

OVERSEAS CHINESE DESIGNERS



Interview by DESIGNING and DESIGNERS in Shanghai, China - 2009

Q: As a Chinese-American who has worked in USA for many years, but you are originally from Hong Kong. You went to the USA to study when you were still a teenager, and then attended University of California at Berkeley, and then Harvard Graduate School of Design. What was your experiences like? What are the strongest impressions you got from the two schools respectively?

EC: The undergraduate architecture program at UC Berkeley did not offer me much in term of my interest in design. The school was much influenced by the writings of Christopher Alexander from the 1960s. The studio classes put a lot of emphasis on space planning and social issues, and less on aesthetics and form-making. On the other hand, UC Berkeley was an excellent University with amazing academic resources, so I took advantage of it and enrolled in a lot of liberal arts classes outside the architecture department. I took classes in the

art department, in physical sciences, in geography, in foreign languages, and I even took a philosophy class with the late French theorist Michel Foucault who was teaching at UC Berkeley at the time. All those classes have given me a very solid foundation for my architectural studies later.

Harvard, on the other hand, was very design oriented and theoretical. When I was a student there, I.M. Pei's partner Henry Cobb was the Chairman of the architecture department. He introduced many internationally well-known architects and thinkers to teach at the Graduate School of Design. We were exposed to a wide spectrum of discourses, from "Classicism" to "Post-Structuralism". There was a lot of energy at the studio, and we often had very heated debates and discussions during the final reviews. It was really an inspirational time to be a student there. In retrospect, I am very fortunate to have the advantage of studying architecture at both UC Berkeley and at Harvard. Their programs couldn't have been more different, but consequently that has prepared me to be a better designer.

Q: We heard that your thesis was a building on the Moon, is that true? What was your concept behind that?

EC: During the last semester at Harvard, the majority of my classmates decided to make their thesis project an investigation of a building type, such as community center, concert hall, or skyscraper. But I thought that I would always have the opportunity to work on buildings after my graduation, and that the thesis semester was a unique opportunity of to do something more conceptual and personal. So I made my thesis project as a "Monument to Christopher Columbus". It was conceived as two structures, one on top of the Santa Monica hills overlooking Los Angeles, the other one in Outer Space. The project was not literally about Christopher Columbus who discovered America, but it was in part my homage to LA, which symbolized the "New World"; and in part an exploration of how to make architecture for this generation who, I think, has been "uprooted" from tradition. I invented an elaborate narrative program for the monument, which was a hub for the

“Information-Age”. Although the whole project was a fantasy, it anticipated the arrival of the Internet, but I did not know it then. Obviously, my thesis was very controversial, and I received mixed reviews. Some professors really loved it, but others did not know how to make sense of it. But in my mind, it was a very important learning process, and I continue to develop some of the same ideas in my work even today.

Q: You have worked on architectural projects in various countries and regions in the world, including USA, France, Switzerland, Spain, Korea, Turkey and Hong Kong. How do you see the relationship between the individual buildings and the diverse urban and cultural context?

EC: One of the challenges of being at Gehry Partners is to work internationally. In a sense, it is not a luxury but a product of today’s global economy. When we begin a project in a foreign country, we try to spend as much time as possible with the people to understand their culture and the context. And I like to read their literature, listen to their music, and look at their arts to learn and be inspired by their tradition. However, when we finally design the building, we do not believe in the historicist approach of copying the existing architecture or context. We think that’s like Disneyland, and it is condescending to the local culture. It would be much more meaningful to try to create something new, something in the spirit of our time, from our understanding of the place. Instead of mimicking what already exists, we prefer the new architecture to compliment the old, like two friends or two different generations having a passionate conversation.

I think that one of the best examples of this approach is our building in Prague, in the Czech Republic. We had a spectacular site by the river, near the old center of the city. Instead of copying the historic styles of the building facades along the river, we decided to re-interpret the window pattern in a contemporary way by creating a new rhythm with the windows for our building. Then we noticed that the majority of the surrounding buildings had towers at their corners, so we decided to respect that tradition and mark our

own street corner with our own tower. This idea led us to creating two towers, one solid and the other one in glass. They look like two dancing figures from a distance, and the locals refer to them as the “Fred and Ginger” building, in reference to Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers from the old Hollywood musicals. I believe that with this project, we have created a very special building that does not overwhelm the existing context, but at the same time it also gives a new meaning to the city.

When we first presented our design for the Guggenheim in Bilbao, it was equally controversial. I remembered the locals thought that it looked like a spaceship from outer space had just landed in their city. But as the project was under construction, they slowly began to understand its relationship to the city. They started to see that in fact, we have carefully considered how the museum would fit into the urban context from different perspectives. By the time the Museum was finished, and perhaps due to its enormous popularity and success, the locals finally embraced it with open arms. Now, they call it a “friendly alien who has been living in their community for the past 500 years.” I take that as the highest form of compliment, that we have created something for the community that is both original and yet familiar in the consciousness of their culture.

It is understandable that because of the appearance of most of our projects, people tend to have a preconceived notion that we just “throw the design together very quickly” without any consideration or respect to the existing context. But we have learnt that if we share the design process with the local community by showing them our struggle with the many, many models we have studied before we arrived at the final design, they tend to be more open to accepting something new and different from what they are used to. And that’s what we accomplished in Prague and in Bilbao.

One of the pleasures of working in different cities is to re-visit the buildings after they are completed to see how they are being used. When we design the buildings, we usually envision them in a certain way. But most often, the

buildings tend to take on their own lives after they have been inhabited. For example, we designed the Guggenheim Bilbao for mostly abstract minimalist art. But since its inauguration, the museum has hosted exhibitions on traditional Chinese Art, Motorcycles, and the fashion of Giorgio Armani. It has been surprising and extremely enlightening to witness the versatility of the galleries. Not to mention that very often, we have made many friends in the local communities during the creation of the buildings. So going back to visit the projects from time to time is like returning home to visit old family and friends. It is very rewarding.

Q: You have worked on many cultural projects at Gehry Partners, most notably the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. How do you look at the relationship between architecture and art?

EC: Even though I am interested in the artistic aspect of architecture, I think that it is important to make a distinction between architecture and art, in the sense that I have never fantasize myself being an artist. As much as I enjoyed drawing when I was a kid, I have never wanted to become a full time painter. And as an architect, I do not consider myself an artist by any means. I remember that the pop artist Claes Oldenburg once said that his work is not architecture, "because it does not have windows." I suppose what he meant was that architecture has to incorporate a dimension of functionality whereas art is freed from that. I may have a more liberal view on function, but I am definitely interested in how people interact and related to forms and spaces. What is even more interesting to me is the relationship between architecture and the arts, and to explore it with an architectural sensitivity.

Since I began working for Frank, I hope that I have been truthful to my commitment to an "Artistic Practice" in architecture. I am fortunate enough to have worked on many cultural projects, which have allowed me to discover and to learn from the other artistic disciplines. And with the development of digital technology, I think that the traditional boundaries between the different creative professions have been dissolved. It is becoming easier and easier for

architects to engage in the other artistic fields, and vice versa.

Q: How do you find the source of an ongoing inspiration of architectural design and maintain lasting creative vigor?

EC: In the past few years, I have been involved with a class on “Creativity” at the Wharton School of Business Management at the University of Pennsylvania. It is ironic that there seems to be more interest in creative thinking within the business community than in the architectural profession. They have come to recognize that “creativity” and “entrepreneurship” goes hand-in-hand in succeeding in the new business model of the digital age. One of the topics for discussion is “Where do we find inspiration?” I don’t think that inspiration comes like a “light bulb” as some people tend to think. I believe that one finds inspiration by paying attention to the little details in our daily lives. It’s about developing the awareness and being conscious of the beauty in the ordinary and the mundane, like when Marcel Duchamp saw the sculptural potential in a urinal, or when Picasso imagined the bicycle seat as the head of a bull. I think that this is what distinguishes our modern sensitivity from the classical frame of mind.

Q: In July 2007, you designed an installation for the French artist Sophie Calle in Luxembourg – European Capital of Culture 2007. Do you consider that work as a combination of architectural design and visual art? Could you tell me how you manage to combine other form of art with architectural design?

EC: In the past few years, I have had the opportunity to venture into exhibition design and set design, collaborating with very creative people in film, theater, and the visual arts. For example, working with film director William Friedkin on the opera sets for *Ariadne auf Naxos* several years ago was an incredible learning experience. We had to plan out every scene for the opera and imagine how the singers and performers would interact with the sets in advance. The process was not too different than designing a building, but since the production had to come together in 6 months, everything had to

happen really quickly. In a sense, I see set design and exhibition designs like the “Art of the Motorcycle Exhibition” for the Guggenheim and the installation for Sophie Calle in Luxembourg as research projects. They are great ways to experiment with ideas of space, form, materials and fabrication. But more importantly, they are a lot of fun, and I hope that I will have other opportunities like that in the future.

Obviously, I will continue to explore ideas with the more traditional architectural projects like museums or theaters, but why not also design the sets and visual effects for a movie, or the virtual environment of a video game? Architects have always engaged in designing furniture for their buildings, but why not also design the everyday objects that are associated with a younger generation, like snowboard, wetsuit for surfing, a new iPod, or maybe even a new car brand for China? Since I spend so much time traveling, I would love to re-imagine the interior of an airplane cabin, or maybe even to design a space station - that would be my dream.

Q: As a Chinese-American born in Hong Kong, have you ever been confused with your identity? And how does your Eastern cultural background impact on your career?

EC: In my mind, the question of identity is not a matter of being Chinese or American. I think that it is more important to know who I am as a person. And since who we are is shaped by our experience in life, the search for identity is, in a way, about living and experiencing our lives to the fullest, and letting our creativity and imagination go as far as possible.

In this regard, I feel very fortunate that I have the benefits of both Eastern and Western cultures. I am very proud that I have sensibilities such as diligence, patience, discipline, and rigor in my DNA. I think that these virtues are uniquely Chinese. At the same time, I think that my experience in the US has also encouraged me to develop a curiosity for the unknown, an open mind for new ideas, and the faculty to express who I am as an individual. I hope that

the work I do embodies and reflects the coming together of these two spirits.

I think that for every artistic person, the creative process is inevitably a form of soul searching for his or her identity. I certainly see my own development as a long personal journey to find myself. Architecture just happens to be the vehicle I use for that journey. I know that I am just at the beginning of this search. I don't think that I have found myself yet, but I am committed to continuing with this search for the rest of my life.

Q: What are your major concerns in architecture field of Mainland China? Do you have any plan to work on projects in Mainland China?

EC: In the spring of 2007, I was invited to Beijing to give a lecture. It was my first time to Mainland China, so I thought that after the lecture, I would visit the Great Wall, the Forbidden City and a few other historic sites, and then I would come home. But it turned out that the experience has energized and inspired me in the most profound way.

Obviously, I am impressed by the enormous scale of Beijing, it's dynamism, and it's transformation into a world-class city as sophisticated as Paris, London or New York. From the western media in the past decade or so, I am familiar with the economic development in China. But I am the most touched by the will power of the Chinese people, and by how they have managed to make it all happen in such a short amount of time. It proves that if there is a strong determination, one can accomplish anything. Since then, I have returned to Beijing several times. I feel an instant affinity to the country; I am definitely going to travel more frequently to China in the future, to see its cities, its landscapes, and most importantly, to get to know its people. I think it is still premature for me to understand the influence it had on me. One thing is certain; I feel that I am now a better and a more motivated person, and hopefully I am a better architect as a result of my visit to Beijing.

Despite the impressive building boom in China, it seems that the majority of

buildings that have been constructed are imports of corporate architecture from the West. This is perhaps the consequence of the incredible speed of China's development; that it has not taken the time to find an architectural language that is different than what is already happening in the rest of the world. In this regard, I see great opportunities for Chinese Architects to look within our own culture to develop an expression that is inspired by our artistic tradition, yet captures the spirit of China today.

Since my first trip to Beijing, I have been very interested in working in China. But Gehry Partners has not had the opportunity of working there. We have heard from some of our colleagues that it is difficult to establish a contractual agreement in China that is compatible with our legal practice here in the US. In addition, most design architects working in China do not participate in the construction documents phase of the project, so it would be a huge challenge to maintain aesthetic control during the construction. I am optimistic that in the not too distant future, we will be able to find a common ground between the architectural process in China and the US that will allow me to play a role in shaping the architectural landscape in China.

Q: What is your current thoughts on architecture? Would you like to share it with our readers?

EC: I feel very, very lucky that my experience at Frank's office has allowed me the luxury of exploring the relationship between architecture and the various artistic disciplines. We have had the privilege of making architecture for many important institutions and companies. But I think that since 9-11, and especially in the current post-2008 economy, I feel that we should take advantage of the situation to rethink the priorities and the values of what we do as a profession.

In this context, I would like to be more involved in projects that are perhaps more modest in scope but have a stronger connection with the local communities. For example, I am very proud to have been involved in the

design of a small clinic for cancer patients in Denmark. I realize that after all these years at Frank's office, most of my projects have been so-called "iconic" buildings, and I have not had a lot of experience in urban and landscape design. So in the future, I would also like to learn how to make our cities and parks better with more projects on the making of public spaces.

In the past few years, there has been a lot of interest in the profession about "Sustainable Architecture". In my mind, the real issue is not so much about "sustainability" *per se*, but we should focus instead on the day-to-day challenge of reducing the enormous "waste" and "excess" that our consumer society has created. I think that a problem like "Climate Change" is a direct consequence of the waste in our everyday lives, from our food consumption, to our industrial productions, to our energy dependence, and to the way we build our environments. Over the years, as our society has been so accustomed to the misconception of "Excess equals Progress", this situation has deteriorated to be worse and worse. But now more than ever, we must change the way we live, and seriously commit ourselves to reducing the excess that we produce. I am dedicated to working in this direction in the future. I do not think that it is about being different or being reactionary to a trend, but it is really about being truthful to who we are, and to finding the "Essence" of our humanity. All the great artists are individuals who express their values and visions with their creations. And I hope that I could accomplish that very same goal in my life.

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