

ARCHITECTURE *in* CHINA:

*speed, change,
movement & dynamism!*

GLASS asks four *leading architecture practices* to share their experiences of designing for CHINA, amidst *excitement, modern tensions* and *high economic expectations*

SPEED! – By David Gianotten, partner in charge of OMA Asia
Building fast has characterised the architectural scene of China since the country adopted a more open approach to the rest of the world in the late 1970s. For instance, the Shenzhen International Trade Building, completed in 1985, had a speed of construction of 3 days per floor, and the often cited Diwang Building, completed in 1996 in the same city, had a speed of construction of 2.75 days per floor. The list of buildings designed and constructed ‘within a blink of an eye’ could go on and on – a few figures can reflect the bewildering speed of development in China and the forces that drive the construction industry forward.

In 2010, the urban population in China approached 600 million. With an annual rate of urbanisation of 2.3%, this number is expected to increase to 700 million in 2015. Consequently, a rapid architectural and construction velocity is required in order to cater for the pressing housing needs. The cumulative new residential floor space has augmented ten times in the past ten years. From 2012 until 2030, China would have built 40 billion m² of gross floor area (GFA) – the equivalent to ten times Manhattan’s current

number. Such growth is unprecedented and was not even accomplished in the Middle East countries at the time of their boom.

In 2010 the construction spending of China had already surpassed the USA and this year is quickly catching up with Europe. The building investment grew 17% per annum over the last 20 years, rising from \$50 billion in 1990 to approximately \$1,100 billion in 2010. This latter amount represented 20% of its nominal gross domestic product (GDP) – almost twice the world average. In contrast, Europe, following the 9% decline in 2009, has seen its construction spending decline by 3% in 2010. However, this construction bonanza has seen the emergence of tension and economic speculation. More cases of corruption have arisen as construction spending increases. Among all the corruption cases in China, one-third involve the construction industry. According to a 2003 survey of the Chinese Ministry

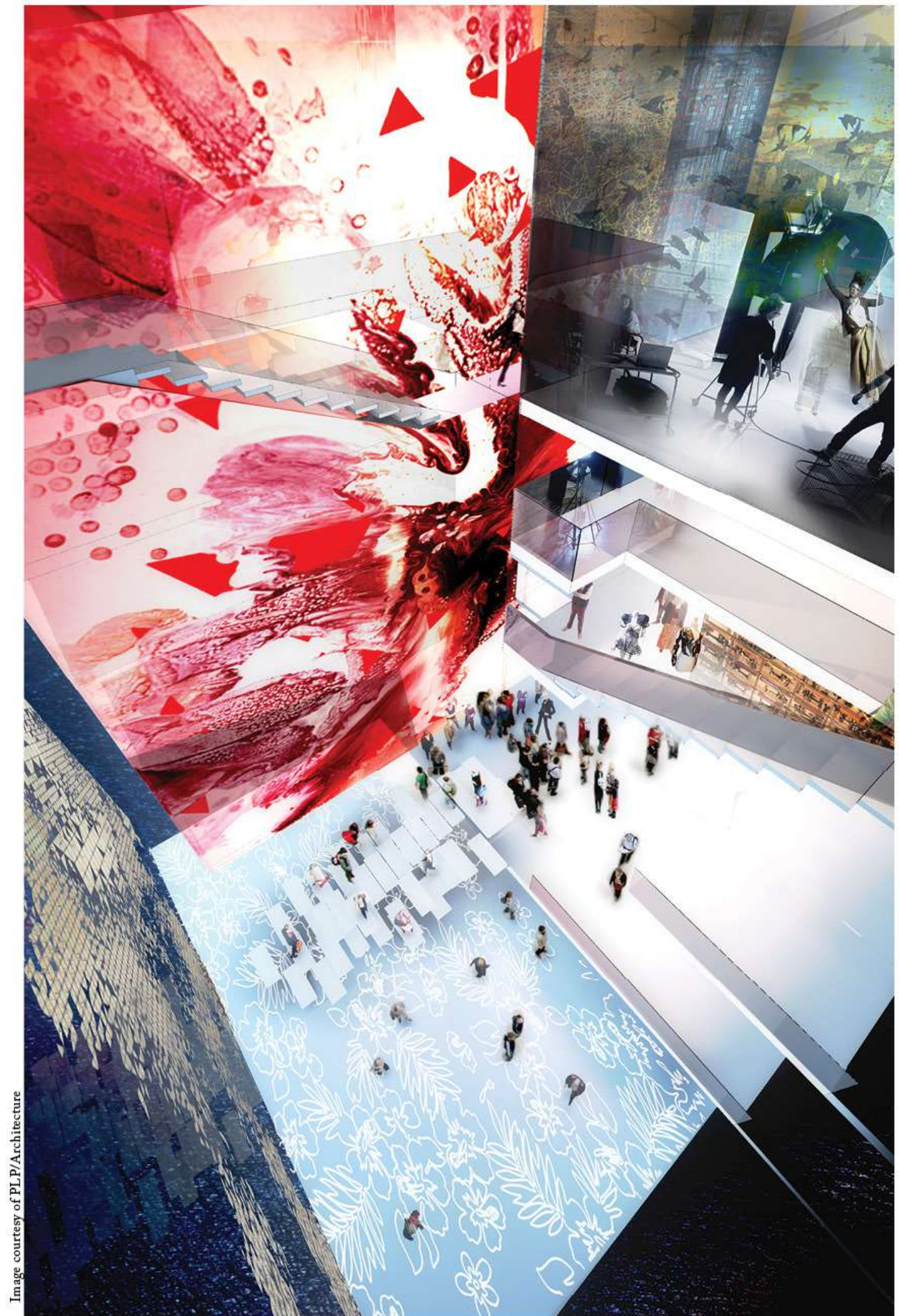


Image courtesy of PLP/Architecture

N+ Masterplan, Ningbo, China, 2011-2012, PLP/Architecture, UK



Panoramic view of Pengshui Central District, Chongqing Municipality, China

Photograph by Ruan Dan
Photograph courtesy of AQSO architects office

of Land and Resources, over 11,000 corruption cases in 2002 were related to land transaction – the area involved was 28,410 hectares. As a result, 771 government officials were punished and 168 were held legally responsible.

While corruption normally is a cause for lament, the speed of change in China is still bewildering. The Western world is yet to fully understand and develop strategies to cope with the new status of China; therefore, it becomes crucial to understand China's cultural and historical context. This development began in main cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen, designated as pioneering centres. There, the communist approach was almost

abandoned, enabling freedom and consequently promoting fast economic growth. In addition, in the last decade other minor cities in China, such as Shenyang, Xiamen and Fuzhou, are also developing fast.

OMA's experience in China has led us to believe that designing urban synergy could be more useful than drawing solid urban plans in the country's context. This applies to both main and secondary cities. In 2010, we participated in the development of the Qianhai Port City project in Shenzhen. There, we planned a 1,800 hectare multi-use hub in 5 months. Given the large scale and the limited timeframe for development, the project had to be rooted in its context in order to achieve effectiveness and significance. Hence we proposed not to remove every existing construction already present on site, but to literally plan in between these areas. In this way, the new is connected with the old and, subsequently, 30 years of history of the city would be represented within the overall plan.

For the developing city of Suzhou, OMA made a plan of 4,200 hectares. The challenge of the project lay in incorporating the existing site into the existing planning that combined six previous masterplans made by different designers. In six weeks, we analysed the history of the area and decided not to present an urban plan with new architecture but an urban strategy composed of different layers with different qualities, from required infrastructure to special recreational zones. As such, a framework for residential, commercial, leisure and other areas was outlined. This scheme also envisages the participation of different developers at different phases of the project, while maintaining coherence in the overall plan.

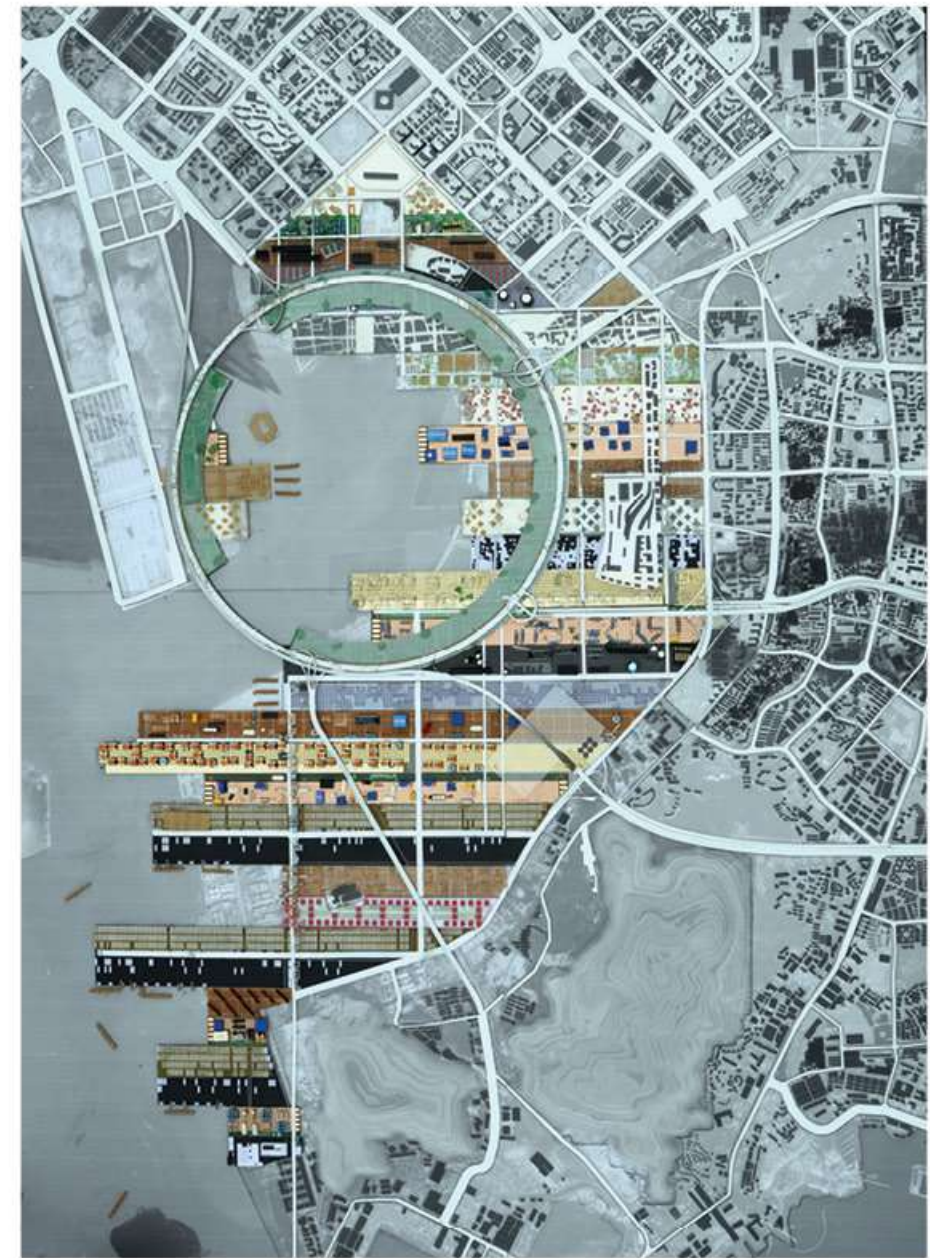
These two cases exemplify how quickly planning decisions are made in China. Although this could easily be attributed to the stereotypical notion of its political system, the planning decision-making frameworks of China and the UK actually share a common aspect: in both places, the

central government – the Ministry of Construction and the Ministry of Land and Resources in China, and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in the UK – is responsible for providing planning directions. The provincial and municipal levels in China, the equivalent of the regional and local organisations in the UK, come at a later stage with more solid development plans, organisation charts and details for implementation. In both countries, only a handful of people make the final decisions on the planning of cities.

The speed of construction processes in China has advantages over the democratic system in Western countries. Although in the latter approach careful attention is paid to the public, bureaucratic procedures and public consultation could turn architectural design into extensive political manoeuvres that do not allow timely decisions. However, a democratic process of planning has the potential to be far from bureaucratic. For instance, in 2000, a fireworks factory exploded in Roombeek, a suburb of Enschede in Holland, destroying one-third of the city. The urgency for redevelopment led to a democratic yet effective process of planning where everybody that lived in the area before the disaster had the right to return, and, similarly, everybody had the right to speak up about their needs and desires. The design of a masterplan with cultural, education and commercial centres was finished and approved in 2002. This example shows that high quality architectural projects can also be delivered democratically, at high speed.

In Chinese, the term crisis has a double meaning: danger and opportunity. If the economic difficulties that Europe is experiencing are seen as threatening to the construction industry, then we should also be able to identify opportunities. Perhaps this moment is the turning point to explore the democratic process of planning in order to reinvent the processes of building and development in the Western world. Can we learn from the immediacy of China?

Speed in architecture, in the most literal manner, is the floor area constructed divided by time. Yet if architecture is conceived as the process of space planning, from initial design stages to its physical construction, then a lot more variables could be added to that definition. Hence building quick becomes not only achieving a huge floor area within a short period of time, but producing spaces that satisfy users in terms of quality and their possible engagement in the process of design. The exploration of this alternative definition of speed in architecture is in process in China. This shows that many different factors that relate to the speed in architecture are yet to be understood and explored in other parts of the world.



Qianhai Port City Masterplan, Shenzhen, China, 2010 OMA, The Netherlands

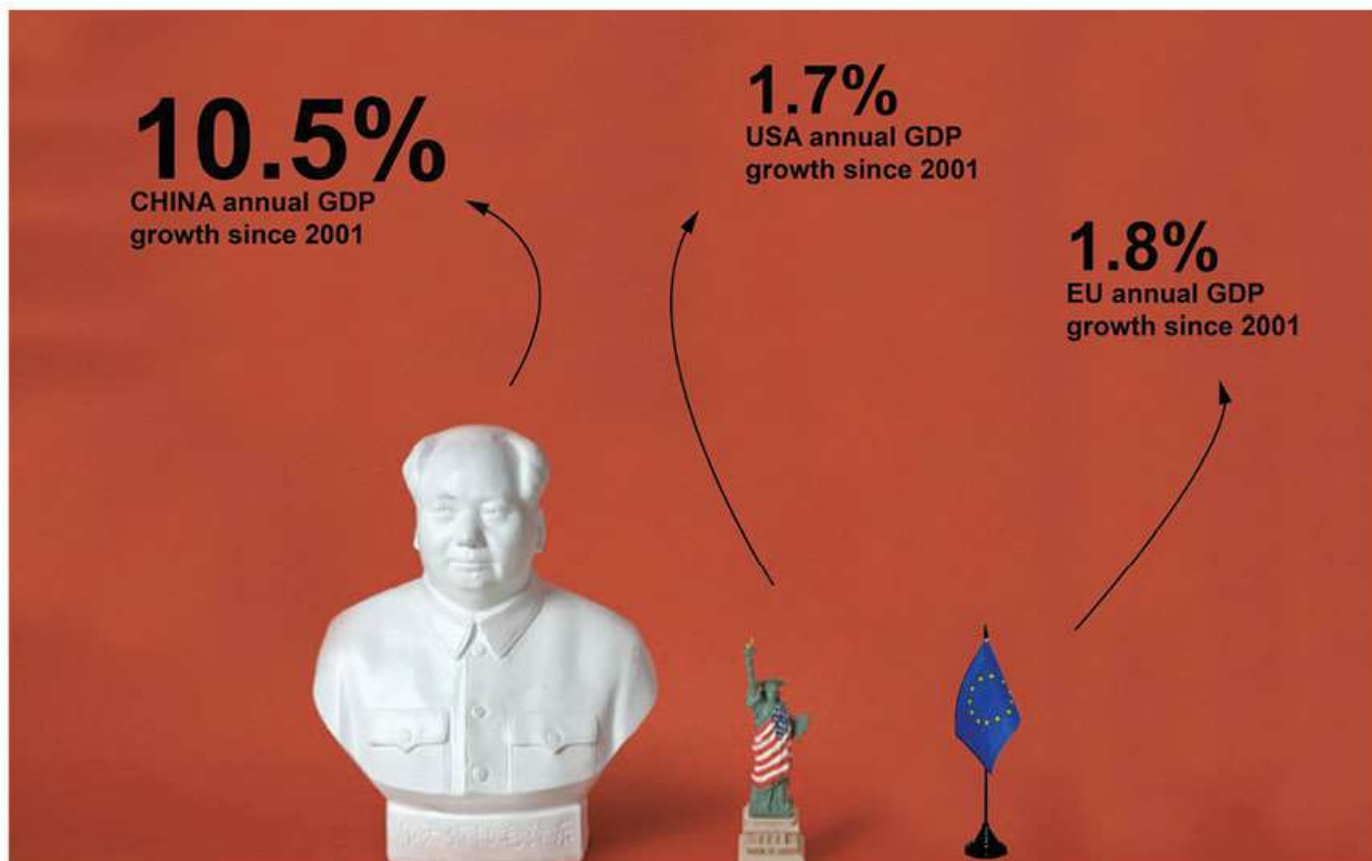
Image courtesy of OMA

In 2010 the
construction
spending of CHINA
had already *surpassed*
the USA and this
year is *quickly*
catching up
with EUROPE



*Better Place Visitor Centre, Guangzhou, China, 2011
Mayslits Kassif Architects, Israel*

Photograph courtesy of Mayslits Kassif Architects



Gross Domestic Product (GDP) comparison between China, USA and the European Union since 2001
OMA, The Netherlands

CHANGE! – By Udi Kassif & Ganit Mayslits
Mayslits Kassif Architects. Israel

As the world's largest building site, China has practically become a synonymous term for change – rapid, massive and intense transformation manifested in various fields but most evidently in the hasty development of the built environment. In the project of the Better Place Visitor Centre in Guangzhou – one of the world's leading providers of electric car networks – Mayslits Kassif Architects aimed to create an agent of change driven by innovative research and technology. This confronted us with the ever relevant questions as to the scope and tools of architecture in the global search for a better future. This building was designed to envelop a new interaction between cars and people, leaving behind familiar conventions about technology and fossil fuels. In a fast growing context of cultural renovation, the tranquil curvilinear structure focuses on the spatial possibilities between transportation and users. The occupant is directed up a spiral ramp along the perimeter of the building. This articulation continues inside the building, through the various information stations, including the battery switch station, the demonstration areas and, eventually, driving the cars – in urban China.

MOVEMENT! – By Luis Aguirre Manso
AQSO arquitectos office. Spain & China

It is not easy to see the sky in Beijing – sometimes because of the storms, sometimes because of the fog and most of the time because of the pollution surrounding the city. At night the stars cannot be seen, only flashing sparks draw your attention in the heights anywhere in the city. In fact, they are the construction workers welding steel onto the structure of the new towers that spread in all directions. The metropolis is transformed by day and night; it changes, it renews itself and expands unstoppable as living organisms do.

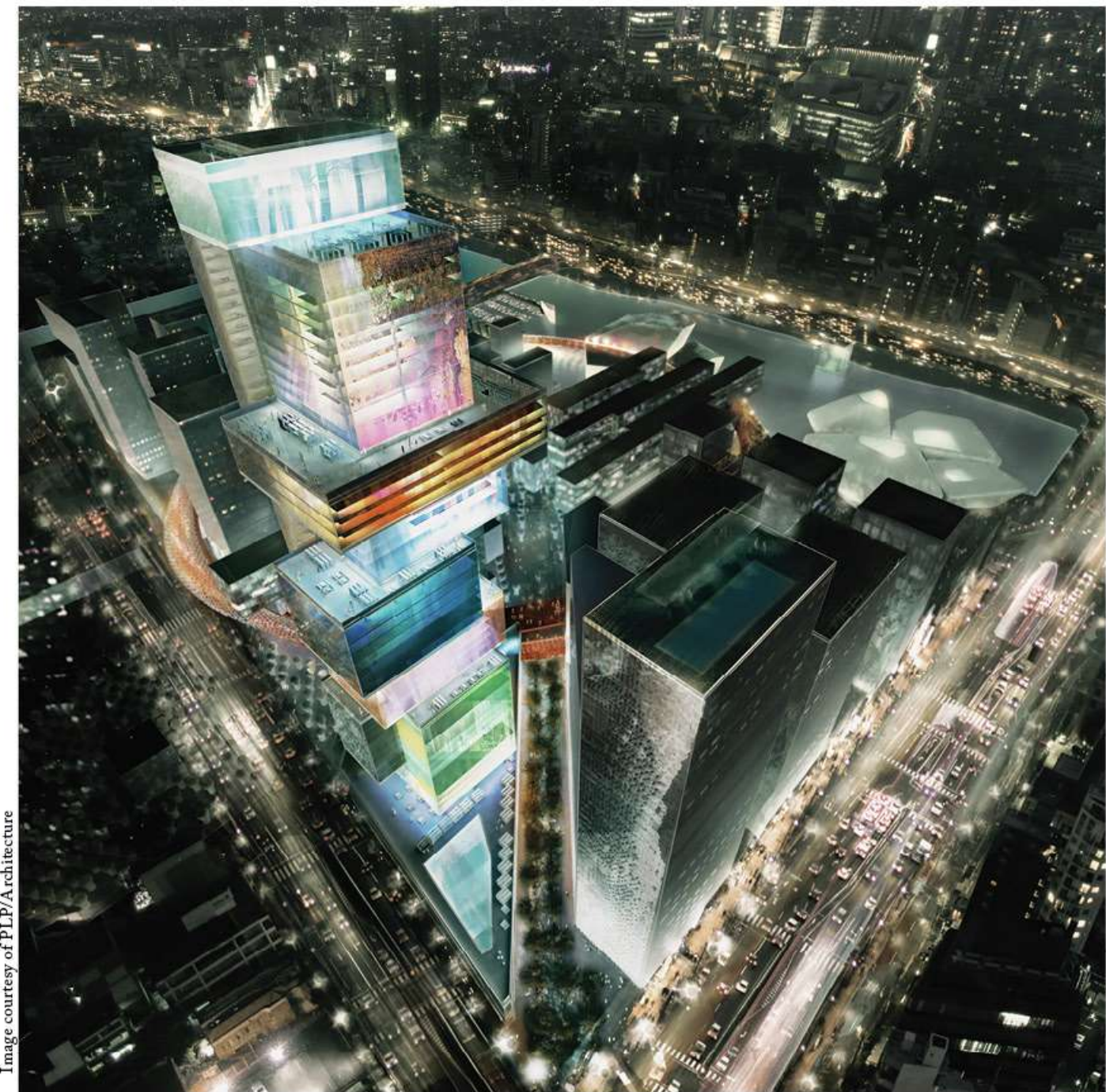
The extensive use of a single model of development becomes evident when the conditions of the territory are adverse. In the past year AQSO has worked on the development of a strategic urban planning for the

city of Pengshui, located in Southwest China. This intervention of an area of more than 3,000 hectares covers the city centre located in the confluence of the Yangtze River and Wujiang River and four other districts in a rugged mountainous area. Recent interventions in the city have become problematic because they have ignored the topographical conditions and, instead, residential towers – ideal for plain areas – have been planned, designed and constructed. Therefore, the city needs a new model of development, able to be adapted to the physical qualities of the city and with the capacity to respond efficiently not only to real estate ambitions but also to social pressure.

The current architectural Chinese scenario is therefore made up of a varied group of contrasts. After a search for modernity, more or less reconciled with the tradition of the past, the result is a multicultural patchwork where factors associated to repetition create heterogeneous urban spaces at a certain scale, but homogeneous as a whole. The repetition of this architectural and urban approach has resulted in a vast scenario made up by similar cities, sometimes almost identical. However, difference exists – impossible disparities, incongruous mixes and diversity can be found in its urban fabric: a unique personality.

DYNAMISM! – By David Leventhal & Andrei Martin
PLP Architecture. UK

In the spring of 2011, PLP was invited to participate in a competition for the design of a fashion hub in the city of Ningbo. The brief,



N+ Masterplan, Ningbo, China, 2011-2012, PLP/Architecture, UK

driven by the Chinese imperative to accompany the shift from the production of goods to the creation of content, was ambitious but succinct: a district that will bring twenty top fashion houses to Ningbo's Eastern New Town. As a response, a policy framework emerged as an identity and branding strategy – a business case. Our project, N+, undertook to matchmake the interests of business/brands, design and the specific Chinese consumer. For it to work, business, creativity, education, sustainability and heritage had to be aligned through hybrid modules and mixed content: a transactional brandscape operating as a creative catalyst. This required the creative reinterpretation of a set of traditional procedures and processes preoccupied primarily with a physical reality. The aim was set to promote strategy over architectural design. This complexity had to be materialised through an instantly digestible and memorable idea. We decided to describe the project through a series of

In CHINESE,
the term *crisis* has
a double meaning:

DANGER
&
OPPORTUNITY

deliberately ambiguous renderings coupled with precise diagrams. In the end what the judges remembered surprised us: the image of the circle superimposed on the square, the Chinese image for the Heaven on Earth.
– Curated by Christian Parreño