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# AUSTRALIA CHINA CONNECTIONS

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OUTLOOK IS BRIGHT





# CITIES OF THE FUTURE

Despite the challenging environment, Australian architecture, urban planning and design firms are capitalising on vast opportunities in China's urban landscape revolution. **Sophie Loras** reports.



LAB Architecture most recently won a design competition for Xiamen's Wuyuan Bay project which includes a marina, showrooms for boats and water-planes, a hotel, retail, food and beverage and leisure and recreational facilities.

Despite the challenging market, more than 40 Australian architects now have offices in China, working on urban master plans and other unique projects as China transforms itself into a vision of the future.

Some have been operating in China over the long-term, others are only, in recent years, capitalising on the vast array of opportunities China presents to the industry as other key markets, such as the Middle East and Australia, dry up.

Austrade's Shanghai-based Trade Commissioner Luisa Rust says the large

numbers of Australian architects who have either established offices in China or fly-in-fly-out on a regular basis, is a strong indicator of the level of Australian interest and commitment to the Chinese market. Australian firms are working on projects across a vast number of disciplines, from sports-related projects to arts and cultural amenities, retail & mixed use, tourism, landscape design, interiors, public transport infrastructure, public buildings, aged-care and master and urban planning.

Ms Rust says Australian architects have a very

positive image in China. "This is due to their project winning history and delivery on iconic projects in China and abroad. Developers and Government project owners comment that Australians bring to their projects international experience, technical ability, innovation and creativity."

"One significant attribute that often is mentioned is our ability to solve problems with simple solutions. Australians are very practical and pragmatic," she says.

The competitive environment in China has intensified over the last few years with greater capability from local Chinese design firms and experienced Chinese born architects returning from overseas education and experience.

Adding to the competition is an influx of architects from Europe and the US as projects in those markets coming to a standstill post GFC.

Australia is not new to the Chinese architectural scene, nor new to designing some of China's most dazzling monuments.

Sydney-based architectural firm PTW is still basking in the glory of its iconic Watercube – completed in 2008 as a centrepiece of the Beijing Olympic Games. PTW now have offices in Beijing, Shanghai and Hangzhou, and the company most recently secured the 5-star Octopus Hotel project in Hainan.

Another Australian contribution to the Chinese architectural scene is the 150,000 m<sup>2</sup> headquarters for Chinese online giant Alibaba in Hangzhou, designed by HASSELL and completed in October 2009. It remains a benchmark for modern workplaces in China, incorporating flexible open plan office spaces within a campus style layout, garden networks and sun shading screens to represent Chinese ice-patterned windows.

HASSELL has the strongest Australian presence in China with over 250 staff. Other big players are Woods Bagot and PTW, but smaller firms are also having success in China.

studio 505, the design firm behind Melbourne's iconic Pixel building, is currently awaiting completion of its Wujin Lotus Conference and Exhibition Centre in Jiangsu.

Dylan Brady, studio 505's Melbourne-based director, says initial work in the Jiangsu area has led to more and more doors opening for the practice in China. The Wujin Lotus project in particular has propelled the firm's reputation beyond the region.

"The way projects seem to run in China, is you win a contract and then if you are doing a good job you get asked to do more... And then because we have delivered, we have just kept winning more contracts," says Mr Brady.

While the majority of studio 505's China projects are in the Jiangsu area, the firm has picked up work alongside other Australian firms on the Xitaihu and Taihu Bay master plans, and is exploring opportunities in Chongqing, Chengdu and Xi'an.

It has found Chinese tier one cities harder to break into. Mr Brady says getting work in China very much depends on developing relationships and then delivering on what is promised.

He says working in China, while challenging, presents opportunities that don't compare in Australia.

"The opportunities in China right now are vast but not without challenges – especially in quality and built output, and the ways of engaging with the client and their aspirations in raising the bar," says Mr Brady.

For the Lotus Project, studio 505's initial brief had been to replace the existing glass box on the site with 'something beautiful.' – "And that's how we got the job."

"The big challenge in China is it is maturing much faster than anyone realises in its own capacity and confidence," he says.

Grant Donald, the Partner & Design Director of Shanghai-based Silk Tree International says the opportunities in China speak for themselves.

His firm has a number of high-profile projects in the pipeline, including the

completion of design development drawings for a 5km-long landscape treatment along the South to North Water Diversion project in Zhengzhou. The 1000km-long scheme will eventually divert 44.8 billion cubic meters of water per year from southern areas to drought stricken northern and western areas.

STI is also working on the redevelopment of central Beijing's Wanshou Park into an aged-care recreational park.

"Things are happening here, and in the Middle East... and they are just things you don't see at home," he says.

Silk Tree International is one of a number of Australian-owned firms that, since 2008, has closed offices in the Middle East to concentrate on the opportunities in Asia.

At its peak, STI had five offices – in

## MELBOURNE

LAB Architecture Studio is an internationally recognized architecture and urban design practice, with offices in Melbourne, Shanghai, London and Delhi. Foremost on their list of many award-winning projects is Federation Square in Melbourne. Having just celebrated its 10 anniversary, Federation Square is the civic and cultural centre of Melbourne, with almost 10 million visitors a year. Fed Square has been published extensively in international magazines and journals, and has been the focus of several television programs.

LAB has completed projects in Australia, China, Singapore, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Riyadh, Beirut and the UK. In China, LAB has projects completed or under development in Beijing, Tianjin, Nanjing, Suqian, Xitaihu, Wujin, Ningbo, Qingdao, and Xiamen. These projects range from large-scale master plans, to high-rise and very high-rise office, residential and hotel towers, as well as retail and leisure developments, and institutional projects for culture and civic functions.

Although the head office resides in Melbourne, the LAB Shanghai office is directly involved in the co-design, management and development of the many projects across China and Southeast Asia. Additional design inputs and support comes from the London office as well as the recently formed office in New Delhi, India. This combined multi-national operation allows for flexibility and agile response to the changes and complexities of contemporary architectural design and production. Having operated in China for more than 10 years, LAB has considerable experience in working with associated LDIs, urban planning bureaus and local government agencies, and has worked with some of China's most prestigious development companies, including SOHO-China, GEI, Sunshine 100, Zovio, MCC and Wanda.

LAB Architecture Studio is a founding member of AUS – Australian Urban Systems. The AUS cluster is a Victorian Government funded initiative that promotes Victoria's skills in sustainable urban development in the key markets of China, India, the Middle East and Latin America. The cluster consists of a broad range of industry representatives committed to the Melbourne model of livability and sustainability and includes some of Victoria's leading research universities and government departments. LAB has acted as spokesperson at numerous events, presentations and forums on behalf of AUS, both in overseas markets and in Australia. LAB Architecture Studio is one of the most original and respected design firms in Australia.

## SHANGHAI

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studio 505's Wujin Lotus continues to open doors for the design firm in China.

Shanghai, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Damascus and Riyadh. Today, STI has the one office in Shanghai with China accounting for 90 percent of the firm's work.

Work for the firm's Middle Eastern projects (mostly from Saudi Arabia and Qatar) is now done from the Shanghai office – a practice that is becoming increasingly common among Australian firms using China as a cost effective hub for international design work.

#### SECURING PROJECTS IN CHINA

Mr Donald says securing initial projects in China is hard. His studio began with gratis work to demonstrate the firm's capabilities and he says it is not uncommon to get to the documentation stage before a contract is signed.

He credits his firm's successes in China to good business development managers who have the skills to work across both the western and Chinese cultures. And establishing good connections.

"In China, it's all about who you know here and what you know here," says Mr Donald. Establishing strong relationships with the local Chinese design institutes is also crucial for making headway in China as all projects in China must go through a local design institute.

Mr Donald says his firm tends to avoid public tenders as they are harder to secure.

Other Australian architects have told stories of tenders being rejected, but later discovering their designs had been used and reused across China.

"In Australia we put in a tender and off you go. Here, a tender or a contract is negotiable and it is just the starting point."

Robert Caulfield, Director of Melbourne-based architecture, planning and interior design firm, CK Designworks has been operating in China for several years but opened an office in

Shanghai in 2012 through a joint venture with an interior design firm.

He says the cultural differences in China are vast. "In Australia, we work around a fixed concept, whereas the work we do in China is a continually changing landscape."

Payment in China can be a drawn out process with stories of final instalments never being paid.

"It's about getting an early understanding of that to manage your cash flow," says Mr Caulfield. "It's all manageable if you are culturally aware."

**"And understanding that nothing you've agreed to at the beginning will be what you end up with – it will be a different project and a different cost."**

CK Designworks has projects across China, in Nanjing, Beijing and Chengdu and is currently exploring possibilities in Guangzhou.

The firm's success working on the master plan for Nanjing's Pukou district, which includes industrial areas, schools, hospitals, retail and entertainment complexes, sport facilities and housing for up to 200,000 people has provided good kudos for obtaining other projects in China, including the signing most recently for a hotel complex in Chengdu.

Another newcomer is GroupGSA which opened an office in Shanghai 12 months ago.

Alban Yuen, GroupsGSA Director who assisted with the set up, says the scale and speed of development in China is exciting. GroupGSA have secured 11 contracts in China in just one year, including major master plans for Chinese tier 2 and tier three cities.

"Down the track I see the Chinese market really growing for us," says Mr Yuen.

James Brearley is the Principal of Brearley Architects + Urbanists. He established BAU with his Chinese wife Fang Qun and they opened the Shanghai office in 2001.

Mr Brearley recounts with humour their early foray into China's architecture scene in the late '90s after winning an urban design competition.

"Unfortunately the client was unscrupulous and we decided never to work in China again!"

They did return, three years later, promising only to do Chinese projects if they were risk free.

"Needless to say that is impossible but we tried to minimize our exposure. We joined

a Victorian government supported Austrade assisted trade fair. A visitor invited us into design competition for a shopping and leisure centre – which we won. And then we then opened our Shanghai office to do that project."

Mr Brearley says BAU's early success in China is best described by the Chinese saying: "A blind cat bumping into a dead mouse."

He says having a Chinese friend, (now partner), to handle all the cultural complexities has made the difference.

Understanding the needs of clients, the expectations of professional practice, and working for low fees with a young local work force have all been challenging, especially combined with limited levels of communication.

"We enter many limited, paid design competitions and have an increasing number of direct commissions. Our portfolio of quality built work now helps, but we got by without it when we began," he says.

Almost all BAU's clients are Chinese, with major clients from local governments.

Projects are generally in Shanghai, Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces, particularly in Qingpu, Hangzhou, Suzhou, Nanjing, and Jiangyin cities. Mr Brearley says the firm avoids more distant projects as they are harder to manage during both the design and construction processes.

"The opportunities are enormous in China for individuals and companies in all fields of built environment design. However it cannot be done easily without a Chinese partner, nor without immersion living in China to partially understand the culture," says Mr Brearley

"Urban Planning, mixed use buildings and public parklands have been a privilege to design. Public parklands in China have been a joy to design. Because of the importance of parks in high-density cities, and because of the current lack of quality thinking and design we feel we can make a useful contribution."

LAB Architecture Studio which has a head office in Melbourne and offices Shanghai, London, New Delhi and a contact presence in Dubai, has projects across Australia, Asia, the Middle East and Europe. But the firm's director, Donald Bates, says the greatest number of its projects are located in China.

"China is a very significant and important market for LAB, both in terms of the number and size of projects, but also for the variety and types of projects," says Mr Bates.

"These range from large scale sustainable master plans, to high-rise and super high-rise office, residential and hotel towers. We have worked on many institutional building projects,



HASSELL's most talked about Chinese project, the Alibaba headquarters in Hangzhou.

such as council offices, libraries, museums and other cultural facilities, and we have been involved in a number of hotel complexes and large retail centres."

Projects come through a variety of sources and opportunities including the Victorian

Government's AUS initiative and state trade missions across China.

With more than 10 years experience in China, LAB also relies on a large network of previous clients and contacts for work. Mr Bates says that in the 10 years LAB

has operated in China, the market has matured and expanded.

He says developed areas such as Tianjin, Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing and Shenzhen, the market is well aware of trends internationally and the issues of aspects such as sustainability are well understood and appreciated as a necessary concern for any development.

Simultaneously, development pressures and opportunities have moved on to China's second, third and fourth tier cities, from the east coast all the way through to western China.

"We feel that there are many more opportunities – of a much greater scale and range of architectural interest – than currently exists in Australia," says Mr Bates.

studio 505's Dylan Brady agrees. "The creative integration in architecture, in culture, in community, for a city to be energetic, efficient... gives us great opportunities to teach the Chinese how that takes place," he says.

"And we are certainly not building new cities like these in Melbourne or Victoria."\*



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