

PRC Architecture in the PRC

HOW ONE BRITISH ARCHITECTURE FIRM IS MAKING THE MOST OF THE MARKET.

Unlike the red flag of the people's republic of china, prc architecture's corporate colours come in a softer range of blues: from the aqua marine and turquoise of their offices on Yongjia Lu, to the darker hues of Michael Vacher's snakeskin cowboy boots. As Managing Director for the Asia Pacific region he is responsible for overseeing design and planning projects spanning the whole range from residential to commercial and ecological, mainly in China but some as far away as Abu Dhabi and Africa.

If tough beginnings auger well, being lost for his first two days in Shanghai, after the company representatives forgot to organise for his arrival, should stand Vacher in good stead. From these inauspicious beginnings, PRC Architecture has expanded from a team of four people to one of over 50 staff.

For the first two years of operations, the company focused mainly on architectural competitions. This is where local developers invite architecture and design firms to submit plans for potential developments they are considering bidding for. Designs which are awarded a placing in the competition receive a cash prize, meaning a small profit on the drafting and work time invested by the firm.

Success in these competitions started opening up opportunities for deeper involvement in a variety of projects for PRC Architecture, ensuring the firm had more input both in the initial concept stages and, in some instances, downstream areas such as co-ordination with the local design institutes who oversee the production of working drawings and materials specification for developments. Recent projects of scale include a redevelopment plans for Hangzhou city centre and Hefei Freedom City in Anhui Province, and an 86 square km "Environmental City" in Jiangsu Province's Yixing city.

As a foreign company operating in China, the firm's remit in most of these projects is limited to the conceptual development of project designs. The developer will then commission one of

the officially sanctioned 'Design Institutes' to produce drafts of working drawings and materials specification for developments. Although this can cause problems with ensuring the concept remains faithful in execution, it comes with the advantage of allowing a reasonably small firm such as PRC to take a lead on these major urban development projects without having to commit personnel to the time consuming process of overseeing the engineering element.

So how does a firm such as PRC use UK experience in its China operations, despite the differences of scale? Vacher sees two areas as key to adding value at the concept and then design phase. Firstly, site history and, second, site analysis.

Synthesising history into a plan is not just about reproducing old looking buildings. Most of PRC's designs work exclusively with the modern, but do so in a way that reflects some of the traditionally accepted norms of Chinese architecture. Site analysis takes a broad look at the context of an existing city, its population and how they interact with their environment, incorporating natural features such as rivers or mountains.

Although the above seem like logical issues for planners to consider, countering the traditional 'density for profit' approach is a real challenge. Getting developers to see the value in an environmental or aesthetic design, or to factor in future traffic flows, for example, can be difficult when measured against the easier calculation of immediate sqm cash profitability. Where firms like PRC can add latent as well as aesthetic value to a property, the push for better architecture gets a boost.

A current example is the 86km₂ urban development being considered for Yixing in Jiangsu Province. Here the massive extension to the existing town - the new 'Environmental City' - is an attempt to incorporate and balance the need for urban density with environmental sustainability. As a taster of what this might mean, consider the project's use of steam 'waste' water from one of the power stations, being used to feed commercial fish ponds. As the water cools away from the plant, it provides varying



The future as Hangzhou sees it



Facing the right way in Ningbo



Yixing: Environmental Urban

temperature environments for different breeds of fish.

Away from the 10-year lead times for a single high rise in London, UK architecture is faced with some unique challenges of both scale and sustainability, in the world's most populous country. As these developments take shape and potentially even set benchmarks in their own right, it's good to see progress in the PRC.

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