

NEW ARCHITECTURE IN THE EMERGING WORLD

Projects by Andrew Bromberg, Aedas

Introduction by Aaron Betsky



Thames & Hudson

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TU-88
W18

10/11

prologue and epilogue by **larry rouch**
foreword by **ralph lerner**
introduction by **aaron betsky**
essay by **joseph giovannini**
edited by **oscar riera ojeda**



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The attainment of the Promised Land, at least in the version promised to the descendants of Abraham, has proven elusive. Periods in the wilderness, mountaintop sojourns, and the building of pyramids often interfered. The Promised Land for architects and designers is, likewise, elusive – we keep moving in search of new worlds with fertile ground for new opportunities, material developments, and enlightened patrons who appreciate our contributions. Today, the site of the Promised Land has returned to Asia – not western Asia between the Nile and Euphrates (with the notable exception of the Emirates), but rather the most eastern regions of Asia. Andrew Bromberg, the immensely talented designer at the Hong Kong Office of Aedas, arrived in the Promised Land ten years ago, and the projects he has carried out from this base have reached far and wide, to well beyond the region.

Andrew Bromberg was raised in the American West – an earlier vision of the Promised Land. At the start of this book, he presents us with an introductory autobiographical photo essay of his wide ranging Grand Tour leading up to his joining Aedas and his residency there (see Larry Rouch's essay, *Shadow Boxing*). His photographs and drawings are more than a travelogue – rather, they illustrate a personal point of view: the important forms (boats), sites (water spaces), regions and people that Bromberg is drawn to. He also makes a point of including himself in various different contexts, and provides sketches, notebooks etc., in order to link his intellect, and selected sites and forms, to his creative imagination. It is from this experience that his hunger to directly interact with his clients, their cultures, customs, and idiosyncrasies seems to have arisen. Bromberg's cultural and intellectual background is also a critical factor in understanding his journey, and his motivation to discover efficient and simple ways to build seemingly extravagant forms is not without its own history.

Architects in the United States have generally shown a tendency to see design as an apolitical act, and have glossed over the link between form and ideology. While

this may have worked well earlier, today's era of globalization of architectural practices brings the evaluation of this important linkage to the foreground in architectural practice particularly because of the increasing number of architectural firms whose offices are unfettered by the restrictions of national boundaries. For Bromberg, Hong Kong is only the base camp. It was through accepting the separateness of ideology from form, along with the tension between the America of rugged individualism (particularly in the American West) and the America that suppressed individuality within the confines of corporate structures, that large-scale architectural practices as we know them today were born. In fact, these large American architectural firms became synonymous with the 'American Way.'

Bromberg was educated in America, where the establishment of large corporate design practices took place in an era of extreme optimism following the Second World War. The country had just emerged as the dominant world power, every boundary seemed permeable and the victorious army was welcomed home to the Promised Land after its trials in the wilderness of global war. The new scale of architectural practices that emerged in that period, accompanied by the technical prowess of American architecture as it harnessed advanced technologies developed during the war, was accepted as a natural consequence of the ascendancy of modern architecture in the context of a country physically separate from the ideological founts of modernism in Europe. A new global form of practice was emerging to facilitate big building projects at home and abroad and this quickly led to the projection of America's new role as a world leader in architecture. This became a predominant model, one which explains a firm such as Aedas – whose own roots lay elsewhere.

East Asia is awash in celebrity culture when it comes to architecture, and the most prominent stars of the recent Beijing Olympics and the national pavilions at the Shanghai Expo are structures that signify the emergence of China as a

world power. Aedas' success and the very high quality of its projects, however, are based upon an emphasis on its ability to provide expertise and a full range of professional services, without tying itself exclusively to the work and ideas of any single one of the talented individuals working in the firm – for the most part, its designers remain anonymous – except for Andrew Bromberg. Bromberg's subtle wordless introduction is complimented by three analytical essays that examine several elements of this paradox: Aaron Betsky (*Curving and Swerving Through Sprawl: Andy Bromberg Makes Architecture in the Global Continuum*); Joseph Giovannini (*Aedas: Building the Future*); and Larry Rouch (*Shadow Boxing*). Together, they fill in blanks by providing readers with three distinct points of view on Bromberg, and the forms and meaning of his work. All three also touch upon the story of the phenomenal growth of China in the last twenty-five years – which needs no re-telling here.

While Bromberg may not yet be a household name comparable to Gehry, Koolhaas, or Foster, I see his place among designers working on their own or in the context of large international firms, as being that of an important 'Early Adopter' of a particularly important form of global practice. Others have followed. Increasingly, important architects and designers are now moving themselves, and/or their practices, to East Asia: OMA; UNstudio; Foster + Partners; etc. The region is filled with astounding opportunities for designers of Bromberg's caliber – those willing to adapt to the way practices are organized here, and who are also wide open to, and hungry for, new ideas.

As Dean I am often asked the difficult question about how best to categorize and evaluate the overall work of large architectural firms and their relationship to idiosyncratic design voices within their organization. There are a limited number of large firms where the primary designer's voice routinely employs easily identifiable, or sometimes truly exceptional characteristics and in some cases a firm's

work slowly evolves along a consistent trajectory of closed formal concerns, and demonstrates innovation within the category of a single building type, or through the identification of the firm with an iconic project. Perhaps the difficulty lies in the assignment of significantly greater value to the creation of a distinctive brand, rather than to the quality and value of simply making things well.

Bromberg's global platform is the Hong Kong office of Aedas. In my view, the firm is exceptional for demonstrating the value of emphatically supporting the voice of an individual designer within the operations of a truly global practice. In East Asia the question is even more pressing because of the culture's heavy emphasis on the material value of a distinctive brand, which stands in contrast to the prevalent tradition of extreme frugality. Most interestingly, the exceptional work of Andrew Bromberg thrives in this paradoxical condition.

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1.

To get to Andrew Bromberg's office, you have to undergo a very Asian experience. Take a subway to Quarry Bay, arrive at the bottom of an older building on a street with stores packed close together, cross an elevated walkway and walk into an air-conditioned maze of corridors that cut through the bases of a group of high-rise towers. Escalators negotiate rises and falls in floor levels, shops sprout out of the angled intersections of different structures, art blossoms on granite walls, and glimpses of older residential buildings reflect off the expanses of glass. Find your way to the right elevator bank, push the button to make the right conveyance appear, rise up to a high floor and find yourself in a world of white walls, curtains, receptionists poised over ledges and monitors beaming out the latest news. Walk into the design studio, and you find row after row of a polyglot collection of mainly very young architecture enthusiasts staring at screens while outside cargo ships make their slow way between the steep green hills from which needles of human habitation rise. This is Hong Kong, and this is the world in which Andrew Bromberg and his team work.

It is a world with certain important characteristics. First, it is, obviously, urban, but it is a city whose scale and intensity far exceed the ones for which, until very recently, traditional rules, theories and models existed. Second, it is a sprawling urbanism: not only out towards the periphery and into the landscape (Hong Kong and Shenzhen are already almost one city, and soon the whole Pearl River Delta will be one agglomeration), but also internally, as the traditional borders between functions, buildings and districts blur. The city no longer consists of objects that together create a much larger object, but of interpenetrating zones and forms whose intensities ebb and flow.

Third, the spaces most people inhabit in such cities are conditioned. This is literally true as much of the globe's most intense growth has occurred in zones with a hot climate, but also socially and certainly economically speaking. Your use of the city is dependent on your economic function, but also on how

you are dressed and behave. The city's interiors are reserved for those who belong, and the sliding glass doors admit only those who have a proper place within. Those who do not belong roam the streets; outsiders even if they are in the city's core.

Fourth, the urban environments that have grown up in this manner necessitate dense and intense moments of use. At the core of the city is the computer screen, fed with an array of data; the store or restaurant, which are the endpoint of often global distribution systems; the bedroom, nurtured and cocooned by myriad technologies; and the place of spectacle, where more technological and economic struggle produces moments of visual intensity. The containers for these controlled explosions are shrink-wrapped in cocoons as tight and cheap as the designers and developers can make them. They advertise themselves by appearing slick and minimal; as they are, while sporting the sort of inhuman, robotic appearance that can only come out of the same sort of systems which have precisely these characteristics.

Finally, this urban environment is generic in that it consists of elements that are present around the world. The competition for these things, whether they are goods or buildings, is intense, and marks the struggle between different urban areas to define themselves. While some of the largest and most successful cities, which have grown exponentially in the last few decades, are enlargements of existing megalopolises, most of them, from Hong Kong to Singapore to Dubai, are almost instant phenomena that have grown up out of what were, a century ago, small villages outside of the major areas of development. While this is true of every generation of cities produced by the industrial revolution, whether they be Manchester, Liverpool, the Ruhr area, Detroit, Cleveland, Los Angeles or Tokyo, the speed and scale of the expansion of this latest crop of urban centers, as well as their distance from traditional centers of growth, has been of a different order.

It is within this city, perhaps unrecognizable as such for those looking for the likes of New York or Chicago, let alone London or Paris, that Andrew Bromberg works. He sees his task as contributing towards the growth and success of these cities, while delivering an efficient package that is still recognizable as an architectural product. To do this, he must use the logic of the technology, global culture and sprawling form that has produced the urban fields in which he operates.

2.

As I noted above, the combination of conditioned intensity and sprawl is central to this environment. On the one hand, buildings are increasingly defined by the need to create as efficient an environment as possible. On the other hand, they appear not only in a physically dispersed space, but also as nodes within networks of transportation and data dispersal and thus are, in a sense, three-dimensional storage and retrieval systems. The question, then, is how they should appear. What contribution can architecture make to an almost automatic process of condensation and so reduce the anonymity of such containers?

On top of these two questions, an architect such as Andrew Bromberg, who is based in Hong Kong and whose work appears mainly in the "new" cities that have arisen out of these forces, has to figure out whether he can find an identity or sense of place in these sprawling collections of nodes which seem to be the same everywhere. What imagery can he draw on, what will make the products his team creates distinctive and saleable, while also responding to whatever traditions, specificities or futures he might be able to draw on in the locations for which he designs?

If we look at the first of these conditions separately, we might notice that what we think of as architecture is hard to find. First, creating an efficient space means maximizing the amount of square footage of a quality that is safe and usable with the mini-

mum amount of capital investment. There are, quite simply, formulas for this. On top of the traditional calculations of floor area to core ratios, come safety regulations, and bubble diagrams. Architects these days must contend with software that tells them how to maximize area and minimize material use, not to mention the calculations that developers use before they even hire a designer. Floor and even whole building configurations become standardized, their variations predetermined by a meta-calculation of relations between all of the financial and contextual formulas to which they must respond. Towards the end of the process, value engineers and other cost cutters tend to leech anything to which a use value cannot be assigned out of the design.

The only thing saving buildings from complete and interchangeable anonymity is that fact that developers in particular are often driven as much by ego and risk-assumption as they are by rational considerations. Bromberg's clients, in particular, are quite often entrepreneurs, rather than the sort of anonymous corporations that today dominate more saturated markets. They believe that they can find value where others have not, and are often enough successful.

They also believe that they must create a "product" that is distinctive, both in terms of how it appears and what it delivers in terms of space and amenities. Architecture thus becomes a kind of validation of place on the one hand, and a clever way of creating recognizable products on the other.

In terms of building in sprawl, developers must thus identify the location for the next node. This used to be a question of building near ports, the entrance to mountain passes, river crossings, or major intersections of natural travel routes. Then it was a question of looking for major highway interchanges, the presence of flat land suitable for development, balancing distances between previous developments, shifting demographics, and even such arcane issues as the presence of major power sources or golf courses. Now, optimal locations are even more difficult to ascertain, especially

in the new cities of Asia and the Middle East. What makes the issue even more difficult is that sites are quite often designated by governments. This has been true in Hong Kong for many decades, and is also the case in Singapore. In cities such as Dubai, the rulers let a few firms compete against each other, but only in zones they have assigned. It is within such areas that sub-developers must find ways of distinguishing their product without any natural or man-made references. In rare cases, the overall developer needs a strategy like Emaar's production of the ridiculously inefficient, but highly noticeable, Burj Khalifa.

Bromberg's 2005 design for the Boulevard Plaza next to the Burj Khalifa is in this case more typical, as it involves a pair of buildings whose height and placement are the result of overall development considerations (the twin towers are part of a build-up towards the central exclamation point, and also serve as one of the circular development's gateways). Given this starting point, the buildings must have enough character for the developer to market them with some conviction and success.

The placement of such buildings in what is – at least from the developer's perspective – a tabula rasa, means that their function must also be interchangeable. Why is one building a condominium, a hotel, or a set of rental apartments? Or why is it an office building, either for headquarters or back-office support? Could it even be some sort of storage facility for data or goods? The possibilities are in some cases completely open, and the function an architect assigns to a given plot depends on a combination of market analysis and guess-work.

At the intersection of these concerns lies the fact that such speculative structures have to be part of an overall picture of dynamic development. The proliferation of Free Trade Centers in the 1980s started this trend: governments designated specific zones where nodes within global sprawl would be placed, and these areas had to serve business people with a variety of structures, including not only office buildings and storage areas, but also hotels, longer-term residences, shopping, restaurants, and even recreation. All of these pieces had to be related and connected. This was also true for newly designated urban areas such as Canary Wharf in London or the various planned developments around the Bay in Tokyo.

In such a situation, which Hong Kong and Singapore again pioneered in the 1970s, a building is in essence a fragment of a whole, but that whole has no coherence other than its containment in a given site. Moreover, the buildings have to be recognizable as being part of the international network: they have to proclaim the fact that they are modern, efficient, conditioned, secure, and plugged into infrastructure. Collectively, they have to look like a node. They also have to contain the sort of spaces that the people who control (through demand or development) such facilities, recognize. Not only do the office floors and hotel rooms have to be standard, so that in the middle of the night the jet-lagged traveler knows where the bathroom is, but there also has to be a food court, swimming pool and a branch of a well-known purveyor of suits or shirts.

Thus the architecture is, again, to a large degree pre-determined, and it is no coincidence that most such developments are designed by a relatively small collection of "alphabet soup" firms (companies whose name is made up of the initials of the original or current partners). It is only in smaller, local developments that other designers have a chance to obtain commissions, and some deviations in function or character are possible. In most cases, however, the locals are trying to look and act exactly like their international models. All this, by the way, comes without mentioning the monocultures of mass housing developments that make up the anonymous meat of much sprawl, whether they be suburban homes in the United States or the apartment slabs of Asia. These developments feature, quite simply, no architecture whatsoever. There is only the environmentally and socially unsustainable production of dreary space.

The one place where the nature and thus the character of new construction is not either completely automatic or generic, is in the creation of the infrastructure that ties all these nodes together. Airports and high-speed train stations have become the locations for the most heroic and monumental architecture of the early 21st century, eclipsing government or business headquarters, as well as cultural institutions. This is where identity is set and where money must be spent on something more difficult to define than work, living or even play, namely the gathering, waiting and entertaining of large groups of people. These nodes become celebrations of the very nature of sprawl.

