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## Architects Find Their Dream Client, in China

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*Page 3*



Peter DaSilva for The New York Times

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IT was an unusual commission, unlike anything that Stuart Silk, a Seattle architect, had been offered in his quarter-century of practice: design three high-end custom homes for clients he would never meet. Although there were some specifications for functions and dimensions — total square feet, for example, and the number of bedrooms and baths — there wasn't a clue as to style or a construction budget.

“A lot of emotions went through my head,” Mr. Silk says. “Disbelief was one of them. Then the anxiety that comes along with the responsibility to do something without direction. But ultimately it was very freeing and intellectually exciting.”

The commission came from Shanghai, where a Chinese developer was beginning work on a community of villas bearing stratospheric prices — 50 million to 100 million renminbi, or \$7.5 million to \$15 million.

How did Mr. Silk get the job? A consultant for the developer had simply seen a Palm Springs, Calif., house that he had designed, liked it, and offered him the project. Before long, the three villas expanded to nine.

Mr. Silk's 17-person firm is among scores of small to midsize architectural practices across the United States that are enjoying a startling boom in Chinese projects — whether in spec mansions for sudden multimillionaires or quarter-mile-high skyscrapers. Although a handful of big firms, like Skidmore, Owings & Merrill of Chicago and HOK of St. Louis, have extended global tentacles for generations, it has been only in the last half-dozen years that Chinese projects have gushed down to their smaller brethren.

These firms are grateful for the commissions, and not only for the obvious reason — that the Chinese work has helped fill the void left by a listless American economy. More intriguing, the architects say, is that Chinese developers and even government agencies are proving to be better clients than their American counterparts. They say the Chinese are more ambitious, more adventurous and even more willing to spend the money necessary to realize the designs. This thrills the architects, who have artistic undercurrents that often struggle to find an outlet.

The Zhongkai Sheshan Villa project, recently completed in a scenic suburb of Shanghai, provides a window onto the unusual workings of some architectural commissions in China.

This luxury development occupies 45 acres and comprises 80 custom villas. Wang Qian, a consultant for the developer, the ZK Real Estate Development Company of Shanghai, toured luxury communities in Palm Springs, Los Angeles and Toronto in 2003 and identified 17 North American architects, including Mr. Silk, to design the homes. The list eventually narrowed to 10.

"I have no idea whether Chinese architects can do this," said Mr. Wang, in an interview from Shanghai. "Maybe they can — but I didn't want to take that risk. In China there was no development like this. The villa market is rather young in China."

Each of Mr. Silk's nine designs was required to be distinct, but no stylistic guidelines materialized. For the first time in his career, he wasn't an architect interpreting a client's tastes and personality, but an artist facing a blank canvas. "It opened up a part of my brain that hadn't been exercised in a while," he says.

Mr. Silk visited the Suzhou gardens, west of Shanghai, where he encountered signs interpreting the landscapes; they were written in poetic language. That prompted the idea of writing story lines from which each villa design could bud. His narrative for one home, called Bending Paths, begins in a meditative vein:

"Like rings from a stone dropped into a pond," he wrote, "curving walls create a journey and define space."

On the aesthetic side, Mr. Silk says, the developer "really stayed out of it — if anything, they helped us more fully realize our ideas." As the design progressed, however, new requirements popped up, some calling for substantial redesign. Mr. Silk was surprised to learn, for example, that traditional Chinese feng shui principles meant that a front door couldn't be positioned at the foot of a stairway, lest good fortune tumble down the stairs and roll out the door.

But over all, he said, "Working in these narratives turned out to be a real win. It's an opportunity we don't get in the programs we usually work with here."

Five villa commissions went to Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects of Atlanta, a small firm known for its extroverted, edgy work. Merrill Elam, a principal in the firm, says the Chinese work came as a radical departure. The firm had never done a house that would be completed without a predetermined owner, and never had a client who expressed no aesthetic predilections.

"We had to think about the designs in a universal way," Ms. Elam says. "Is it nice to have a small garden beside a dining room? Yes! Humans have instincts for certain things — views, light, privacy. We had to apply these notions as if we would live in the houses ourselves. They didn't give us any clues."

AS Americans take on Chinese clients, they are adapting to some fresh nuances in the architect-client relationship. It's a swirl of patient relationship-building, fast-track decision-making and lyrical moments that, they say, would be unusual in American business dealings.

Chris McVoy, senior partner at [Steven Holl Architects](#) in New York, says a developer in Beijing gave the firm three months to develop a concept for a high-rise housing project that replaced a Mao-era factory in the heart of the city. The firm injected into the project Mr. Holl's long-simmering ideas about urbanism, tapping the earth underneath for [geothermal](#) energy, and fixing everything it saw wrong with the dreary Soviet-inspired high-rises in Chinese cities.

"We thought they'd say, 'You're crazy, forget it,' and we'd walk away," Mr. McVoy says. "We presented to about 20 people, and when we were finished, of course they all looked to their president to respond first. He said: 'Anybody can build buildings. Few can build poetry.'"

The project was built, complete with glass bridges linking the towers like neighborhood alleys in the sky. It led to the even more radical "groundscraper" headquarters for [China Vanke](#), a big developer based in Shenzhen in southern China. The structure is the size of the Empire State Building laid out horizontally and raised five stories off the ground to provide a public park below.

The firm also designed a development it calls the Sliced Porosity Block, under construction in Chengdu, in central China; jagged gorges are scooped out of the buildings to carve pathways for sunlight.

"There's no way a U.S. developer would let us do these," Mr. McVoy says, adding that the American mentality is, "if it hasn't been done before, then you shouldn't do it. It's all about risk, risk, risk. The Chinese have a kind of fearlessness to build things."

He says there may be more involved than just an intrepid spirit. "There's another dimension to it," he muses. "There's an appreciation of nonmaterialist ideas, a connection to history and culture and especially, meaning. They drive toward a solution, but there's also a metaphysical dimension."

Les Wallach, an architect in Tucson, Ariz., has likewise found a receptivity he's seldom seen in the United States. His 12-person firm, [Line and Space](#), has designed a 40-mansion China Vanke community near Hong Kong. The original commission specified a "clubhouse" for the 40 families who would occupy the homes.

"I told them these people could belong to any club in the world," Mr. Wallach says. "Why not do something entirely different?"

He hatched a concept for a hilltop retreat where artists could come to work; their art would become part of a communally owned gallery there.

"They thought about it for a little while and said, 'Let's do it,'" Mr. Wallach says.

[Goettsch Partners](#) in Chicago, an 85-employee firm that is now doing half its business in China, has found that its Chinese clients respect their architects' decisions about materials.

"They don't establish a construction budget in the same way we do," says the firm's president, James Goettsch. "I don't think we've ever had a project slowed down or held up over the budget."

The architects appreciate such decisive, generous clients. [Heller Manus Architects](#), a 25-employee firm in San Francisco is now doing two-thirds of its work in China, with a dozen projects currently on the boards. "They have coherent policies that enable them to get things done," says Jeffrey Heller, a partner.

Mr. Heller's business partner, Clark Manus, who is the president of the [American Institute of Architects](#), has a theory about the streamlined Chinese process. "The U.S. political establishment is mostly attorneys and other people who are involved with political science," he says. "In China, the highest-ranking officials tend to be engineers. They see a problem, they allocate money and effort toward a solution."

Of course, this efficiency sometimes comes with a price: a firmly decisive, top-down system means that projects are built whether or not people in local neighborhoods want them. As Mr. McVoy observes, modern development has already erased much of China's historic architectural fabric, like intimate courtyard neighborhoods of Beijing, which were defined by their hutongs, or alleyways. He says his firm would have "serious misgivings" about accepting a commission that would destroy something of historical value.

FOR some American firms, marketing efforts in China have consisted of little more than answering the phone. Jim Olson, partner in [Olson Kundig Architects](#) in Seattle, won a Chinese commission after a Hong Kong businessman and his wife spent a year separately combing through books and magazines for houses they liked. When they compared notes, an Olson-designed house in San Francisco was at the top of both piles. Thus came a commission for a 14,000 square-foot villa.

Now there's a neighbor calling — or the agent for one. Mr. Olson says a man who owns a nearby home site recently had an acquaintance call to test the waters. "That's the way they do it," Mr. Olson says. "Someone else first contacts you in place of the potential client to make sure you won't say no."

Patient relationship-building is at the heart of any long-term marketing effort in China. Mr. Heller has been traveling to China about six times a year since 2004, and much of his firm's work has grown out of a relationship with one person in a Chinese design institute.

"It's such a relationship-driven world," he says. "You go out to lunch, you go out to dinner."

Goettsch Partners, like Heller Manus and [Steven Holl](#), has established a permanent office in China, and a young Shanghai-born partner, James Zheng, is working as Goettsch's director of Asian operations. He says he spends 60 percent of his time in China, much of it cultivating relationships.

With more American firms working in China, the competition is increasing, he said in an interview from his Chicago office. "The good news is that it's relatively easy in Chinese culture to just call someone and say 'I want to meet you,'" he said. "You can't always do that in the U.S."

At this stage, ethnocentricity, traditionally a powerful force in Chinese culture, doesn't seem to be affecting the selection of architects. Mr. Wang, the Shanghai developer, says he just wanted the "right architects" for the villas. "It's not about who designed the villas; it's about the output," he says. "It's because the architect has designed a very nice building that it becomes prestigious."

Mr. Zheng says that there is a shortage of Chinese architects with the qualifications to execute large-scale commercial projects. "In my opinion," he says, "what most of them are missing is not the conceptual ideas, but rather the experience and ability to turn the concept designs into reality."

He says he has sensed some resentment or jealousy among some talented Chinese architects. "However," he says, "I believe the majority of them really understand and respect" the American architects' role.

Goettsch has been so successful in China — with 25 mid- and high-rise projects, and with a 1,440-foot tower for the city of Tianjin now in design — that the firm is becoming picky about its clients. Not all developers have adequate expertise for big projects, Mr. Zheng says.

"You want to avoid clients who don't know anything about building," he says. "They won't respect you; they'll try to change things along the way." Which sounds an awful lot like architects' complaints about American clients.

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