

CICA Shanghai 2015: An Overview

By: Karen Eicker

In early December 2015, eight members of the International Committee of Architectural Critics together with critics and scholars from China, Korea and Japan gathered in Shanghai and Hangzhou to take part in the CICA Shanghai 2015 conference.

“Beyond Orient and Occident, North and South: The Universal and the Particular in Contemporary Architecture” was a collaborative effort between the International Committee of Architectural Critics (CICA), the College of Architecture and Urban Planning (CAUP) at Tongji University in Shanghai; the School of Architecture and Art at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou; and the Shanghai Urban Space Art Season (SUSAS).

The intention was to reflect on, and raise fundamental questions about, contemporary architecture in a global context, looking at contemporary problems and related architectural approaches. The programme was structured to include presentations of regional projects in architecture, urban planning, landscape design, theory, media, curation, and criticism itself, followed by interactive panel discussions.

The conference was curated by Professor Manuel Cuadra, PhD, Secretary General of the International Committee of Architectural Critics and Professor in architectural and built environment history at the Department of Architecture, Urban Planning and Landscape Planning at the Universität Kassel in Germany; and Professor Li Xiangning, PhD, Deputy Dean and Professor in history, theory and criticism at Tongji University’s College of Architecture and Urban Planning.

CICA Shanghai 2015 was opened by Professor Li Zhenyu, Tongji University’s Dean of the College of Architecture and Urban Planning. Over the following four days, a dynamic dialogue was developed in the form of an active cultural exchange between representatives from the different world regions.

Of particular interest were the parallels that emerged between the local professions in China, Korea and South Africa over the last twenty years – where architects continue to search for regional identities within a global context (the Modern Movement was cited as a particular influence), while taking into account rich vernacular built traditions as well as exponential technological advances.

This concept was introduced by Manuel Cuadra in his opening address entitled “Identity: the Architecture of the Human Condition” which traced the influence of European urban history on post-colonial South American architecture; and introduced the idea of the Anthropophagic Movement, or ‘cannibalistic’ architecture, where one culture is devoured by another in evolving an architectural identity relevant to time and place – essentially an “architecture of appropriation”.

Li Xiangning then traced the recent history of contemporary Chinese architecture in his talk “From Experimental Architecture to Critical Pragmatism: Individual Architectural Practices in Contemporary China”, which looked at experimental architecture as resistance; architectural autonomy versus social reality; politics versus form; globalisation versus localisation in the Chinese context; and the profession’s increasing concern with social justice and spatial ethics.

These talks set the tone for the rest of the conference and the debates and dialogues that ensued. Participants included the CICA members Professors Manuel Cuadra from Germany/Peru, Li Xiangning from China, Axel Sowa from Germany/France, Xing Ruan from Australia/China, Ruth Verde Zein from Brazil, Şengül Öymen Gür from Turkey, Trevor Boddy from Canada; and Karen Eicker from South Africa. From Asia, Korea was represented by Professor Hyungmin Pai, Japan by Professor Isozaki Arata, and China by Professors Wang Shu, Ge Ming, Lu Yongyi, Wang Junyang, Zhou Rong, Jin Qiuye, and Liu Chen.

Sessions were interspersed with visits to noteworthy architectural sites in Shanghai and Hangzhou, which included the China Academy of Art (CAA) campus by Wang Shu housing the Shui An Shan Ju Hotel (Wang Shu) and the CAA Folk Art Museum (Kengo Kuma); the Waterhouse at South Bund by Neri & Hu Design and Research Office; and the studio of Arch-Union Architects (founded by Philip F. Yuan), which included an exhibition and demonstration of cutting-edge materials prototyping.

The final day culminated in a panel discussion between the CICA representatives and members of the Chinese scholastic community. Ways forward were proposed in the statement that intellectual debates such as those of CICA Shanghai 2015 need to be made more public through exhibitions, competitions and the media; and in the question 'where to now?', which generated thoughts on metaphysical and ethical exploration; the need for deeper and more probing research into contemporary social issues; and pragmatic approaches that engage with spatial and resource sustainability.

The spirit of the conference was summed up in Cuadra's closing remark, "CICA brings together people from around the world who consider that reflections on architecture make a fundamentally positive contribution to the profession."

CICA Shanghai 2015 sought, through thought and debate, to find a balanced approach to regional authenticity within particular social and political contexts and a worldwide economic and environmental reality. The conference was instrumental in setting the conceptual context for further engagement between north and south, east and west; and in furthering a broader awareness of both global and regionally particular issues affecting the architectural profession and related industries worldwide.

The following is a list of the papers presented by the CICA members:

- "Identity: the Architecture of the Human Condition" – Manuel Cuadra (Germany/Peru)
- "From Experimental Architecture to Critical Pragmatism: Individual Architectural Practices in Contemporary China" – Li Xiangning (China)
- "What is the duty of a critic? – the basic and the supreme" – Xing Ruan (Australia/China)
- "Nature-Culture Symbiosis: Demir Houses by Turgut Cansever (TR) and Amanruya by Emine-Mehmet Öğün (TR)" – Şengül Öymen Gür (Turkey)
- "The Universal and the Particular in Hillbrow, Johannesburg: Outreach Foundation, Local Studio" – Karen Eicker (South Africa)
- "Heritage and participation: French debates on the city" – Axel Sowa (Germany/France)
- "Latin American Contemporary Architecture: common sense and idealism. Projeto Viver Building, FGMF Architects" – Ruth Verde Zein (Brazil)
- "James KM Cheng Architects" – Trevor Boddy (Canada)
- "Hans Scharoun: Landscapes and Architectures of the Vernacular today" – Manuel Cuadra (Germany/Peru)
- "Building a New Tradition" – Li Xiangning (China)

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