Peter G. Rowe and Seng Kuan
Architectural Encounters with Essence and Form in Modern China

Seng Kuan and Peter G. Rowe, editors
Shanghai: Architecture and Urbanism for Modern China

A surge of scholarship over the last five years or so has revealed a growing international interest in the architecture of modern China, reflected in important recent JSAH articles by Xing Ruan and Delin Lai.1 A booming economy resulting in many high-profile commissions, the widespread demolition of historic architecture, and the increasing interaction of Chinese architects and scholars with the West are all, presumably, causes of the burgeoning of English-language scholarship. Two new books by the writing team of Peter G. Rowe, formerly the dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Design, and Seng Kuan, a doctoral candidate in architecture at Harvard, explore the significance and evolution of architecture in twentieth-century China. With Architectural Encounters with Essence and Form in Modern China, Rowe and Kuan have produced the first English-language history of the subject. Their second collaboration, Shanghai: Architecture and Urbanism for Modern China, is an edited volume with contributions by Marie-Claude Bergère, Pierre Clément, Jeffrey W. Cody, Seng Kuan, Richard Marshall, Elizabeth J. Perry, Peter Rowe, Saskia Sassen, and Yue Wu. The compilation of articles and illustrations of contemporary projects attempts to define an architecture of modernity in China’s most populous metropolis.

Arranged chronologically, the chapters of Architectural Encounters with Essence and Form in Modern China divide the century into eras defined by certain political, economic, and design trends. A fictional literary frame describing a conversation among contemporary Chinese designers separates the chapters. While architectural historians may find this device a bit contrived or superficial, it may interest designers who might otherwise be somewhat averse to history. This sort of narrative dialogue also echoes classical Chinese philosophical texts like the Analects of Confucius or the writings of Zhuangzi. Within this frame, each chapter is an exploration of these trends, punctuated with illustrative discussions of specific buildings. The book’s clear organization, combined with direct and concise language, makes it a pleasure to read. It is certainly accessible to upper-level undergraduates and could be used as a textbook.

The first chapter, “Traditionalism versus Modernism in China,” introduces the main thematic device Rowe and Kuan have used to arrange their survey. The authors here provide a succinct summary of the intellectual and political movements within China from the Opium War of 1840–42 through the early years of the twentieth century. The threat of domination by Western imperialists alternately triggered movements toward technology-based Western-style modernization and toward traditional Confucian ideologies. The initial major school of modernization-oriented thought, the Self-Strengthening movement of the 1860s and 1870s, proposed the formula of “Chinese learning for essential principles, Western learning for practical functions” (5). The movement’s emphasis on the contrasting ideas of ti (essence) and yong (form) provides Rowe and Kuan with the concept they utilize throughout the book in assessing the responses to modernity and tradition in twentieth-century architecture. This approach is announced on the cover of the book itself, which prominently displays the characters for ti and yong.

The second chapter, “Foreign Influences and the First Generation of Chinese Architects,” begins with a brief discussion of the continuation of Chinese traditional architectural systems. The authors then contrast this approach with the more wholly foreign architecture being produced in the so-called treaty ports (cities on the Chinese coast where foreigners had varying degrees of jurisdiction). As Rowe and Kuan’s discussion turns to the Republican period (1911–49), their emphasis shifts to the first generation of Chinese professional architects, tracing their histories from their educational origins in the United States (particularly the Beaux-Arts-oriented University of Pennsylvania) and Europe to their first major projects.

This review flows smoothly into “Four Architectural Attitudes Toward Modernization,” the third chapter. Here the authors outline the approaches to architecture that had gained a permanent foothold by the 1930s. The first was the wholesale importation of Western eclectic styles, including modernism. The second, in which modern functions were integrated with Chinese traditional features (ornament, roofs, and proportions), was championed by Chinese designers such as Lu Yanzhi and Dong Dayou. Perhaps the most prominent advocate of this fusion was Shanghai-based American architect Henry K. Murphy.2 The authors ascribe the third approach most firmly to the designs of Yang Tingbao, in which the context for modernity in China was less archaeological in relation to Chinese traditional forms, melding them with contemporary Beaux-Arts practices in the West.

The fourth and final approach to tradition and modernity outlined by Rowe and Kuan is the founding of the discipline of Chinese architectural history as a historically and archaeologically precise discipline under figures such as Liang Sicheng and Liu Dunzhen. These two fathers of architectural history in China attempted to understand the grammar of traditional architecture in order to inspire their more “correct” use.

After mention of the great disruptions of the Japanese occupation of China’s eastern metropolises and the subsequent Chinese civil war, the authors bring us to the 1950s and the “Big Roof Controversy.” With the triumph of the

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People’s Liberation Army, the influence of the Soviets and socialist realism arrives on the Chinese architectural scene. The Soviet design ideal of “socialist content and national form” (95) found a parallel in the ongoing Chinese consideration of essence and form. In relationship to this development, the Chinese classical revivalist “Big Roof” style (in many respects the progeny of the adaptive Chinese architecture of the Republic era imbued with a new sense of nationalism) retained its place as an official national idiom.

By the mid-1950s, an emerging economic crisis led to a reaction against the expense of ornamenting buildings in this mode. Some architects and many officials began to champion utilitarian, industrial modern design as more appropriate to the needs of an emerging industrialized communist revolutionary state. In the fifth chapter, “Struggles with Modernism,” the authors first describe the role that economic design played in the spread of a brand of modernism, albeit one that still had—in many cases—a strong Beaux-Arts flavor. The most prominent architectural commissions of the era, the so-called “Ten Great Buildings,” erected to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic, were evenly spread along a continuum from the “Big Roof” style through Soviet-influenced social realism to more entirely modern buildings. This chapter ends with a summary of the handful of notable modernist buildings produced in the 1960s and early to mid-1970s, a period of declining commissions.

The architecture of contemporary China is surveyed in the next two chapters, “The ‘Culture Fever,’” covering 1979–89, and “A Commodification and Internationalization of Architecture,” which addresses the era after the Tiananmen Square incident. The 1980s, characterized by the political and economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping, departed from the old dichotomy of traditional versus modern in the desire to embrace all that proved pragmatically useful. In architecture, this was characterized by an increase in commissions to Western architects, a technological race to catch up to the West in order to build and maintain state-of-the-art buildings, and a general return to eclecticism in individual artistic expression. While the 1980s witnessed intensified debate in architecture schools as Western architectural theory was made broadly available, the 1990s shifted the emphasis firmly back to architectural production to meet surging economic development. The diversity of design modes expanded yet again, but some attempts were made to include references to traditional China—from Xing Tonghe’s Shanghai Museum, shaped like an ancient bronze vessel, to SOM’s Jin Mao Building, allegedly referencing Tang Dynasty pagodas, and the more refined if more literally traditional works of female architect Zhang Jingqiu in the city of Xi’an. The dominant trend in major architectural commissions, however, may be the desire to display China’s status as a technologically astute state by commissioning high-profile and avant-garde projects by European architects such as Paul Andreu or Jean-Marie Charpentier.

In their conclusion to Architectural Encounters with Essence and Form in Modern China, Rowe and Kuan admit that essence and form have perhaps started to fade as primary concerns. While allowing that references to China’s architectural tradition are still likely to have a place in public official building as part of urban armatures, the authors seem content with the wide range of expressions put forward today. They conclude that engagement, debate, and reconsideration are vital in order to encourage a healthy design culture in contemporary China. Rowe and Kuan have here given us an ample resource with which to begin.

If there is any fault to be found (though not necessarily to be attributed to the authors) in this solid survey, it is in the illustrations. Many projects are not illustrated and the photographs, all in black and white and often murky, cannot convey the polychrome details that are so important to many buildings featured. While they offer a very satisfying historical narrative, the authors have left room for a more pictorial history of twentieth-century Chinese architecture to be produced by others. Nevertheless, this book belongs in the library of any interested scholar.

Kuan and Rowe’s Shanghai: Architecture and Urbanism for Modern China is a different type of work. Comprising nine amply illustrated essays interspersed with high-quality color photographs of recent and ongoing architectural projects in Shanghai, the book comes across as largely celebratory, though some of the texts take on more critical and analytical points of view than others. Five essays may be of limited interest to historians of Chinese architecture. Sociologist Saskia Sassen, in “The Formation of Intercity Geographies of Centrality,” explains Shanghai’s emergence into a globalized system of centers for multinational corporations. Harvard professor of government Elizabeth J. Perry, designer Pierre Clément, and urban designer Richard Marshall chart recent developments surrounding the civic center of the People’s Square, plazas and shopping promenades, and the city’s riverfront, respectively. Rounding out this selection of descriptive articles on contemporary projects, Yue Wu, chief planning officer of Shanghai’s Pudong New Area, explains in “Residential Development in Shanghai in Relation to Its Economic Conditions and Population” the demographic challenges the city has had to face over the past couple of decades.

The remaining four articles will probably be of greater use to architectural historians. Marie-Claire Bergère, historian and professor emeritus at the Institut National des Langues et Civilizations Orientales in Paris, provides a wonderfully concise history of the development of the city in “Shanghai’s Urban Development: A Remake?” Introducing the reader to Shanghai’s heritage as a “dual colonial city,” a treaty port with the divided administrative entities of the International Settlement, French Concession, and Chinese City, the author discusses the era of the “transition city” in
which older divisions were blurred, the
economy expanded, and finally, Chinese
political movements formed to resist
Western control. Bergère then turns to
the ambivalent relation of the communist
regime to this former hotbed of capital-
ism. She also covers recent develop-
ments, such as the declining role of historic areas
in the city’s general economy. Bergère on
occasion tends toward Shanghai excep-
tionalism, as when she states that the city “monopolized Chinese modernity” before
1949 (52). Those who have studied other
major Chinese cities such as Nanjing or
Guangzhou will question this but overall
the essay is an excellent introduction to
Shanghai’s history. Peter Rowe’s contribu-
tion, “Privation to Prominence: Shanghai’s Rapid Resurgence,” is a satisfy-
ing summary of the government master plans for Shanghai’s development in
recent decades. In reviewing these plans,
he enables the reader to gain a more
in-depth understanding of the planning
process in China, and puts forth a com-
parative analysis of success in the imple-
mentation of these plans.

The most impressive discussions of
architectural history reside in Seng
Kuan’s “Image of the Metropolis: Three
Historical Views of Shanghai” and
Jeffrey W. Cody’s “Making History (Pay)
in Shanghai: Architectural Dialogues
about Space, Place, and Face.” Kuan
focuses on “panoramas of the Bund,” a
“bird’s-eye view of greater Shanghai,”
and Lujiazui, the cornerstone of plan-
ning for the Pudong New Area. Moving
from the skyline of commercial archi-
tecture produced by capitalist demands on
valuable real estate along the Bund to the
Beaux-Arts planning of the Republican-
era plans for the Shanghai Civic Center,
Kuan sees their synthesis in the grand
plans of Lujiazui Financial Center. The
spatial and historic legacies in Kuan’s
views of Shanghai convincingly allow
Lujiazui more meaning than the individ.
ual buildings’ gauche corporate glitz
might at first suggest.

In his somewhat poetic essay, Cody
explores the resonance he finds in the
contrasts and layered meanings of specific
sites and links these reflections to historic
preservation concerns. He begins by pon-
dering socialist and capitalist globalization
through the juxtaposition of the stepped
profiles of the Soviet social realist
Shanghai Exhibition Center and the adja-
cent and larger Shanghai Center (1990)
by American developer John Portman.
He then considers the multiple associa-
tions of the Morriss Apartments, con-
structed in the early 1930s as one of the
first works of fully “modern” Western
built housing to accommodate the cosmo-
politan taste of upwardly mobile
Shanghaiese. The final site for the
author’s ruminations is a segment of
Nanjing Road (historically a main shop-
ping street of the city, and a center of
baitai, “Shanghai style”) where plans for
a pedestrian mall raise questions about
the commodification of history. As Cody
asserts, much of Chinese architectural
heritage is preserved only to the point that
it can be of use in the marketplace. Cody
urges the academic and architectural com-
community to enter into conversations con-
cerning the built heritage of Shanghai
(and by implication, China). Thus he ends
in a place not so far from the conclusion of
Architectural Encounters with Essence and
Form in Modern China. The two books
provide ample background from which to
start an engagement with the burgeoning
field of Chinese architecture.

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Notes
1. Xing Ruan, “Accidental Affinities: American Beaux-
Arts in Twentieth-Century Chinese Architectural
Education and Practice,” JSAH 61 (Mar. 2002),
30–47, and Delin Lai, “Searching for a Modern
Chinese Monument: The Design of the Sun Yat-sen
Mausoleum in Nanjing,” JSAH 64 (Mar. 2005),
22–55.
2. A superb and detailed account of Murphy’s work
can be found in Jeffrey W. Cody, Building in China:
Henry K. Murphy’s Adaptive Architecture, 1914–1935
(Seattle, 2001), reviewed in JSAH 63 (Mar. 2004),
120–22.

Joseph L. Scarpaci
Plazas and Barrios: Heritage
Tourism and Globalization in the
Latin American Centro Histórico

Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2005, xix
+ 236 pp., 105 b/w illus., 14 tables. $45,
ISBN 0-8165-1631-6

One of the least publicized endangered
species of the twenty-first century is the
historic landscape of cities across the
planet. Too often the built environment
is atomized (by architects, the media,
investors, or property owners) and wor-
shipped in its most recognizable form—
the individual structure. Meanwhile, the
larger space that nurtured the building—
its neighborhood—is forgotten or ignored.
This oversight, as Joseph Scarpaci skillfully argues in his new book
Plazas and Barrios: Heritage Tourism and
Globalization in the Latin American Centro
Histórico, is a critical loss to the historic
preservation movement, since the mean-
ing of buildings is fundamentally deep-
ened by the unique sense of place
embedded in the communities (barrios)
and public spaces (plazas) that surround
them.

Scarpaci’s book may be grounded in his
fields of cultural, urban, and histori-
ucal geography, but this timely and care-
fully researched volume is important for
architectural historians, landscape archi-
technicians, planners, Latin Americanists.
Its publication comes at a watershed in architectural
history. The beginning of the new millen-
iunium has been marked by digital
technology and other globalizing trends,
whose accelerating pace poses new chal-
enges to the preservation of more “low-
technology” phenomena such as archi-
tectural history. Scarpaci’s book serves an impor-
tant purpose in helping to move archi-
tectural history away from individual
buildings and into the more critical area
of historic centers. It offers those who
study the field a wealth of new informa-
tion that both places architecture in a
geographic and institutional context and
explores frameworks for those who are
fighting to preserve historic centers and
their edifices.