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MY PRACTICE ^{OF} ARCHITECTURE ^{IN} CHINA

Francesco Scolozzi
Compiled by Julia Ningyu Li & Hu Yinan



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To Matti and Nicky, the treasures of my life.

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PREFACE

Dreams Realized in China

I have had the pleasure of knowing Francesco Scolozzi for 10 years. During that time, he has travelled to China several times annually, frequently staying up to 4 months at a time. No matter where he goes to in China, whether it be Beijing, Dalian or another city, he is comfortable walking alone on the street, or taking the bus or subway, not different from other Chinese residents except that he does not speak the language. Francesco enjoys very much the Chinese culture as well as its food such as Beijing Duck. However, this is not what motivated him to leave his luxurious 5500-square-foot house in Toronto (as detailed in the well-known newspaper *Toronto Star*) and stay in a small condo of less than 100-square-foot in China. Francesco's taste for European and North American cuisine is reflected in his work, with his architectural style combining the influences of both Eastern and Western cultures. His designs are widely accepted by the Chinese people and a number of high-rises he designed have been built in China. He attributes much of his success to his acceptance in China.



Born in Italy, Francesco received his Doctor Degree in Architecture at the University of Florence and later earned his Master Degree in Urban Design at Harvard University, in the United States. In 1967 he founded the company that bears his name, Scolozzi Architect Inc. in Italy. The combination of the first letters of his company name is equivalent to the Chinese character SAI, which means competition. Indeed all his life Franco has been bidding and competing with others. Through this competition, he has been able to advance his career in China. At the invitation of the Shanghai Municipal Government, Francesco together with Macklin Hancock, principal of Project Planning, made his first trip to China in February 1995, to propose a master plan for the Century Business District of Shanghai called Lujiazui. When he arrived at Shanghai, he experienced a culture shock because Shanghai was not as developed as it is now. The city was heavily polluted and there was no heat in the conference room of Shanghai Municipality. Francesco, dressed in suit, had to put his hands on the tea cup in order to keep himself warm. However, the simple living conditions in Shanghai did not prevent him from working in China. From his hotel room he pulled up his curtain and looked outside the window. He was shocked to see such a huge construction site, on which at least 40 high-rise buildings were under construction within his eye sight, not to mention the projects in its surrounding areas. It was quite an incredible experience. He had never seen something like that in all his life. This city, with its thousands and thousands of people moving from one part to the other part of the city like a river of bicycles, symbolized a tremendous market. During



his career, he had never worked before at the level of 5 square kilometres. Francesco felt that this was the perfect opportunity. In 1996, however, tragedy struck. His eldest son, a fourth-year architecture major at Carlton University, lost his life in a car accident. Francesco was so distraught over his son's death that he withdrew from his work for a lengthy period. Several years later he travelled to China once again since he needed to walk out from the shadow of his son's death and escaped from that environment. Francesco has been fortunate enough to have his vision for projects transformed into reality in China. He won the international bidding for the 30,000-square-meter China Nanjing Youth Science Center and, later, the new campus of Dalian University of Foreign Languages and RITS Garden Villa for Beijing Capital Group, to mention just a few.

Francesco has witnessed tremendous changes brought on by China's open policy and the transformation of Chinese architectural style from pro-American to pro-European and, subsequently, to the integration of its own national features. As a foreign architect working in China, Francesco always sticks to his principles when conflicts arise over his designs. One incident I recall occurred when Francesco designed the Bank of Communication head office in Nanjing. I happened to be on a business trip in Nanjing at the time. When I spoke with him in the morning, he was in Dalian and had no plans to go to Nanjing. By the evening, he hurriedly travelled to Nanjing, with his plans in hand. Due to the language barrier, I served as his interpreter when he met with local architects, the next day. At the meeting, he stressed that the reason for coming to Nanjing, was because of major modifications to his design,



especially the design of underground coffer. No parking space was permitted surrounding the coffer and even bicycle parking would affect the outside appearance. The Chinese architects reiterated that they were obliged to follow the construction standards of China. In this case, the underground space had to be utilized for parking in direct proportion to its construction area. I told them I was not Franco's interpreter; rather I was his friend and a fellow townsman of Nanjing. Since this building would last more than a hundred years, the focus should be on the future while making the design. Francesco mentioned that all bank coffers worldwide are clear in the surrounding areas in order to prevent any hidden threat. This is common sense and a matter of principle. By compromising, he felt his reputation as an architect could be in jeopardy. Through mutual communication, the Chinese architects eventually accepted Francesco's ideas and immediately made the appropriate changes. This building is now one of most extraordinary projects Francesco has designed in China.

Francesco is now at an age where, having achieved much success, he could easily retire to enjoy the rest of his life. However, he has no desire to give up the work he is so fond of. Architecture has become an essential part of his life. To maintain a healthy body and keep fit, he not only continues to exercise, but carefully watches his diet. As he likes to say, "No architect ever has a big belly." Francesco has a strong sense of responsibility. After he finished his project design for 175 units of Jinglong Garden Villa (with 380-square-meter each), developed by Beijing Capital Group, he personally went to the



construction site, on numerous occasions, to provide direction. Early on, Francesco held high expectations when it came to food and living conditions but, for the sake of his dream, he was willing to live with more simple conditions, eating food to which he was unaccustomed. He seems to have been destined to do this work. Currently, he finds himself on a tremendous construction site in China. He continues to get more and more projects in China...

Julia Ningyu Li
December, 2009

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I would like to thank Julia Ningyu Li, who has been promoting the book many times. I was reluctant to work on this book because I felt my feelings and experiences were private and was reluctant to open these experiences to others. But in the end, I realized that my life experiences and my work in China could help others understand why I came here, what my philosophies are, and what my professional life and my dreams here are like. Architecture is the center of my life and the motivation of my existence. And together with my family, it is the most important thing that I've dedicated all my attention, effort and passion to.

I am thankful to my friends Peter Yau and Macklin Hancock. They took me to China and introduced me to Chinese culture. Macklin was born in Nanjing. His grandfather William was the founder of the Nanjing Gulou Hospital. Peter is originally from Hong Kong and has always been extremely fond of China, where his roots are. Together we visited many areas of China, where I was introduced to various intellectuals, officials and interesting people. For me this has been a process of growth and learning of Chinese culture in its environment.

INTRODUCTION

My Life as an Architect

For me, this is almost the 14th year working nearly full-time in China. It has been and still is a very exciting experience. I've always been very fond of the East. Years ago I didn't know very much about Chinese culture, but I did get in touch with Japanese culture and as a matter of fact, a few years after my graduation, I worked with Kenzo Tange, a very famous master of Japanese architecture—probably one of the most famous architect and planner of the sixties and seventies. I had the opportunity to work with him because I was hired by Finanziaria Fiere Bologna to be a consulting architect.

At that time I was a young architect graduated with honors from Florence University, Italy. The mayor of Bologna had appointed Kenzo Tange to design the master plan of Bologna North, and the Finanziaria Fiere was a public corporation in charge of developing a section of Bologna North, the Fiera District. This job gave me the great opportunity to work with Tange for more than one year and learn about Eastern culture.

I was in Japan a few times, and during these opportunities, I had a chance to appreciate and enjoy the sophistication of



Eastern culture. I say “Eastern culture” because Japanese and Chinese are different cultures that have similar roots and common ground; the major differences is the style of things, but in substance, some of the traditions and behaviors are quite similar.

Now that I am close to the conclusion of my professional career, it is great to look back to my past and see what I’ve done and achieved all these years for the people of China. Because our profession is a social profession and is oriented to work for the people rather than for ourselves, what we do is very important for the development and the future of the cities. Very few realize the importance of an architect role: in a broad sense, it can have together with politicians the success or failure of a city. I take lots of pride in my work done in China; it is my small contribution to the renaissance of the country.

Unfortunately, the knowledge of the layman of architecture and the role they have in the formation of a city is very scarce; developers after the end of 20th century and, even now, in most cases tend to continue to put up ugly buildings polluting the aesthetic of our environment. An ugly building is going to be on our planet for 50 to 100 years, and the presence of an ugly piece of architecture is going to make the environment unpleasant for everyone. We know from sociological investigations that the impact of the living environment on people is quite crucial and can have a serious impact on the growth and psychological development of people. People will suffer if their living environment is not a good one. That is to say, it is important for any architect to always look back to



past realizations and from this experience try to improve the design performance for the future. As architects we are called to build for the environment and to create and improve the condition for a better life for everyone of us. To achieve this goal, we need help from everyone. We need more consciousness and culture to have better cities.

Architects in China, a country that is developing at this moment, are extremely important. I've seen many cities in China that are, apart from historical monuments, great in terms of design. There is a lot to learn from these old samples.

The non-official architecture is basically an economical architecture. In the earlier decades of the People's Republic, I think there was not so much concern for the quality of the living environment because the major concern was to built shelter for the people who very badly needed it. Buildings did not belong to the people but the government, and until recently, the concept of building management did not exist at all.

There are many areas of the city that have been very much degraded and the environments of the building in some cases are run down. This is very important for architects to re-create a new environment for the Chinese people to live better. I think we have a tremendous task to improve the situation and the quality of life; we need to work together with local architects to show them that the ideal direction is not of profitability but the direction of a humanistic approach of creating a better environment.

Money is important, but it is not as important to do the job that the people expect from us. I think architects in China—