

Jeffrey Heller—Bay Area Architect

Designing & Planning Sustainable Projects in China

In the following TPR exclusive interview, Architect **Jeffrey Heller**, president of Heller-Manus Architects, a San Francisco-based firm with nearly two-thirds of its business in China, details the opportunity and appeal of working as an architect in China.

According to Heller, the enterprising spirit and political will in China sets it apart from the current development environment in the United States and California --China's response to urbanization is sustainability, and it is mandated by the government.

"There is a mindset in China to do things—to get things done, and to get them done right. In the United States—and I go back and forth so much, more than six times a year—I am concerned about the sense of not wanting to get things done, especially in California with its encumbrances."

-Jeffrey Heller, president, Heller-Manus Architects

We record this TPR interview in Shanghai while traveling with the Bay Area Council's mission to advance China-California economic relationships. Your architecture, design-build, master planning firm appears to be a perfect example of a thriving transpacific practice. What enticed you to expand in China?

I came to China out of curiosity. I knew that things were "happening" in China, I knew that Shanghai was changing and emerging as a great city, and I wanted to know more. Candidly, I was stunned at the scale and the rate of change and the dynamism of the place; Shanghai is a great livable city.

I set out to do something about that in 2004, when the economy in the U.S. was great. My motivation was only about "wanting to" and not about "having to" practice in China. There certainly was no game plan. Thankfully, I met the principal of respected Chinese architectural and planning firm; we established a professional relationship that's been ongoing since then.

You came, as you note, to Shanghai in 2004, at a time when California's real estate economy was quite strong. Obviously, China was more attractive. Elaborate on the value proposition for practicing architecture and planning in China then and now.

Well, there's a lot of creativity going on here; a lot of growth. With this growth, there are also a lot of big issues being dealt with in China—urbanization of a huge segment of the population, a transformation from agrarian to more urbanized that has been going on for a couple of decades. Clearly, China is becoming

a principle world power and maybe ultimately "the" world power. So it's very historic. Being a part of this historic transformation of China is great fun. Also, the growth rate is so fast that a lot of rushed, not very good planning and building decisions have been made. Candidly, our firm's role is valued; we are being asked to create livable, sustainable buildings and plans.

The government policy here, from the top down, is to develop sustainably. Government is embracing sustainability

"I came (to China) out of curiosity...I was stunned at the scale and the rate of change and the dynamism of the place; Shanghai is a great livable city."

much more powerfully than in the U.S. on a policy level. It's very exciting because they want to do all of these things that they should be doing. They have such a population, rate of energy use, and growth that it's a true challenge, but they have the mindset to deal with it.

What development and master-planning opportunities are now on Heller-Manus drawing table?

We're working in China with about five cities. It's very exciting stuff—large-scale urban design as well as

major development projects. In the United States, the economy is kind of slow, so we are working only in the San Francisco Bay Area. At least two thirds of our work is now in China. Lastly, We recently did a bid for the Bay Area Council on a design for a new proposal for a Bay Area/California World Expo for 2020, which was just announced today by our governor.

What should our readers know about the firm's China work and projects?

We are working in Guangzhou, where we're doing not only large-scale urban planning for the city of Guangzhou but also working for various clients in Guangzhou. We're working in Tianjin on a very interesting project, which is the headquarters for a company called CARTC, the China Automotive Research Technology Company—the people who write and enforce all the safety standards for automobiles in China that are built in China and that are brought into China. We have projects in Shanghai.

We're also in the competition on the waterfront in Shanghai, which is a seven-mile long section of the Huangpu; we're in the finals on that. We're looking to Hangzhou, probably on a project starting very, very soon in Chengdu. We're obviously, very busy.

We do this TPR interview of you as we boat on the Huangpu River past one of your firm's newest project's in Shanghai. Give our readers the background and design elements of this Shanghai high rise.

We won a design a design competition to do a building on Shanghai's
Continued on page 22

“Most of the people in practice [in China] are from the older world. The younger people here get it, and it will shift and change as time goes on, but right now there’s big value for us to bring it here and interact intimately with the people, professionals, planners, and officials here that make it work.”

-Jeffrey Heller, president, Heller-Manus Architects

Heller: China Motto: Get it Done; Get it Done Right!

Continued from page 6

Huangpu River. The building we’re passing now has a very strong presence on the river. The client was very visionary, and the planners were very encouraging about doing a green building. This high rise and mixed use building is 28 stories—principally office with many other uses—and it was the first LEED Gold high-rise in Shanghai.

Start to completion, how long did this LEED Gold high rise project take to win approval and be built?

Start to completion, from the very first day we entered the competition to the finish of the building, four years or less. Everything here moves at a positive and exciting pace. They manage their process much, much, much better than we do in California or the United States.

Is the pace of development in China faster because approvals result from a top down government process?

It is a top down process, but it is more than that. There is a mindset in China to do things—to get things done, and to get them done right. In the United States—and I go back and forth so much, more than six times a year—I am concerned about the sense of not wanting to get things done, especially in California with its encumbrances. We can’t seem to get out of a mindset that we need to get out of.

Could you share with our readers your firm’s other work, for example, in Guangzhou, China? What’s the nature and scale of this work?

The commission is for the new extension of the downtown of Guangzhou, about nine square miles. About a year and a half ago, the mayor invited and tasked Heller-Manus to review proposed plans for remediation of what’s called Guangzhou’s North Axis

Plan—where the Asia Games are going to be this November.

So, we came in and visited, they toured us around, and it became apparent very quickly that this was a very big deal. And then they asked me to comment on the current plan after touring around for a day. The plan was already in place; they were already working on it. The government basically did it. We had a meeting, and I presented 17 points that I thought were recommendations on the plan. What I didn’t know was that I was going to present them in a huge

“...unless we in the United States get our act together, we’re going to get left behind from everything from the economy to high speed rail to the environment.”

room full of city heads and staff. We walked in the room and it’s one of those official meetings with the chairs and the whole thing, people sitting on the side. I went through this presentation with the party secretary of the city and it was just amazing. The fundamentals of our plan were livability and sustainability, which has to do with pedestrian access around the city, controlling traffic, alternative means of transportation, greening the city, managing mixed-use, and some prospects of preservation in the city—putting those all in a coherent framework within Guangzhou. We dove right into it after that and we worked on that pretty hard. That was the first part.

Then we were invited on the second part, which is the South Axis Plan,

the next phase. And that was a full on competition and we were one of three or four. We applied the same principles, and, as I understand it, our plan was instantly recognizable by all the high officials and the planners, even without our name on them. Then we presented and were selected.

Are your projects setting a standard for like master planning commissions in China?

We’ve taken our show, if you will, around. Other cities are excited about what we’ve done, and that helped us get invited to the waterfront competition. Otherwise I don’t think we would have been invited. A lot of very high-visibility U.S. firms that applied for that competition did not get selected. I should add, however, that we work collaboratively with some top firm like AECOM and some of the top landscape architects in the United States. So we bring top-level expertise to our commissions.

As you noted, your Shanghai high-rise building is LEED Gold. Is LEED Gold certification common? Is it becoming a trend in China?

More and more, it’s a trend. There are more buildings embracing sustainable technology now, first of all because it’s government policy, and, secondly, because the developers, clients, and tenants all want to move in that direction.

Interestingly, when we started our building project, we were looking to do LEED Certified, and we were aware that the client was worried about the cost. With approval for LEED Certified, we pressed for LEED Silver because we thought that was affordable. By the time our client did the analysis, we were able to achieve LEED Gold, which was significant because it’s the second highest rating, Platinum being the highest. Heretofore, LEED Gold was difficult, but it’s becoming more achievable. We’re proud of our achievement.

Continued on page 23

CA Bids for 2020 World Expo with Heller-Manus Design

Continued from page 22

For the record, are there not architects and others in China who decline to embrace sustainability. How fully is sustainability in practice embraced in China?

The value our firm brings to China is that we shake things up from the old way of thinking—which is kind of a post-Russian, post-dictatorship view of design and planning. China has become, in many ways, open and democratic, although the government structure is the same. But everyone

For those who might to expand their firms to China, what advice could you offer about both today's challenges and opportunities?

First, I came because I wanted to. I started six years ago. Coming here now because you have to or think you need to is much more challenging. The reality is that more people and firms are coming. Establishing relationships, therefore, will take longer. China is a relationship driven society. Thus, it will be difficult

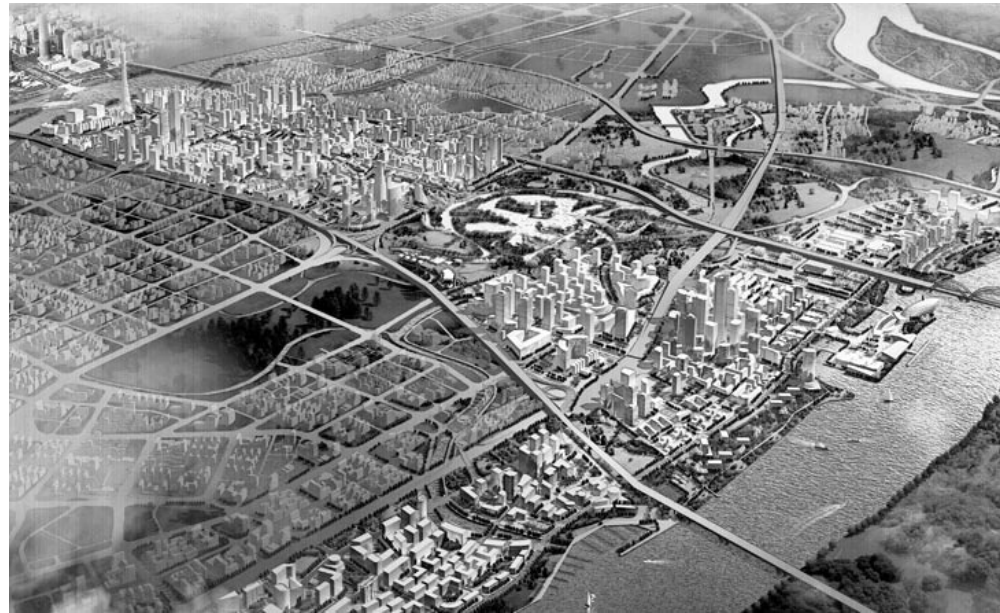
and attention they're willing to give or here.

How difficult is it for an American firm to do business in China with a partner or a collaborator that is from China?

For me a partner or collaborator is essential. I would not contemplate doing it any other way. I don't think you could be as successful if you didn't have that type of partnership. Although some firms come here and establish their own firm and they do work—and that works also because then they're here in full—the collaboration is much more powerful when you work with Chinese firms.

If you were asked by ULI to present in California about your work here in China, what would be the key bullet points of your firm's presentation?

First, that the governmental process and the national attitude were extremely important and extremely positive. Second,



Heller-Manus Architects

Heller Manus is responsible for the design of a comprehensive conceptual urban master plan for 14.78 square kilometers of Guangzhou's southern city center. The purpose of this master plan is threefold – to identify and assimilate developments, historic buildings and infrastructure worth keeping; to develop a cohesive core plan that will clearly define open spaces, waterways, and pedestrian, vehicular and transit circulation patterns; and to provide a visionary framework for future urban development.

is forward thinking now. They want to move in a livable, sustainable direction, and they're willing to embrace design that represents that spirit. That's a very different spirit, so it's very new. Most of the people in practice are from the older world. The younger people here get it, and it will shift and change as time goes on, but right now there's big value for us to bring it here and interact intimately with the people, professionals, planners, and officials here that make it work.

today, at best, to establish yourself here. It will take time.

The other comment I can offer is that I have a natural affinity and enthusiasm for China. I like coming here. It's not part of a business plan; it's part of my spirit about the place. That's a huge difference. If people want to come here just to do business they can do it with a huge time commitment. It might happen because there is so much going on, although it may or may not happen depending on how much resource

that the people here have the same goals, which is to get things done and get them done right. Third, unless we in the United States get our act together, we're going to get left behind from everything from the economy to high speed rail to the environment.

What's the hardest thing for your audiences in the states to appreciate and understand about the work you're doing here and the opportunity here?

"The fundamentals of our plan were livability and sustainability, which has to do with pedestrian access around the city, controlling traffic, alternative means of transportation, greening the city, managing mixed-use, and some prospects of preservation in the city—putting those all in a coherent framework within Guangzhou."

-Jeffrey Heller, president, Heller-Manus Architects

VX2011: The VERDEXCHANGE Green Marketmakers Conference
Jan. 23-25, 2011, Los Angeles, CA
www.verdexchange.org

Capital Improvements at Your Major Southern California Universities
Los Angeles Headquarters Member Event
Nov. 4, 2010, 5:30 pm - 7:00 pm
The California Club, Los Angeles
info@laheadquarters.com

Where the Sidewalk Ends
Building Industry Association of Southern California Los Angeles/Ventura Chapter
Nov. 5, 2010, 5:30 pm - 9:00 pm
Skirball Center, Los Angeles
mimig@bialav.org

Real Estate Evolution—What is Your Plan for Success in 2011?
Southern California Local/Alliance Program
Nov. 10, 2010, 11:30 am - 2:00 pm
Skirball Center, Los Angeles
<http://www.icsc.org/>

Sustainable Excellence: The Future of Business in a Fast-Changing World
Milken Institute Forum
Nov. 15, 2010, 4:30 pm - 6:00 pm
Milken Institute
1250 Fourth Street, Santa Monica
<http://www.milkeninstitute.org/>

2010 Mayoral Sustainable Housing and Transportation Summit
Los Angeles Business Council
Nov. 17, 2010
Korn Hall, UCLA Anderson School of Business
<http://www.labusinesscouncil.org/programs.php>

Understanding California's New Green Building Code
A Green Technology Event
Los Angeles: Dec. 15, 2010
Santa Ana: Nov. 4, 2010
<http://www.green-technology.org/calgreen/>

Ma: Leveraging Academia, Practice

25

The Planning Report

October 2010

Continued from page 19

given you seem to work 24 hours, 7 days a week.

The advantage of keeping a practice while holding this position is in constantly getting feedback from society, as represented by my multiple clients. That constantly refreshes my understanding of what society needs and what the industry is up to. Obviously, dealing with students and faculty is exciting, but by encountering other forces, the group of my clients, I get a different angle.

In terms of how to practice, I am forwarding my work into sketching and communicating through electronic devices. I am taking a “hands-off” approach. I do not do

the traditional architect morality of “hands-on.” I am developing the dimensions of a hands-off practice. I’ll get back to you when I develop the whole philosophy and its processes. I am giving a lecture this afternoon called, “Sketch and Stretch.” When I sketch I have a natural tendency to stretch, both in the process of thinking and delivering. Stretching allows me to, both in terms of space and time, create a process where I can participate in the process on my terms rather than fol-

lowing the flow that is sometimes so automated by the design process. I am halfway through the concept and I will report back later. Two words: hands-off and stretch. **TPR**

“The role I hope the School of Architecture can bring is the role that architects always play in industry—to bring them together through design thinking.”

Heller: CA Seeking 2020 World Expo

Continued from page 23

Two things. First, they don’t believe it, which only amuses me. The second is that they’re not willing to alter their mindset, to really get with what is really happening in the world right now and the concept of getting things done. That is killing the United States right now; certainly it is killing California. I see it on every single trip.

Let’s close by asking you to comment on the announcement that’s about to be made today in Shanghai by Governor Schwarzenegger.

The governor announced, with Jim Wunderman of the Bay Area Council, that we’re going to make a

Bay Area/California bid for the Expo for 2020. It’s extremely exciting, and we’ve thrown together a proposal for reference that follows those principles we are talking about.

It is exciting because the Expo Shanghai is setting an example for the world, and it is exciting that people are interested in the international global marketplace and about China as a center. The United States has been out of it for a while, since the mid-1980s. It’s time for the United States to reassert itself as a positive influence on the planet. It certainly worked for California. We talked a little bit about the idea of something jointly where there’s a piece in L.A. and the Bay Area to make a real California statement. **TPR**

“The Shanghai Expo has come off as a positive global experience, and we need to join in that. California is a place that could certainly be preeminent in doing it because we had the 1915 Expo and the Expo on Treasure Island in 1939. It would help lift California’s spirit and economy, and it would put us back on the global stage...”

-Jeffrey Heller, president, Heller-Manus Architects