would call a Chinese office with a job offer. So you have to work quite hard to build up an international reputation. With China, it is the opposite: the Chinese want to give their jobs to foreign offices.

DB: Was that the reason why you decided to go to Yale for your education? After all it is one of the most prestigious universities in the world. Could you say a little more about your reasons for studying in the States and how it may have contributed to your career?

MY: When I graduated from college, there were no private offices in China. All architectural offices at that time were huge companies owned by the government. As a young graduate you had two chances: Either you work for them or you go to a graduate school. So the only choice I saw, in order to gain a good education, was to go to another country. I didn't actually care which school. On my graduation day, the Dean of Yale, Robert Stern, drew a really impressive conclusion. He said that from this day on each and everyone of us students has to forget what we have learned in this school. I try to make this clear. What he meant was that in school there are so many good teachers and masters, which are all fully aware of their skills and attitudes. So they argue and fight each other all of the time. In order to get through all of this, you have to establish your own judgments from this environment. The year before I worked with Zaha Hadid. She is a very independent and strong character and she likes to transport this attitude to her students. She



Fig. 5: The Superstar as a contemporary, mobile Chinatown

was the first person, which introduced me to contemporary art. So apart from all architectural education, that was a big step. Furthermore, as one probably knows, in China you always get told that the individual shouldn't be so special and different. But from my present point of view I would say that architecture is about the expression of you personal point of view and of your beliefs. Without that there will be no good architecture.

DB: If you look back at your work, what does it tell you about yourself and your beliefs?

MY: I have to say I haven't defined them yet, but I am improving. I still have a lot of different interests, such as nature and many other things. I think I am quite lucky that at my age I have not yet finalized myself.