

The Domestic and The Foreign: Architecture in Globalization

by Sang Lee

A Conversation with Frederic Schwartz, New York

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Participants:

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FS: Right now we are competing for one of the world's largest projects in Shanghai for the World's Fair in 2010. The World's Fair then becomes the city of the future, a model for the city of the future. It includes a proposal for the world's tallest building (718 meters).

SL: Can you talk about the program for it?

FS: The program is similar to any world's fair, with international pavilions, great exhibition halls and grand plazas. But what made it very interesting for us and, and all the others competing as well, is that this area of Shanghai is planned to become a model for the city of the future. Even designing for 2010 for a city growing exponentially is quite a challenge. In China, 50% of the population is moving from the countryside to cities, which is perhaps the biggest mass migration we've seen in the history of the world.

Recently on July 4th, *The New York Times* magazine, instead of about the US, dedicated the whole issue to China. I have been there five times the past year. When I come back, New York looks small. This is the first time when I have been on a trip to a city and returned to find New York small. As far as I can see, the density and growth in and around Shanghai is staggering.

The site is right in the heart of Shanghai, and the master plan is equal to the area from the southern tip of Manhattan to the 34th street. We partnered with Robert A. M Stern's office and the Southeast University of China.

SL: When you did this proposal, did you get a sense from the project organizers what they are looking for as a cultural project? If a large rural population is rapidly migrating to an urban environment, there must be some sort of cultural changes and adjustments to consider, in addition especially if many foreign architects will be involved in the project.

FS: Their idea about foreign architects is changing. They are recognizing that they have local talents and don't necessarily need to rely on foreign architects. In the recent past, for the Olympic Games in 2008 for example, they would bring in a lot of international stars, and the local firms would do the construction documents because of inexpensive labor.

What makes our situation unique is that we do this as equals with our Chinese partners. We didn't just do the concept design and farmed out the rest. We went

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over there and worked closely together with them. It was really a team effort among equals and an amazing experience.

The program was absolutely culture oriented. We also pushed the cultural program because we believed in it and stressed environmental issues to offer Shanghai a model of sustainable design. The site is on both sides of the river, Huangpu River, also called the mother river, equivalent to East River here in New York. Our scheme took off from one of the ideas we tried as the team THINK for the World Trade Center competition, which was the sky park.

There we have one of the densest cities in the world, with a lot of man-made mountains and open green areas, and the idea is about doubling the land use by building habitable structures with green roofs. This is obviously very closely related to sustainability issues. While the Chinese cities are growing, they are also becoming extremely polluted cities. There is a constant haze of smog in Shanghai that would make LA look clean.

SL: As an architect coming from New York, what was particular about the domestic culture of architecture in Shanghai, compared to here in New York or in other cities you have been to? Did you have anyone engaged in the critique of your work?

FS: It isn't just myself going there and asking to do certain things. We are partnering with the Chinese colleagues. We were as much listening and learning, breathing and absorbing in the culture. We would meet with a Fung Shui master, would come and review our design, in the middle of the night and discuss the project. Here in the US Fung Shui is often taken very lightly. But in China it is like the zoning code. You cannot do a project in China without it.

Another partner we had, Eric Sun, was born in Shanghai and educated at Yale with his own practice in New Haven and Shanghai. We were much immersed in their culture in architecture. Also we had in our office a very skilled young architect from China. We hired him independently of this project before we were invited. A lot of US firms use their offices in China like a back office labor pool. I don't approve of that.

SL: How does this compare to your experience in New York on large projects?

FS: This makes Ground Zero, then considered one of the largest, really small. Ground Zero is 16 acres and this site in Shanghai is 1,600 acres. I am very lucky to have been able to work on large projects, and I enjoy working on large projects not because of the size but because they bring so many interesting issues to deal with. Now if I look at the West Way project I worked on for eight years, it was from the Battery Park City to the 42nd street. It was the biggest project in the country at that time. They are comparable in terms of complexity, but the fact that I was working in such a different culture makes it much more interesting.

Let me expand on this a bit more. I think what's happening in Shanghai is that if you go there you would feel that it's more commercial and capitalist than New York City. Actually every city I visited felt teeming with commercialism and capitalism, with all the advertising, hustling and vibrancy. I felt I was prepared as I grew up in NY and am

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from streets, so to speak. If I had been from a small town USA, I might have been completely overwhelmed and with totally different opinions.

SL: I am asking this question because NYC is one of truly global urban centers in the world. But yet it is not that easy to find strong outside influences on architecture. Do you agree with that?

FS: I do agree with that. New York architecture is controlled mostly by large corporate firms. That's why when you look around you see so many terrible buildings, one after another. Outside my office window, I am looking across the river at New Jersey. Goldberger¹ recently wrote that Shanghai of New York is in New Jersey. In Shanghai so many buildings are terrible, too. You don't know who designed those buildings, all anonymous. None of them really aspire to anything that is great about architecture. They are just real estate. Muschamp² wrote best about this, too. That architecture in New York is controlled by big corporate firms.

Then there are firms that do good architecture once in a while, but mostly that's in between doing corporate buildings, the real estate. They are really big firms with a lot of mouths to feed. Now obviously a lot to do with Ground Zero, architecture post-9/11 has become more recognized as an important part of our lives in this city. So in New York City now we are starting to see a smattering of buildings that are capital A, architecture. Richard Meier is now doing his first building in New York City. I worked on White Hall Ferry Terminal for almost twelve years, opening in 2005, and now people started to recognize it as architecture. I think with the work on Ground Zero by our design team, THINK, and by some others like United Architects, people started to get excited about the possibilities of urban architecture, no matter what the size was.

Architecture is still real estate first in New York City. You can see this great potential to do great architecture at a place like Times Square even though it still is real estate first, corporate architecture. There are very few places in New York where the priorities are about architecture, instead of the real estate.

SL: Do you think this is also the reason why there are so few architectural competitions in New York City? For Ground Zero, the port authority initially hired the architects they already had a relationship with.

Some would say that to be able to work on civic projects in New York City, you have to collaborate with big corporate firms or very well known foreign "star" architects. Do you feel that way, given that your firm is still very small in size and native to New York?

FS: In that first scheme for Ground Zero, people were outraged by what they saw. I have been very fortunate in my career to collaborate with right people at the right time. I am a small firm but able to do biggest projects in the world because I do collaborate.

¹ Paul Goldberger, the architecture critic of the New York Times, 1972-1997, currently the architecture critic of the New Yorker magazine and the dean of Parsons School of Design, New School University, New York.

² Herbert Muschamp, the successor to Goldberger at the New York Times until 2004.

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I am now beginning to get large projects on my own, but I would much prefer collaborating. It is much more interesting. We just won two important competitions, New Jersey Memorial and Westchester Memorial, without collaboration. You ask me this question because you are a young architect with a small firm, who *has to* collaborate with those who can and otherwise you just can't compete for this type of projects.

For 25 year I have been in practice now, I have participated in a lot of competitions. Within the past five years, I have completed over 40 competitions in various situations. As a sole practitioner I believe I might have worked on the most competitions in the USA. Some of my colleagues, they have never done one competition in their entire careers. Not a single one.

I would bet that 99% architects in the US have not done a single competition. In New York City, the Staten Island Ferry Terminal competition in 1992 was the first competition sponsored by the city in about 100 years. The city stopped architectural competitions because McKim Mead and White won all the time. They were the SOM of the time.

Rafael Viñoly and I have just teamed up to do probably a largest and densest project on the West Coasts in San Diego – “the Wave” – three million square-foot in one building. There was a competition by the developers, an international open competition for qualification. They selected six teams. We did something called the Wave, an idea we haven't tried before. Other schemes were all exactly conventional. They did exactly what developers always get. You couldn't distinguish one from the other; they were all more or less the same. One might be better or worse than the others in some ways but basically they were all about the same. It was scaling down from the beginning instead of scaling up. Of course it is more complex than that, but the developers were essentially looking for conventional buildings instead of a thoughtful master plan for such size and density.

SL: For Ground Zero you have worked with an international cast of architects. What was your experience in that collaboration?

FS: None of the work would have been possible without collaboration. It was one of the greatest moments in my career in terms of education. I learned so much from others in the team: what they think, how they work and how they interact. I don't believe that type project should be done by one egotistical architect. I believe that we won that project, but something else happened. That's another story. We shared a great work ethic. We never stopped working and still continue to collaborate. I believe in such collaborations.

SL: When architects come from the outside, even those considered prominent, historically they seemed to have a hard time with projects in the city. For example Le Corbusier with the UN complex, it is well known, had a bad experience. Mies also had a hard time with his Seagram building because his open public plaza in front broke the uniform street façade line of Park Ave.

Why do you think it is so difficult for foreign architects to execute projects in the city? Do you feel that NYC is resistant to architects from the outside?

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FS: At this point it is changing. In the past, yes, it was very difficult, not just foreign architects but for all architects except for a few in the city. The city's very complex zoning laws put you in a shoebox. But one of the reasons the change is that we now have a mayor who cares about arts and architecture and the commissioner of planning is probably the best of all times I can remember. So there is more flexibility, more possibilities and positive thinking from the administration, based on a new sensibility about architecture and its possibilities, post-9/11.

Whether foreign or domestic, whether it is the cult of star architects, now people see more value in architecture. I am not a star architect but in terms of the work we did after 9/11 and after my proposal for the design study NY Times sponsored, I see more doors open for me. That is one of the reasons why someone like me can do a very large project such as the one in Coney Island, 3 million square feet of floor space.

SL: After the LMDC competition for the new World Trade Center, you and your design team became in the end the runner-up. After that, were you invited to contribute any further to the project?

FS: No.

SL: Not at all?

FS: No.

SL: So after the competition concluded, even though you were officially the second place winner and given the enormity of the project, was there no possibility for you to be involved in the project at all?

FS: No. I wasn't asked for any further involvement.

When we submitted our scheme for the Ground Zero competition, the committee voted unanimously for our design. It was not even a tie, which the governor had to break. Our scheme was their choice, but something else happened and we were removed. I cannot tell you exactly what happened but that was the end of it.

SL: Now the first building, the World Trade Center No. 7 is under construction, and the design of it by SOM started even before the competition. How much of the former WTC complex was put up for the competition?

FS: Even though it is a building in the World Trade Center complex, it was initiated by the World Trade Center Development Corporation, independent from the LMDC, so that building was not in the scope of the LMDC's WTC competition. It should have been. The 16 acre area the original twin towers occupied was the specific scope of the competition. There are many buildings around that area, of which the WTC 7 is a part. Now the former Deutsch Bank building became a part of the project. So the extent of the project boundary has been shifted a bit since.

When I proposed my idea for West Street in March 2002, I took on the entire Lower Manhattan. I stated that if we look at only the Ground Zero area, we will miss the point. I thought that looking at the entire Lower Manhattan area and including West Street would open interesting possibilities. Many felt the same way, but when the LMDC briefed the architects about the competition, they made it clear to me, of all

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- from around the world, that we were not to touch West Street. I thought it was a big mistake.
- SL: Also now, Santiago Calatrava is working on the transportation hub at the WTC site. There was a substantial competition for the master plan, but if I look at the process, it seems in the end there will be many buildings plugged in and around the site, designed by many different architects selected by many different interests. How do you think this would work?
- FS: A good master plan would allow architects to express their designs – I don't mean this as a comment or critique of the master plan, whether it is good or bad – but a good master plan would accommodate the future flexibility that may change all the time and not be so restrictive to interfere with the expression of individual architecture. I think it is healthy that now we can have someone like Calatrava and others. These buildings shouldn't be all the same. That is why I am critical of Battery Park City. I would be critical of restrictive architectural guidelines. An important part of the master plan is the architectural guideline, which affects architects to do their projects for the site.
- SL: Do you think there will be other competitions for individual buildings at Ground Zero?
- FS: No. They will do it by a selection process. They will just select architects based on the qualification. That way it is easier to control when you just pick somebody. I am all for competitions because that is the only way I will get to do the kinds of buildings. Based on qualification, if they will base the decision on just how many and big buildings I have done, I cannot compete. They rely on the safety of such a process for the governing agency, because it's safe to pick some directly under their control.
- SL: So you mean that such a process in this particular case is a political decision, rather than anything else.
- FS: If you look at the Ground Zero competition, in the end the decision was political. As I mentioned, the steering committee voted unanimously for our scheme, 8 to 0. Not even 7 to 1. Then it was taken away by the politics.
- SL: What do you think of the WTC project as it stands? Do you think it will live up to the global expectation, in the city and to the outside?
- FS: It will not. The master plan was based on rhetoric and false impression. What is the Wedge of Light? There is no Park of Heroes. Everything this master plan promised was words and in the end there was very little left of it, it seems to me. Or you could say it is great to be so flexible that we can accommodate Calatrava. We will see what happens. I don't want to dwell on negativity but I think the master plan has now been watered down and compromised more and more because it couldn't stand up in the first place.
- SL: When you have projects overseas, in different cultural and political contexts, how do you start?
- FS: I start by trying to immerse myself in the environment: history, politics, art, food, music and reading as much as I can about the culture and its architecture. I try to

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absorb as much as I can to make the project *relevant*. By this, I don't mean in terms of historicism. It is about getting a bigger picture because what happens when I go to these parts of the world, I can see that with the kind of technology we have today I feel the world has really become global. I feel that the time is moving exponentially.

When I am in San Diego, Toulouse or Shanghai, it seems many places are becoming the same. Perhaps it means that it is becoming easier to read those places. All these places used to be very different from each other. Even though LA, San Diego and San Francisco are along the same coast line of California they are three entirely different cities. When you are there to do architectural projects, you would be aware of those differences, not to mention the differences you would certainly notice in a place like Shanghai. But as different as they may be, now they share much of the same characteristics. They are as much the same as they are different. I was so amazed to see Shanghai was even more commercial and capitalistic than New York. Even only ten years ago, you wouldn't have felt that way. Exponential changes....

So on one hand I try to absorb what the culture is at a given place and at the same time I find a lot of its features becoming globally shared. This could also mean that the globalization somehow makes it easier to be in those places, yet at the same time you try to find what is particular about them to make the globalization special today. I have learned a great deal from Donny Deutsch, who is one of the most important people in advertising and branding. I did his offices in New York, Chicago, Boston and LA. All of them are Deutsch corporate offices in the US and share the same branding idea but for him finding particular aspects in each place was very important. Every Deutsch office you go to you should be able to know clearly that it was Deutsch advertising, but at the same time each of them should look also local.

- SL: How subtle or apparent these local differences would be in this example?
- FS: His headquarters is in New York. But when I designed his office in LA he asked me that it should be distinctively LA. Not Deutsch NY transplanted in LA. When people walk into that office they should be able to see clearly that they are in LA.
- SL: In architecture, how do you think the type of branding on a global scale and at the same time the representation of the local could work?
- FS: I try to make both aspects work. If I do a project in Coney Island for example I would like to see these aspects and a sense of where it is coming from among others. Certain architects, to their credit, are simply brands. They could be brands you either like or dislike. You know that they are brands when you refer to them by the first names or last names, not both. I think it is good that someone can be that good with what they do.
- SL: Do you think there is still architecture that represents something beyond or rather than individual architect's branding aspects?
- FS: You could find many types of architecture designed specifically for certain social, political, cultural and economic groups. You could draw a map of architecture and find all these different types. Do I aspire to that? No, I don't. I aspire to finding my own voice and my own way to do architecture. I don't want to do the same

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- predictable architecture all the time. Just yesterday someone called me from Chicago and wanted to discuss a project at the river. They said that they looked everywhere and found my work overwhelming in terms of its variety. I feel that's where I want to be. I don't want somebody to be able to predict what I am going to do next. I don't know what I am going to do next. I have a certain direction I follow. But I always try to look at every project fresh, new and different. Denise Scott Brown calls it non-judgmental architecture.
- SL: If you look at the work of the star architects, they are wanted because of their particular signature formal expression...that may be reiterated in many different places.
- FS: They are. For example, Frank Gehry is great at what he does. But his buildings are all different. He is a great architect and one of those who have helped put architecture back on the map. I think it is great to do that. There are those who think that his way of doing architecture is a big problem, but I disagree with that opinion. Whether or not his buildings are great architecture, he definitely helped open up new possibilities in architecture. This debate has been going on probably as long as architecture itself. I am sure they probably had the same debate about Michelangelo.
- SL: The debate about the individual and the collective....
- FS: I think we cannot have the collective without the individual and also the other way around is true, too.
- SL: What kind of problems did you have because of your point of view or architectural language?
- FS: I had problems with certain commissions because something in the work I have done in the past made the clients think I will do the same thing again. But sometimes I also do get work because of that reason. You know it is always a struggle to be a small firm. You always have to compete for projects. It is a great struggle my small firm trying to do big projects. It is also a unique position, and that is possible because of architectural competitions. That is why I like to do competitions, and commissions never get dropped on your lap. It allows me to beat SOM. I cannot beat them in interview selections.
- SL: Did you have experience with a community opposing or protesting against your design?
- FS: I am working on one of the largest new building projects in Harlem now. I presented the design to the community board and they approved it unanimously at the first meeting. Unlike other projects in Harlem, I tried to make the design culturally relevant in that community. I worked with Jack Travis, a great black architect, helped steer us through what the spirit of building in Harlem should be. The community understood that. It is very difficult to do that in Harlem, not to mention other communities, even for big firms.
- SL: I would like to discuss something uniquely New York. It is about Philip Johnson and his power. It is quite rare to find someone who has had so much influence and power for so long over a particular profession....

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FS: He was so powerful because he could bring you a project. He could deliver you a commission if he liked you, through him. He could put you in an exhibition at the MoMA based simply on his saying so if he wanted. He was the pope or the godfather whatever you could call him. It was as simple as that. But in the end that's what architecture is about in a way. H. H. Richardson once said that the most important part of architecture is to get a commission.

SL: Do you think his influence and power on the profession had a positive side?

FS: The positive side is that he helped a few architects get very important commissions and they did great work. But at the same time he prevented those who were not in his favor from getting projects. For the few on his list he was great and for the others, bad. There are always power brokers in every city. But he really consolidated his power nationwide in terms of who could get a major commission. I was in that position, too. I met with him one day and the next day I got a phone call on a project. He did it to show off his power. This type of power culture in architecture is very much magnified in New York, just like everything else in this city.