

Cover Story: Upgrading Taipei's Architecture

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* Three Who Have Had an Impact - By Lin Mei-Chun

* What's Happening Beyond Taipei - By Lin Mei-Chun

* Exquisite but Temporary - By Stephanie Poon

Despite its aspirations to be an international city, Taipei has not been able to boast of much world-class architecture - glorious buildings that breathe spirit and pride into a metropolis. Even Taipei 101 has gained more attention for its height than its design. Now as a result of architectural awards focusing public awareness on exceptional design, as well as a movement within the profession to reform architectural education and qualification procedures, hope is stirring that new construction may give the city a much different look in the years ahead.

By Lin Mei-Chun

Landmark buildings serve as symbols of the city in which they are located, reflecting its history, culture, and level of technological and artistic achievement. The Eiffel Tower is the first thing that comes to mind when one thinks of Paris; in New York, prior to 9/11, it was the World Trade Center's twin towers. In Taipei, that status belongs to Taipei 101, which at least for a few years - until it was surpassed this July by Burj Dubai in Dubai - had the distinction of being the world's tallest building.

Yet aside from its height, Taipei 101 has won few plaudits for the magnificence of its design, and the harshest critics dismiss it as a giant metal-and-glass Christmas tree with doodads attached. Further, beyond that single iconic building, Taipei has been unable to compete with the glorious skylines gracing many of the other leading cities of the Asia-Pacific.

The architectural development of Hong Kong and Singapore, for example, to a great extent benefited from the international mindedness implanted during long-term British presence in those former colonies. Tokyo's landscape is the product of combining Western and Asian, traditional and modern influences; Japan's long history provided a foundation, and the throbbing commercial spirit of the city attracted many of the world's top architects to demonstrate their capabilities. The rapid modernization in China has enabled its architecture to catch up fast, as the astonishing transformations underway in Shanghai and Beijing attest.

Looking back over the past half century, a number of factors can be cited as hindering Taipei's architectural development. One was political. Although the Japanese carried out initial urban planning during their 50-year (1895-1945) colonization of the island, after the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek arrived in 1949, it looked on Taipei as merely its transitory capital pending "recovery of the mainland." Until a few new buildings to house ministries went up in the 1970s, investing in new public structures would have been considered defeatism.

The frenzied nature of the post-war economic growth also played a role. Taipei, which now has a population of about three million, had only about 240,000 residents in the mid-1940s. Then came the flood of refugees from China, followed by decades of migration of job-seekers and their families from the countryside. The need simply to provide sufficient housing was so intense that considerations of beauty and design were most often ignored.

Particularly in older sections of the city, most streets were - and are still - quite narrow, leaving little room for gardens, pedestrian zones, or other public space. It is a fundamental problem that has vexed every mayor. With the available land so limited and so expensive, developers seek to maximize profits by making the most intensive use of the space allowed under the law, which is often to the detriment of the quality of the living environment.

Aesthetics need attention

Residents, too, may seek to gain extra space - for example, by enclosing balconies or building illegal structures on rooftops - at the expense of aesthetics. In the interest of security, they often bar the windows, further ruining the building's appearance. Some of the blame for the ugliness also belongs to the developers, who frequently shun more expensive materials to cover their buildings with tiles that soon grow discolored and dingy. At least in this respect, the situation has recently been gradually improving. Nowadays it is more common to see exteriors in brick or architectural concrete to better show off the quality of the construction materials in high-end buildings.

Another criticism is that not enough has been done to bolster Taipei's historic identity. Kuo Chao-lee, associate professor in the Graduate Institute of Urban Planning at National Taipei University, says the city government has long focused on the development of new districts rather than the conservation of older historic areas, such as Wanhua and Dihua Street, that add much to the character of the city.

The beginning of the Japanese colonial era in Taiwan coincided with the period in which Japan was rapidly absorbing Western ideas and practices. For Japanese architects heavily influenced by European culture, Taipei became an ideal place for experimentation. The Presidential Office Building [originally the Japanese Governor-General's office], Control Yuan, Taipei Guest House [then the Governor-General's residence], National Taiwan Museum, and the old wing of National Taiwan University Hospital - all built in a hybrid style with a classic baroque flavor - were erected at that time.

Post-war, as the Taiwan economy began to take off in the 1960s, ZhongShan North Road became the showplace for Taipei's best buildings. The Chia Hsin Cement Building and the former Taiwan Cement Building were considered examples of the most modern office buildings. A few blocks to the north, St. Christopher's Catholic Church, erected in 1967 and now best-known as the gathering place for Filipino workers, is noted for its excellent arrangement of space.

Many public buildings during that period emphasized palace-style architecture buildings in a spurt of Chinese nationalism that was a reaction to the Cultural Revolution taking place on the mainland. Examples include the National Palace Museum (1965), Chungshan Lou on Yangmingshan (1966), National Museum of History (1970), new wing of the Grand Hotel (1973), and the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall (1980). The genre, then the epitome of political correctness, is now viewed as having little architectural value. Han Pao-teh, director of the Museum of World Religions, criticizes the style as "outdated" even at the time the buildings were built. Kuo Chao-lee says it merely duplicates the look of ancient Chinese buildings with no innovation.

Despite its similar style, the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall (1972) has gained widespread appreciation. The architect, Wang Da-hong, was considered the leader of Taiwan's modern architecture movement in the 1950s. For the Sun Yat-sen Memorial, he vowed to invent a "new Chinese style." Critics agree that the building successfully reflects tradition while casting it in a modern form that eschews gaudy decoration.

Aside from these grandiose palace-style structures, most public buildings constructed between the late 1950s and early 1970s - such as Ministry of Foreign Affairs (also done by Wang Da-hong), Taipower dormitories, the display center of the Agriculture Department (nicknamed the "Hall of Holes") and the Student Activity Center at National Taiwan University - have received general approval. These projects were constructed when the nation was still struggling economically, and people were more careful about resources. Under the principle of plainness and simplicity, they are purely function-oriented, carried out using straightforward techniques. "They appear genuine and modest, with their own character and spirit," says Victor Su, managing partner of Stonehenge Architects International.

Movement to the east

In the 1970s and 1980s when Taipei started to be more prosperous, the city began to develop eastward along such thoroughfares as ZhongXiao, RenAi, XinYi, and HePing Roads. A big number of modern commercial buildings rose quickly, although today their quality is rated as mediocre because of the then-shortage of experienced architectural professionals.

At that point, high-rises began to appear in Taipei. Completed in 1985, the Taipower Building on Roosevelt Road was the first in Taipei to exceed 100 meters in height. The number-one position was soon claimed by the Shin Kong Building (244 meters), which went up across from the Taipei Train Station in 1993. Its completion at the peak of Taiwan's economic boom symbolized that Taipei had reached the stage of being a highly developed commercial city. The building remained the prime downtown Taipei landmark until Taipei 101 opened in the XinYi District in 2003.

Designed by C. Y. Lee & Partners, Taipei 101 has been a controversial piece of work. It has been a source of pride that Taiwan possessed the construction technology to be able to build the world's tallest building, served by the world's fastest elevators. But many critics complained that the design incorporated too many Chinese elements - such as the basic pagoda shape and the ancient-coin motif on the exterior. Others have objected that the abrupt way the building seems to touch the ground gives it an unwelcoming disposition.

It is noteworthy that when the building was recognized at the 2005 Far Eastern Outstanding Architectural Design Awards, Taiwan's most prestigious prizes in the profession, Taipei 101 garnered a Special Award rather than one of the regular prizes for architectural excellence. The judges reportedly engaged in heated discussion before reaching their decision. Although most of them questioned such elements as the building's style, artistic value, practicality, and even political connotation, the consensus was that Taipei 101 deserves credit for having created an urban monument that the people of the city have taken to heart.

Corporate customers

In recent years, some of the most distinctive projects have been for corporate headquarters. After a company has grown to a certain stature, it may wish to have its name on a quality building to represent its past achievements and hopes for the future. The Hong Kuo Building on DunHua North Road is an example. Completed in 1990, it is generally regarded as C. Y. Lee's best work. The building, meant to exemplify the confidence of the Hong Kuo group, has not been to everybody's liking. Some find it too grand to match its surroundings, even "egocentric." But from an artistic point of view, it is a highly original work of post-modernism.

Besides the Chinese elements that he tends to favor, Lee - a fan of Egyptian culture - this time added Egyptian elements into the design as well. From the side, the building's shape resembles a sphinx. "The building shows the architect's universal view - no longer limited to Chinese thinking," says Wu Kwang-tyng, chairperson of the architecture department at Tamkang University. "It tries to express eternity, like the ancient relics in Egypt."

Compared to Lee's grand style, the projects of Kris Yao tend to be warmer and more accessible to the general public. Yao, founder of Artech Architects, has been regarded since the late 1990s as the leading architect in Taipei, and has won numerous awards both at home and abroad. Among his works, the Continental Engineering Corp. headquarters took first prize at the Far Eastern Awards in 1999, and the Design Academy at Shih Chien University in Dazhi won the Far Eastern Campus Construction Special Award in 2004. "Yao's works are meticulously designed, with everything done according to logic," says Han Pao-teh, convenor of the award's evaluation committee. "Although the projects possess some avant-garde elements, everything remains rational and easily understood by the public."

Located at the intersection of FuXing North and MinSheng East Roads, the Continental Engineering building's zigzagging metal structure is especially eye-catching at night. Since Continental is a major construction company, it was considered very important to demonstrate the company's advanced construction techniques through the project. The complicated structure and the use of architectural concrete called for in Yao's design were challenging to construct. "It's a perfect blend of design and technique," says Tamkang University's Wu.

The Shih Chien University project was an effort by the school to integrate itself with the surrounding community. As the campus has no formal entranceway, the building itself serves that purpose, and is intended to welcome neighborhood residents to enjoy the campus. "Many buildings in Taiwan haven't taken into consideration of the movement of people and its urban settings, but that's what I consider of utmost importance," says Yao. "People have to feel welcomed by the building, and the building has to embrace people."

Except for last year when the panel of judges decided that no entries were deserving of a prize, the Far Eastern Memorial Foundation (established by the Far Eastern business group) has given out more than a dozen awards to architectural works every year since the prizes were established in 1999. But very few of the prize-winners have been located in Taipei (most, in fact, are in small towns.) Han notes that innovation and creativity are key criteria for the award. "There are many big buildings in Taipei, but that doesn't necessarily mean big innovation. That's why they don't interest the judges."

Appropriately for Taiwan's high-tech industrial orientation, the one type of architecture where Taiwan may be among the world leaders is in high-tech factory buildings. One of the leading experts in this field is Joshua Pan, whose firm has designed almost half of the buildings in the Hsinchu Science Park (with Fab 12 of the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. and the MediaTek headquarters as major examples), the Guandu headquarters complex of ASUSTek Computer, and the Neihu office building of the Winbond Electronics Corp. Multinational companies such as Corning (in the Central Taiwan Science Park in Taichung) and Merck (in Taoyuan) have also used his services. Pan says the key to high-tech projects is to "control the timing," since there is "no room for delay" given the short product cycles and huge investments involved.

Pan runs the nation's largest architecture office, with 250 associates and employees. That number includes those working in China, where the firm set up branches in Shanghai and Xiamen in 2000. In recent years, Pan has strived to diversify his business beyond high-tech clients to prove his well-rounded capability. The motorscooter garage at National Chiao Tung University won the World Association of Chinese Architects (WACA) Gold Medal Award in 2005 and the Taiwan Architect Annual Design Citation Award in 2006. The reconstruction of the Taipei Truth Lutheran Church, across the street from National Taiwan University, received a Citation Award from the American Institute of Architects (AIA) in 2006. In the church project, Pan opened some space as a pleasant oasis for members of the public to relax.

Public projects

Over the past decade, the vigorous real estate market has spurred noticeable improvement in the quality of private housing. In contrast, most public-sector projects still leave much to be desired. "Public projects such as city halls and

airports should be landmark buildings - the best evidence to show the nation's artistic and technical achievements - but we are very weak in this regard," says Kris Yao. One of his projects - the Hsinchu Station of the Taiwan High Speed Rail system - represented Taiwan at the 8th Architectural Biennale in Venice, Italy in 2002, was invited to 1st Architectural Biennale at Rotterdam in 2003, and was given the top Taiwan Architecture Award last year. Yao says he set out to prove that world-class public construction can exist in Taiwan. "The problem does not lie in the techniques, but the implementation," he says. Most of the best architects try to stay away from public projects, however, declining to participate in open architectural competitions out of suspicion that they are just for show, with the results subject to manipulation. Other complaints are the extremely long administrative procedures, political interference, and what are considered to be the unfair distribution of rights and obligations between the government and contract holders under the Government Procurement Act. In addition, it is almost impossible to attract good international architects for public projects since the regulations call for awarding the contract to the low bidder. Taiwan's current design fees for such projects are only one-third the prevailing international level.

Charles Lin, director general of the Ministry of Interior's Construction and Planning Agency, acknowledges that it is unrealistic to expect the lowest price to yield the best product. Since taking office in August, he has made it a top priority to reform the process, and to ensure that the competition is fair and transparent. As revising the Government Procurement Act would be a complex task requiring the Legislative Yuan to pass an amendment, what he is seeking to do for now is to introduce changes in the contracts to equalize the relationship between the two parties. "We hope the reform can re-ignite architects' passion for public projects," he says.

Architectural reform

Last month, a group of architects led by Cheng Mei established the Taiwan Architecture-Reform Organization to elevate standards in the profession with the ultimate goal of enhancing Taiwan's environmental quality. The new group grew out of the "September 21 New Campus Movement," whose members participated in school reconstruction projects following the massive earthquake of 1999. Having encountered numerous administrative barriers while carrying out these projects, these architects are well aware of the legal and regulatory problems that have hindered architectural progress in Taiwan, and have decided to join forces to try to do something about it.

One of the group's goals is to reform the examination system by which architects are licensed. "If capable applicants do not get the license and the less-qualified ones do, it is detrimental to both the profession and the environment," says Cheng Mei. The average passing rate in Taiwan for the exam is only 5% - believed to be the lowest of the world - compared with about 50% in the United States. While effective architectural training should emphasize practical experience, the current system makes the examination all-important, with the results that applicants spend a lot of time going to cram schools.

A related problem is the "lending out licenses" phenomenon, whereby some licensed architects make large profits simply by "chopping" - stamping their seals on - the documents prepared by those without a license. Cheng maintains that the exam should not be designed to be unreasonably difficult.

Revising the examination system would also make it easier to carry out reform in another area in which it is needed: architectural education. The Taiwan Architecture-Reform Organization advocates including more courses in the humanities and social sciences in the curriculum, in order to turn out architects who are not just narrow technicians but have a broad range of knowledge and social-cultural understanding. Further, contrary to international trends, faculty appointments to architecture departments in Taiwan are based more on holding advanced degrees than on actual professional experience and performance. "The problem is that the Ministry of Education fails to appreciate the different educational requirements for training professionals compared with other academic disciplines," says Wu Kwang-tyng of Tamkang University. He notes that the core class for architecture students should be one-to-one design training, which should mean a huge demand for teachers with abundant working experience. But under the existing system, elite professionals in the field can only serve as a lecturer or assistant professor for lack of a doctoral degree. Although the law allows for teachers to be promoted based on the presentation of high-quality architectural works, at the same time it prohibits full-time faculty members from running an architectural office, giving them less opportunity to create works to present. Opinion leaders in the profession stress that quality architects can be produced only if the government improves

the faculty hiring system to encourage top-rated architects to enter the classroom as is common in most other countries.

Three Who Have Had an Impact

They are now elder statesman of the profession, but back in the late 1970s, three relatively youthful local architects led the way in surmounting the limitations of Taiwan's traditional approach to building-design to bring the country's architecture more in line with global trends. Cheng Mei, 77; Han Pao-teh, 73; and C. Y. Lee, 69 - considered the titans of Taiwan's second generation of prominent architects - are also credited with dedicated commitment to their profession, including the enthusiastic cultivation of new blood. Nearly all of the talented younger architects practicing today were their disciples. The first generation of leading architects, such as Wang Da-hong (whose designs include the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall and the Taipei Songshan Airport), and Chen Chi-kuan and Chang Chao-kang (who worked with I.M. Pei in designing the the Luce Memorial Chapel at Tunghai University), received most of their architectural education in China. Cheng, Han, and Lee were trained first in Taiwan - all of them at National Cheng Kung University in Tainan - and then overseas. Cheng studied in Switzerland and later earned a Master of Architecture degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Han obtained a degree from Harvard University, and Lee from Princeton. They were among the first group of overseas students returning to Taiwan to work in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and all three started by teaching architecture at Tunghai University in Taichung before opening their own architectural offices.

Cheng Mei

Over the past 30 years, Fei and Cheng Associates (the firm founded by Cheng and his colleague Philip Fei in 1975) has completed over 200 projects, including Taiwan Adventist Hospital (1987), the new buildings of National Taiwan University Hospital (1980-90), the Tainan and Chiayi Station of the Taiwan High Speed Rail (2002), and the Miramar Entertainment Park (2004) in Taipei's Dazhi section. Cheng refrains from engaging in much self-promotion, instead focusing on how to offer clients a high-quality and practical building that fits in well with its surroundings and can endure the passing of time. Unlike most architects, whose academic training precedes their practical experience, Cheng had already been working in the field before receiving his professional education. "His working experience allowed him to be free of the limitations of academic institutions," says Kuo Chao-lee, associate professor at the Graduate Institute of Urban Planning in National Taipei University. "He is diligent, systematic, and places more emphasis on techniques and materials than on theory." His office has been dubbed "the training center of the architectural profession," and after the devastating 921 earthquake in 1999, Cheng encouraged young architects to participate in the "campus restoration projects" that brought the creation of many innovative school buildings in central Taiwan. "His encouragement added new energy to the profession, and the [campus projects] provided an ideal stage for younger architects to develop," says Lin Jou-min, founder of the JM Lin Architect Group. Cheng also serves on the Taipei Urban Planning Commission, and was previously the director of Taiwan Architect magazine. Recently he has been among the leaders of the Taiwan Architecture-Reform Organization (see the main story for more details).

Han Pao-teh

Called the "godfather of Taiwan architecture," Han has played a key role in introducing the concepts of modern architecture to Taiwan since the 1960s. For 10 years starting from 1967, he headed the architecture department at Tunghai University - considered the cradle of Taiwan's current young architectural talent. At Tunghai, he introduced a five-year program based on the U.S. model, reducing the load of engineering courses and instead emphasizing design training and broadening students' thinking. That change was in line with his oft-stated philosophy that "architecture belongs to the humanities, not engineering." The period of his chairmanship was the golden age for the department, which succeeded in attracting a corps of outstanding faculty members. In addition, the magazine he published at that time, *Environment and Phenomena*, was the first of its kind in Taiwan in looking for architectural core values and questioning the then widespread excessive imitation of either Western or Chinese-palace styles. Founded in 1967, his firm of Han Kwang Architects, Planners and Engineers has completed many projects that blend traditional Chinese elements with modern architecture. The best known include the China Youth Corps Activity Centers in Hsitou, Kenting, and Penghu; Garden Nan, the estate used as a retreat by the United Daily News Group; and the Institute of Ethnology at Academia Sinica. At the same time, he was heavily involved in efforts to restore such historic buildings as the Confucius Temple in Changhua. Han later shifted his focus to museums and education. He was the founding director of the National Museum of Natural Science in Taichung, and then served as the first president of the Tainan National University of the Arts, where he promoted the educational concept of emphasizing inter-relationships among design, art, and culture. He is currently director of the Museum of World Religions. The numerous columns and critiques on aesthetics and architecture that he has written since the 1980s are also considered to have had a great impact on society.

C. Y. Lee

C. Y. Lee is without doubt the most controversial figure in the Taiwan's modern architectural history. Despite the fact that many of his buildings - such as the Chung Tai Chan Monastery in Nantou, the Hung Kuo Building, and Taipei 101 - have been criticized as being "too symbolic," "overly decorated," or even "ugly," no one can deny that his work has represented a new direction in Chinese architecture. During the years that he worked in the United States after completing his schooling, Lee had the chance to learn from one of the most acclaimed architects of the twentieth century, I. M. Pei. Lee served on Pei's team in tackling such project as the Chinese Pavilion at Expo '70 in Osaka, giving him the opportunity to grasp the power of great architecture. His experiences overseas also sparked the realization that architecture must be connected to one's own society and culture. Lee's subsequent efforts to incorporate a Chinese spirit into modern architectures can be seen in the "saddle roofs" in the Da-an Residential Community, the jade theme of the newest SOGO Department Store in Taipei, and the Chinese coin and pagoda motifs of Taipei 101. Many critics accuse him of being too individualistic, and of creating works that are too grand for the public to relate to. When encountering criticism, Lee only seems to work harder. He says he is only interested in setting trends, not following them. "I want to present our own national aesthetic value, different from a Western one," he told TOPICS. "You may not like Taipei 101, but you can tell it is an Oriental project at first sight." Since the early 1990s, Lee has developed a strong interest in Chinese philosophy, especially Zen, which he considers central to Chinese culture. "That study has helped him make a professional breakthrough," says Wu Kwang-tyng, chairperson of the architecture department at Tamkang University. Previously critics saw in Lee's repetitive themes that he had encountered some sort of bottleneck. "Lee is more than an architect - he is an artist trying to bring his thinking to an artistic level," says Wu. "But Lee also has too strong a sense of mission, and sometimes the burden gets too heavy." Lee's firm of C. Y. Lee & Partners Architects/Planners, founded in 1978, has completed more than 200 projects in Taiwan and China, including many of the biggest commercial projects in Taipei. His work enjoys great popularity in China, where he opened an office in 1994; there are now branches in Shanghai, Beijing, and Shenyang.

- By Lin Mei-chun

What's Happening Beyond Taipei

Elsewhere in Taiwan, major cities such as Taichung and Kaohsiung have been striving to elevate the quality of their architecture by putting projects in the hands of world-class international architects.

In Taichung, the plan to attract the Guggenheim Museum to build a branch (and to invite Zaha Hadid, Pritzker Prize laureate in 2004, to design the building) fell through two years ago for lack of financial support from the central government. Nevertheless, the internationally minded mayor, Jason Hu, has continued to pursue his aspiration of turning the city into a cultural mecca boasting public projects designed by world-famous architects.

Japanese architect Toyo Ito, for example, known for creating highly conceptual architecture, was commissioned to design the city's Opera House - a building that is expected to draw worldwide architectural attention when it is completed in 2009. The Swiss firm of Weber + Hofer AG is designing a new city hall and a building to house the city council, while Stan Allen, dean of Princeton University's School of Architecture, is in charge of the redevelopment of the area formerly occupied by Taichung's Shuinan Airport. The plan includes building a sports and entertainment arena, educational center, exhibition hall, park and a monument - to be called Taichung Tower - to symbolize the dynamic spirit of the city.

In Kaohsiung, the main stadium for the 2009 World Games, still under construction, is also the work of Toyo Ito. The architect reportedly has achieved a breakthrough in athletic-stadium design to convey an open and welcoming atmosphere. In the private sector, the Ching Fu Fong Kuo Shipbuilding Co. has commissioned Sir Richard Rogers - the famed British architect who was one of the designers of the Pompidou Center in Paris - to be the architect for the company's new headquarters building. Slated to be completed this December, the project is viewed as part of Kaohsiung's efforts to stimulate local pride and revitalize its economy.

But good buildings are not necessarily located in big cities. On the contrary, the suburbs and smaller towns are often home to quality architectural works, as there are fewer regulatory restrictions and more space for architects to exercise their creativity. Nearly all of the winners of the Far Eastern Architectural Design Award, Taiwan's most prestigious architecture prize which was initiated in 1999, have been located outside of urban centers. The principle is to encourage innovative projects that have regional characteristics and exhibit concern for the environment. "Through the award, we are seeking to look for Taiwan's own style in architecture, rather than simply following international trends," says Han Pao-teh, the convenor of the award's evaluation committee.

Two buildings located in Taipei County have been award winners in recent years for their avant-garde approach to space arrangement. They are the Shi-San-Hang Museum of Archaeology in Bali (designed by Sun Te-hung), which took first prize in 2003, and the Ceramics Museum in Yingge (designed by Chien Hsueh-yi), which won the second prize in 2000. The Shi-San-Hang Museum is designed in the shape of a boat to symbolize the arrival of the original indigenous settlers at the site. All of the structural lines radiate toward the sea. Besides its unique appearance and use of space, the Yingge museum is known for its effects with light and shadow. Han considers both projects to be progressive works with powerful visual impact.

Architect Huang Sheng-yuan has won the Far Eastern award several times for projects in Ilan County, including the Civic Corridor in Ilan City and the outdoor performance stage in Sansing Township. Not a native of Ilan, Huang moved there after finishing his degree at Yale University in order to be close to the people and the land. Han says his works may lack the flair that would win international appreciation, but they are meaningful for Taiwan because of their strong regional flavor, something that touches the heart of the people.

As mentioned in the main article in this section, the campus reconstruction projects in central Taiwan following the 1999 earthquake have a special place in Taiwan's architectural history, and the Far Eastern awards have paid special tribute to these projects. Some of the prize winners include the Yu-Ying Elementary School in Puli (a collaborative project by Li Lyu-zhi and Gan Ming-yuan) and the Min-He Elementary School in Nantou done by Lin Jou-min.

Besides Hwang Sheng-yuan's focus in Ilan, other leading architects have formed special connections with particular localities. Jay Chiu, for example, has taken a special interest in Hsinchu, Kung Shu-chang and Lin Jou-min have forged a close relationship with central Taiwan through the earthquake reconstruction projects, and Liao Wei-li is known for his projects in Tainan.

This year the Far Eastern Awards for the first time invited the participation of architects from Shanghai, since the mainland city has become a competition arena for many world-class architects. Taiwan has nominated five projects, including the Hsinchu Station of the Taiwan High Speed Rail (by Kris Yao), the XinYi Pedestrian Overpass System in Taipei City (by Chang Shu), the Black-faced Spoonbill Conservation Management Research Center in Tainan (by Liao Wei-li), the Beitou branch of the Taipei City Library (by Chang Ching-hua and Guo Ying-chao), and the September 21 Earthquake Educational Park in Taichung County (by Jay Chiu and Chuang Hsueh-neng). The results are due to be announced in December.

- By Lin Mei-chun

Exquisite but Temporary

Strolling around Taipei, you may occasionally catch a glimpse of a striking structure nestled unobtrusively among the unremarkable residential buildings. "Oh, I must come back and visit this museum," you think to yourself. But when you

return a few weeks later, the structure has been mysteriously replaced by a construction site.

Afterwards you discover that these artistic structures, which often seem to sprout overnight, are basically on-site sales offices for real-estate developers about to launch a new project. Possibly the most avant-garde creations found on the island, these temporary structures remain standing for the pre-sales period usually lasting from six months to a year. They are then demolished to make way for the permanent luxury housing - which generally looks much less intriguing.

Housing showrooms are found across the globe, but Taiwan's technique of using the design to attract the attention of potential customers is rare. The custom appears to have originated in Taiwan, and has now been emulated by developers in China. As Taiwan's numerous small- and medium-sized property developers vie aggressively for bigger pieces of the pie, the show homes have proven to be a highly effective sales tool - so much so that for a developer to spend NT\$10 million to \$20 million (about US\$300,000 to \$600,000) to erect a single temporary structure is no longer considered lavish. Occasionally the expenditure reaches as much as NT\$40 million.

In the beginning, these projects were usually placed in the hands of interior designers. But in recent years, developers have shifted to hiring architects and encouraging them to formulate imaginative and inspiring designs. Inside, the reception area is where uniformed sales representatives greet guests warmly, escort them to comfortable sofas, and make sure they are served Italian coffee along with a glossy brochure. The visitors are then ushered into an exhibition gallery displaying samples of high-end building materials, state-of-the-art plumbing fixtures, and earthquake-resistant technology. But the highlight of the experience is the interior showroom, often designed by celebrated local interior designers.

For these temporary structures, in which no one will ever reside, architects are emancipated from the usual constraints of strict building codes and zoning laws, enabling them to experiment with bold ideas and innovative materials. Though critics often berate these buildings as "fake architecture," others see them as statements that may foreshadow industry trends, as well as opportunities for architects - especially those just starting out in the profession - to experiment and exercise their creativity. Architect/aesthetics consultant Kung Shu-chang has designed over 20 sample houses in Taipei and Taichung, starting with one in the XinYi District in which he used 8,000 perforated plastic screens (usually used for drainage catchment) to create the outer wall. Other unconventional building materials, such as paper piping, glass bottles, coal, and glass tiles, have also been featured in Kung's work. Increasingly conscious of environmental issues, the designers often ensure that most of the materials are recycled or reused in subsequent projects.

"It's a pity to see these structures torn down after less than one year," remarks Kung. "Taipei's landscape lacks bold aesthetic statements. If a few of these buildings could be kept as flagship stores of luxury brands or as high-end restaurants, that would be ideal." Kung also suggests that universities or other institutions could relocate these structures to their campuses and use them as galleries or libraries (though there are various regulatory issues that would need to be resolved). So until then, remember to take a photo if you pass by a charming one-or two-story building in Taipei. It might not be there for long.

- By Stephanie Poon