

Olympian Ambition

When was the last time you could remember such a furious flurry of buildings coming online, all world-class architectural icons – before they were even completed? And all in one city? *Ngiom* gives his take



PHOTO COURTESY MICHAEL SEAN LEE



PHOTO COURTESY JOHN PAULINE, PTW ARCHITECTS

Opposite: National Grand Theatre; above: The Water Cube

The names themselves are unforgettable. Marketing brilliance in a nutshell. Or an eggshell.

Bird's Nest. Water Cube. Z Crisscross. Egg. Dragon. These and more will be on proud display during the Beijing Summer Olympics 2008. An architectural *tour de force* that will not only endure, but will help redefine Beijing and China in the 21st century.

First off, these structures aren't too terribly subtle, with their sheer scale struggling for contextuality. They are instead large singular statements that could be built anywhere in the world, provided they were accompanied by political will, large funding, and a deep well of cheap human labor. In other words, they *couldn't* have been built just anywhere.

The design concept of Terminal 3, the newest expansion of what is now the world's largest airport, Beijing Capital, is derived from a combination of two Chinese ideograms for "human," which resembles two upside-down 'Y's. Architect Norman Foster opined that the building appears like a "flying dragon" when viewed from the air, and the dense southeast facing windows do appear like scales when viewed from above. The building cost US\$3.8 billion, can handle 50 million passengers a year and took less than four years to build (the much smaller Terminal 5 at Heathrow cost US\$8.7 billion).

The interior is breathtaking, like being inside a huge tent whose roof has been stretched as far as the eye can see, gently tapering off into space. Despite its size and breadth, it suggests incredible lightness and airiness, really an incredible achievement – and an improved use of space and materials compared to Foster's earlier Chek Lap Kok Airport in Hong Kong (now ten years old), which is itself no slouch for innovative terminal design.



PHOTO COURTESY CHAD WALKER

Designed by Dutch-based OMA, the Z Crisscross Building – also known as the CCTV Building (it will house its new national broadcasting center) – is a *War-of-the-Worlds*-like structure of 550,000 sqm, accommodating up to 10,000 people, and costing US\$750 million. It is clever, striking, even brash, as if relishing its seeming ability to defy the principles of architecture, never mind the laws of gravity.

Like the other buildings in our story, it *demand*s to be noticed. Architect Rem Koolhaas started out as a journalist, so it was probably fitting that his design has generated so much copy, and not a bit of controversy. For if any building can be said to be out of context, this building is it.

As *China Today* reported, “Wang Bing, architect at the Beijing Institute of Architectural Design Research says of the new CCTV Building...that it gives nothing to those viewing it but a visual shock, and a costly one at that. Koolhaas has never designed a building of such huge dimensions anywhere else, and China has to spend billions of yuan for his experimentation.”

And a footnote (or dirty little secret): OMA may have a reputation as avant-garde rebels, but they almost certainly “borrowed” the concept from another architect, Peter Eisenman, for a Berlin office project (never built).



IMAGE COURTESY OFFICE FOR METROPOLITAN ARCHITECTURE (OMA)

Opposite: The Bird's Nest; above: The Z Crisscross

Another of Beijing's new architectural showcases – and one that some also believe is devoid of context – is “the Egg,” or National Grand Theatre, designed by Paul Andreu, who also did the Shanghai Pudong International Airport. With its glass and titanium panels glistening in the light, it appears as either a futuristic curved house of spiritual harmonies, or an alien (and menacing) spaceship.

The structure cost US\$325 million to build and contains three main components: an opera hall, music hall and theater hall. It is 212m long, 144m wide and 46m high. It's as tall as the nearby Great Hall of the People, and this proximity, (it's also very near the Forbidden City), has caused much grumbling as to its

unsuitability, indeed incompatibility, in the presence of the hallowed elders.

Nevertheless, the ellipsoid dome, completely surrounded by a pool of water, does impart a sense of tranquility. And who knows, the critics also complained about I. M. Pei's futuristic pyramid design for the Louvre addition, which is now generally agreed to have been a success.

The Bird's Nest, aka the Beijing National Stadium, was conceived by artist Ai Wei Wei and jointly designed by Swiss firm Herzog and de Meuron and China Architecture Design



Terminal 3, Beijing Capital International Airport

Institute. While it has also had its share of criticism (most notably from Ai himself – but that’s another story), all that was quickly dispelled once the structure began to take shape.

Interestingly, the building was not intended to resemble a bird’s nest specifically; the designers used it merely as an analogy in their concept presentation. From there it quickly caught on, and the “name” stuck. Aside from the obvious resemblance to a bird’s nest, the aesthetic behind it also has a very Chinese philosophical feel of lightness, elegance and harmony. And the name itself is in keeping

with the Chinese penchant for colorful, imaginative names (not to mention a famous Chinese delicacy!). It cost \$423 million, of which a large portion is contained in its 36km of unwrapped steel, weighing 45,000 tons. The stadium seats 100,000.

The name Water Cube speaks for itself. The outer wall, which mimics water bubbles, is based on an innovative material known as ETFE, fabricated like transparent pillows. This inflated hard plastic has a high thermal capacity. The envelope is patterned as if one “sliced” through a bubble, so as to see it from the inside, which would appear irregular and organic. The entire building is encased in a continuous frame, where space, structure and façade become one seamless element – like a massive cluster of soap bubbles.

Designed by PTW Architects of Australia, the Water Cube celebrates transparency and fluidity, and is quite stunning at night when light from within makes the building glow in crystalline fantasy. The building is 50,000sqm, comprises five swimming pools, and seats 17,000 people.

Love them or hate them, Beijing’s Olympic-sized boom has shaken up the architectural landscape, prompting lively debate and pushing the “monumental” vernacular to new heights of expression – and/or ego. **11**