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QINGYUN MA

Ma has created several award-winning projects with MADA SPAM, including the Longyang residential complex in Shanghai and the Silk Tower in Xian. He has also worked on the Central China television headquarters (CCTV) in Beijing and the Stock Exchange in Shenzhen. Ma has taught architecture in China at the University of Shenzhen, Tongji University, Shanghai, and Nanjing University. In Europe, he has taught at the Berlage Institute (Netherlands), the ETH (Zurich), in Paris, Germany and in the US, at Harvard University, the University of Pennsylvania and Columbia University. In October 2006, Qingyun became the new Dean of the University of Southern California School of Architecture.

Project for the South China Science and Technology University, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, 2008.

Qingyun Ma's insight into urban architecture is influencing a whole generation of architects. During his recent trip to Austin, Texas, we caught up with him to ask him about his concept of architecture and what he calls "new urbanism".

Qingyun Ma
Architecture,
breaking new ground

How would you define architecture and the work of an architect?

Qingyun Ma: Architecture is a set of knowledge that goes beyond perimeters, but must work within those perimeters. Architecture itself has no limits. Architecture is a social intelligence that specifies or commands the way we build. I think the job of architects is primarily to make good buildings and good spaces for different purposes. It goes beyond physical space and into the heart of the landscape. That is always a central part of architecture. It goes from very small objects to very large projects.

What is "architecture without boundaries"?

Q. M.: Following on from the point that architecture is a knowledge of sorts, the primary essence of knowledge is its ability to reinvent or explore new territories. By combining and recomposing knowledge, you discover new territories. That's how I see architecture without boundaries: it's about dealing with the way that knowledge is formed and reformed, between non-knowledge and the unknown composition of non-knowledge.

In what way is the SPAM (strategy, planning, architecture, media) approach developed by your practice innovative?

Q. M.: You take architecture as the main, core business of ours, but it can't act on its own. It has to go beyond that to the sphere of planning. But urban planning cannot start until you have strategic clarity. That is not enough, either. Architecture in the end is expression, a message. It cannot limit itself to construction. It has to extend itself and be part of a much larger field.

Could you explain why and how the social, political and cultural context influences urban planning in China?

Q. M.: First, China still has a social structure that, by and large, is authoritarian and central, top-down. That strengthens planning, because planning by definition is top-down, strategic-level thinking. It needs assertive decision-making. Secondly, there is the current situation of the so-called emerging market. That is really new. The impatience of Chinese society is a consequence of this new round of globalization. It is a unique phenomenon in China, because it is very fast, very experimental. This very dogmatic government and society is embracing tremendous experi-

ments in architecture. The third aspect is flexibility, which is related to the sense of risk-taking, and the fact that Chinese society is accepting change very quickly, of course. That is something totally unprecedented in Chinese culture.

Why is it so different from what is happening in Europe or North America?

Q. M.: One problem of Western society is the significance and monumentality of buildings and architecture in general, the sense that everything has to be preserved. The whole education system in the West teaches architects to build to last. That has really proved to be problematic. Why preserve today's achievements to sacrifice tomorrow's opportunities? Chinese culture believes in the future; it doesn't look back to the past.

To what extent is the Chinese approach to town planning unusual?

Q. M.: In China, urban spaces are not really defined as private, public or commercial. There's an element of improvisation in everything. A place can be public one day and private the next. Since space is not defined by its function, cities are flexible and people can use every tiny corner of them. ■

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