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Fusing History and Height in Modern China



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Albert Chan is the Director of Development Planning and Design at Shui On Land. Chan manages the conceptualization, site feasibility and master planning of the “Tiandi” mixed-use communities and the design of large-scale mixed-use developments. Chan has more than 25 years of experience in planning, design and development, including 15 years in China. He also focuses on new product development and chairs the Sustainable Development Committee. Prior to joining Shui On, Chan worked at the New York City Department of Design and Construction. His education includes an MArch from Berkeley, an MS (urban design) from Columbia University, and an MBA from New York University.

Albert Chan is the Director of Development Planning and Design at Shui On Land, based in Shanghai. Shui On Land is the developer of several successful “Tiandi” (“heaven and earth”) mixed-use projects throughout China. Its Wuhan Tiandi project recently won the 2016 CTBUH Global Urban Habitat Award. Chan has previously served on the CTBUH China Awards Jury and has recently joined the CTBUH Advisory Board. In this interview with CTBUH Journal Editor Daniel Safarik, Chan discusses his development philosophy and thoughts on the urban habitat.

What does it mean to you for Wuhan Tiandi to win the CTBUH Urban Habitat award?

Of course it is a great honor, and it was very gratifying to be recognized. In China it is especially meaningful because it has been developing at such a great pace and so many new things have been built, but often, architects don’t think about the totality of the community. It’s more about single buildings.

Architects spend a lot of energy looking at the façade, the inner workings of the building, and how to resolve the top. But if you look back before we had tall buildings, the emphasis of how the building related to the surroundings was very important. Sometimes I think that, as we have built so quickly, we have forgotten about that. But it’s actually critical. If you get it right, the place has vitality for a long time. But if you get it wrong, even if you have great buildings, you won’t have vitality.

For CTBUH to look at environment and context is very meaningful, and I am very happy for the project to be recognized. I want to point out that the development took 13 years, and so many parties were involved, all of whom did a great job. Then, even after it’s built, how it is being operated is also part of what makes it successful.

Having sat as a juror in the China Awards program and now as a winner in the Global program, what are your thoughts on these programs?

I applaud CTBUH for being in China and involving Chinese architects. One interesting aspect I noticed was that the Chinese and foreign jurors valued some things differently. For the Chinese counterpart, the culture part was important to them – what makes a tall building a signature for a city, and particularly, what makes a good one in China? I think they asked themselves that question, and the foreign jurors did not pursue that as much. It could be an incredible debate, just that subject alone. That was quite enlightening to me.

I also think both programs would benefit if we talked about the urban habitat *even more*. In the China Awards, I think what happens when a tall building reaches the ground was not discussed as much as it could have been. That would bring an enrichment of the criteria, and maybe bring the ground-plane design level up for future buildings. It’s about the emphasis.

What are your objectives for your participation in the Advisory Group?

CTBUH has a lot of experts already. But it seems you have more expertise in tall



Figure 1. Shanghai Xintiandi, Shanghai. © (cc-by) ChinaUli2010



Figure 2. Wuhan Tiandi, Wuhan. © Shui On Land

buildings than urban habitat. I am lucky to have had the opportunity to help realize some of these communities. My contribution to CTBUH, and maybe through CTBUH to the design community as a whole, can be bringing together the idea of tall buildings and urban habitat, looking at how they can be better integrated to make great places. The time and physical scale of our projects are unusual in the sense that we are interested in creating vibrant, mixed-use urban communities by phases. Shanghai Xintiandi is a 19-year-old project (see Figure 1). Not many people can work on a project for 19 years. So that would be my unique contribution.

How did incorporating human-scale features and traditional architecture into your developments become your signature?

There are several principles we adhere to.

First, we believe mixed uses make the area more vibrant. We always try to create pedestrian, transit-based environments, not car-based. When people arrive in a place on foot and walk the streets, the place is alive. When they drive their cars into the basement, there is no one on the street.

We also like to be sustainable. Most of our developments are LEED-ND (Neighborhood Development) Gold-rated. From the technical angle, we want to create small blocks and a dense street network. That is how you actually achieve mixed use and walkability. They go hand in hand. It sounds obvious, but very few developers do it. The government typically sells a big piece of land, and very few developers will carve it up and make streets. The government regulates allowable land use, site area, gross floor area (GFA), and floor area ratio (FAR). But they never talk about the size of the lots and the streets. There is no form-based code for the block scale.

We want to create landmark places. By “places,” we mean something like a plaza or the street itself. For us, being a community developer, we have to have nice streets and squares, parks, and sometimes even a lake – all public. But, very few developers do this, because they really just focus on buildings.

Lastly, it’s really important that the project relates to the cultural context: we want the project to fit into the neighborhood, not be like an alien that dropped down. That’s why we do preservation. It’s actually a small part of the production of the company, but it has been recognized because so few companies do it.

How have these principles come into play in your major projects?

Shanghai Xintiandi was not a landmarked area. The only buildings that needed to be preserved were the meeting place of the Communist Party – three small buildings, not the whole two blocks. But we preserved and adaptively reused more buildings in two whole blocks, because we saw what that could do for the overall neighborhood. At Wuhan Tiandi, we have several historic buildings, but we also preserved the old trees (see Figure 2). That added much to the project. The scale of the neighborhood is developed based on this principle. Sometimes it’s tall, sometimes short, because uses are different. The land we develop can be in very dense areas, and sometimes the real estate needs to be tall to be commercially successful. For me, it’s a success when one of our new developments feels like a community that has always been there.

How have you localized some of these principles?

The relationship between old and new, tall and short is different in each master plan. For

example, in Taipingqiao (Shanghai Xintiandi), we have a 3.5 FAR. Even within that, we will build a 60-story tower, currently under design. It’s the same in Chongqing.

In Wuhan, if you look closely, the residential development is quite dense, some exceeding 3.0 FAR, in the courtyard housing. Each lot is about 10,000 square meters, which is unusually small for China, containing one or two mid-rise towers that form part of the street wall. Then you have a small community park next to it.

So the relationship is that the low-rise commercial and the mid-rise residential form the enclosure of the park. Then you have the taller towers coming out in the background, and you can see the river. The towers are positioned so that they are not overshadowing the public places. That is very much a function of the master planning process. We take care to make sure that the places we build are nicely scaled, so that the tall buildings are not all over the place, where it feels like a canyon.

What’s different about this compared with master planning as it is typically practiced in China?

For one thing, we adhere to it and don’t change it all the time. It’s really about the interaction of the master plan with the execution. This is really important in China, because the government has some nice master plans, but as years go by, they change or don’t follow them.

With respect to the creation of public places in China, many involved don’t quite understand the scale – not the architect, developer, government planner or master planner. That is something that comes from experience. It is very important to have the

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right scale of these places, around streets, squares, and parks. We learned from our own experience. Some are more successful than others. Over the years, we learned how to execute it.

What is most critical for developers to know about execution?

When I talk about execution, I don't just mean building, I mean building with master plan in mind, leasing, and operating. Building in China now is quite easy; there are huge construction companies. But even today, in Xintiandi we still change operations, change tenants, try to change with the times. We changed the outdoor café outside the enclosed mall. We brought in flea markets and other activities. We put out more outside seating, flowers, canopies. We try to individualize the stores. It sounds mundane, but actually not too many people do it. It changes the place. Otherwise, it's just buildings, shells – it's not about people.

Is there a middle ground between what you do and the podium-style shopping mall that is so popular here?

If you buy one small piece of land, you just try to maximize its value. So in a shopping mall, you do everything you can to keep people inside. But if everyone thinks like that, there is no community. In China, because of its density and strong culture of clustering, I believe the shopping malls and the street can coexist. In America, one Walmart can kill

the whole Main Street. It's either Main Street or Walmart.

China is a special case. The density and transportation are part of it. In many Chinese cities, there are usually good connections to the subway system, and not everyone has to drive to the mall. Culturally, people in China like to walk the street in many places. There is street food, mom and pop stores; it's enjoyable.

The way we look at shopping malls is, all of the stores open to the street and the interior. Some shopping malls are designed with only two entrances. Then basically, they just have windows to the inside. We felt that our shops facing the street would draw people through the project in a way that does not kill the street. But you have to be careful. If you do it in too many places, you will still kill vitality.

Many developers have gone for the approach of land clearance and starting over. Even with total control, the result is often disappointing. Why?

I think most developers do not have the principles that we have. If you don't have those, you kind of default to a modus operandi for large lots. For residential projects, you start by building a fence. You create a nice interior garden and surround it with towers. It's sold as a huge, safe place where you can walk and take your kids. If you don't have a broader set of principles, you default to this. For most developers, it's not even a consideration, and everything is driven by the default sales model.

I think it will change because recent regulations stipulate more small lots, more openness of the city spaces, and transit-based development. China is moving forward. Policy is coming around to the reality. There are now more non-enclosed shopping centers built that better relate to the community.

How do you interpret “weird” architecture, and how can architects and developers be more responsive to the community?

Sometimes there is a call for a spectacular piece of work. The “not-so-good-weird”

design comes about from the naivete of the client and an architect that has a wild vision. Most architects, with rigorous input from the client or government, will create something that is pretty nice. But without that guidance, the buildings can become more sculpture than architecture that serves the community.

Architecture is a social art. That's why the client and community should have input. Even innovative architects should recognize that. The best pieces of architecture around the world are a mix of good design and inputs from others. The great cathedrals, the Parthenon, the Pantheon, all had input from the church, the community, civic leaders.

An architect acting without the input of society is a relatively new phenomenon. The most beautiful places on earth, like the piazza in Siena, Italy, were designed by a bunch of people, over time. All the owners agreed to this curved shape and gently sloping ground surface... otherwise it would not have been built that way. The most successful places have come about this way.

That is much different than a developer clearing a site and building a replica of Siena.

You can have the image, but you don't have the content.

How do we recapture that sensibility for today?

Someone has to lead. When we are involved, we try to lead and produce a master plan independently of the government's. Then it is rigorous execution for the long haul, from the planning, urban design, and architecture point of view. You have to be vigilant everyday in execution. Xintiandi and Wuhan Tiandi are their own places, and they have contemporary needs and long, complex histories. We don't want to build France in Wuhan. We want to acknowledge the influences of those places, but make something that is part of the city. Hopefully the place we create really belongs to the people of the community. We want them to feel it is theirs. That is really what makes a place successful. ■