

From *The Atlantic*

**CITYLAB**

## Ma Yansong's Urbanism

"What we've learned about modern cities in China was always from the West. But after 30 years of this practice, we see problems and new ideas emerging."

MARK BYRNES | [@markbyrnes525](#) | Nov 25, 2016 | [1 Comment](#)



While the location and design of [The Lucas Museum of Narrative Art](#) remains [in limbo](#), Ma Yansong has is eager to talk about everything else he's working on.

The Beijing-born architect has made a name for himself in the United States in recent years after winning the commission to design George Lucas's museum—originally for Chicago but now slated to end up in either Los Angeles or San Francisco—with each design taking on a different form in response to its site. In the meantime, work progresses on [8600 Wilshire](#), his first U.S. project to break ground. The modest residential project in Beverly Hills represents the architect's interest in a design language that merges urbanism with nature: Apartment facades are covered by native plants underneath a cluster of white and glass villas surrounded by trees—a reflection, says Ma, of Beverly Hills itself.

Ma, now 41, has experimented with architectural forms and landscapes in China since he founded his firm, [MAD](#), in 2004. There, he has grappled with the country's rapid urbanization and the environmentally and socially destructive development that has come with it. Through his cultural projects, office complexes, and masterplans, Ma routinely demonstrates an ability to provide meaning and delight to anyone who steps inside his eccentric spaces.

With the Lucas Museum and an assortment of smaller private projects in the U.S. and Europe—[as well as a new book about his career so far](#) (Phaidon, \$79.95)—Ma hopes to bring more of what he's learned from China to the West.

CityLab caught up with Ma earlier this fall on a visit to New York to talk about his views on urbanism and how cities can evolve through architecture:

## **What project are you working on now that you're most excited about?**

Many. We have several very large, mixed-use projects in China. We're working in the States and in Europe right now, as well. In all of our projects, we want to make something that's in between architecture and urban planning and create a nature-driven urbanism. We treat architecture as a landscape where we're creating an urbanism that presents itself as beautiful scenery.

One example is our project in Paris, which is located in the 17th arrondissement next to Martin Luther King Park. The city made a new masterplan for the area and invited international architects to each design one residential building. Ours is very much about how living space can coexist with nature. We introduced free shapes with the curves and the outdoor space and terraces. This building isn't going to look like a concrete block but as something that's a part of the park.

## **How does a building like this connect with the surroundings, socially?**

When people talk about a building, they're still just talking about technology, or the height and strength of the architecture. That's why a lot of LEED buildings seem like just a box. What about our emotional connection to nature in a city? The space inside these buildings can be more engaging for man and nature.

People call [our Toronto project](#) the 'Marilyn Monroe Towers' because of its curves. You don't typically describe a high rise building as if it were a woman. Most buildings are like men—they look horrible and serious because they're memorials for capitalism and power—but there, we tried to make very free and natural shapes and the balconies with a lot of glass to feel more natural.



Absolute Towers, 2006–2012, Mississauga, Canada. (Photo: Tom Arban)

**That part of the Toronto area (Mississauga) has seen a lot of growth in recent years but has always appeared as a rather nondescript place. Did the developer behind this project ask for something with an identity?**

This situation happens in many places, even in China. These growing cities don't have identities so everything that gets built all looks the same. All of the high rise buildings in China are driven by economic and financial forces but then people complain after they're built. There's a lack of identity in these kinds of places. They all end up looking the same and soulless.

We won the competition to design our project there in 2005 and it really made people pay attention to the city. It was my first time understanding democracy in the West. I don't know why, but they decided to make a competition and then ask the public to vote. We were voted number one and an international jury also voted for our design, so it wasn't up to the developer. Through the competition they realized a lot of people liked our design and the first tower sold out in one day.

**Has Mississauga been more ambitious about its own architecture since your project?**

Their mayor was so proud of it, everyone was. It's a landmark for the place but I don't see them having a bigger ambition beyond that project.

**What U.S. project of yours are you most excited about?**

We have several projects in the States, but the Beverly Hills one is first to actually break ground. We're basically building something that represents my impression of how the city is laid out, so we have a green mountain and integrate smaller scale houses on top of it. The locals were very open to the idea. I don't think Beverly Hills has a lot of new architecture, but they they loved the design and we got approval for it very easily.



8600 Wilshire, 2013-2017, Beverly Hills, USA. (Image: MAD Architects)

**You've also developed [a plan for Los Angeles](#) before. What's the story behind that project?**

That was part of a research project for the Wilshire Corridor. They were looking at how to bring density to the city, so we proposed a high rise building that looks like a tropical structure with gardens and people working in the sky, bringing a human connection to the high rise idea. I'm actually trying to build something like that in China or South Asia because that's where density is seen as natural.

**Were officials receptive to your concept?**

They're still building in the downtown area but they're building high rises that look like the kinds that were built in China 10 years ago. That's funny, because in China we're criticizing cities for always building the same buildings but now you look back in the States and they're doing the same things.

**What are you building in China now?**

Two projects. One is the [Chaoyang Park Plaza](#) in Beijing, which is almost completed. It's next to Chaoyang Park, the Central Park of Beijing. In between the park and the city are a lot of high rises, so we decided to bring in curves and the natural shape of a building. It's a green building, the vertical lines are air tunnels which bring cool air into every floor. But more than that, we want to make the whole project look like a natural part of the park, like rocks or stones. Behind this tower you have smaller buildings as well as valleys and gardens. It's open public space, like a garden in the city.

There's also a project in Nanjing, the Himalayas Center. It's huge, 13 towers. The high rise buildings look like waterfalls and the villages in between. When you're inside it, you don't feel the building's impression and inside the largest tower there are vertical gardens. The idea is that this is not a concrete forest, but a traditional landscape painting: you build the background and then you build the focal point.

So both of those are at an urban scale. It's groups of buildings and space in between so when you enter these spaces, it's definitely different from any other urban space.

**You also created a [futuristic masterplan](#) for Beijing before.**

That was in 2006. At that moment, everyone was talking about the 2008 Olympics and I was thinking of how to illustrate the future of the city well after the Olympics was over. We proposed three things: turning Tiananmen Square into a forest from the concrete plaza it is right now; building a floating city above the towers to free up land for parks; and renovating *hutong* [the traditional parts of the city] while inserting small silver bubbles into the courtyards as toilets so that we can keep the families who currently live there instead of displacing them.

## **How are [hutongs](#) and their historical value perceived in today's China?**

I think people see their value so a lot of capital has come in recently. But when these areas transform into luxury developments, you don't have a community anymore. Sometimes the government tries to develop these areas while cleaning out the population. I was involved with one of those projects and they were like, 'so what's your idea for the future?' I can have a million ideas but without people I can't do anything. My idea was a city of these true residents, because it's not only about commercial activity or tourism, you need people who actually live there. I think about how to improve their living quality, providing heat, gas, water and all those things that they don't have now. For a city, building the shape of the traditional design is secondary. A true neighborhood is the priority.

## **Your cultural projects in China appear as instant landmarks. Is there one you're especially happy with?**

We just completed the [Harbin opera house](#), which started six years ago. Harbin is known as the Northern capital city, and it has the most famous music festival in China. This summer they held the music festival all around the city and in the opera house. The building is in a natural setting so it's important to make it feel like it's a part of nature. And, more importantly, people can walk from the plaza along its facade. People really enjoy it now. Every day it's full of people. They like to walk around it even when there isn't a show. It's become a very engaging space, not just a landmark.





Ordos Museum, 2005–2011, Ordos, China. (Photo: Iwan Baan)

**Does the public space in your [Ordos project](#) accomplish the same thing?**

Yeah. I didn't think about public space much at that point. I was thinking about the desert because Ordos was like building a city out of nowhere, so I was thinking about this bubble as an object from outer space and landing in the desert. After we completed it, the landscape became so engaging because, I don't know why, maybe because of the curvature. A lot of people run and walk and lie down on its slope. It's been a successful public space.

**How do you interpret Xi Jinping's "[Weird Architecture](#)" ban in China?**

When our chairman says that, it doesn't mean all officials think that. I have some say in the matter as an architect who practices there, so I can further define what's 'weird' since I do design a lot of 'weird' architecture.

**In the U.S., media typically mentions Rem Koolhaas's CCTV tower as the main culprit. Is that really the kind of work Xi is against?**

CCTV building is special. On one hand, it's creative, contemporary architecture. On the other hand, it represents a powerful, anti-gravity authority. When people in China criticize that building, they're talking about the large-scale state projects that have unlimited budgets. People don't like CCTV because they tell too many lies. If this building was open to the public and was about fostering creative minds or young people, or education, the reaction would be different.

There are buildings in China that have been done in very poor taste. Some government buildings look like the White House or the U.S. Capitol. Some residential towers look like a wine bottle. My understanding is that he's criticizing those types of things more than creative, contemporary architecture.

**What's something you want to try out design-wise that you haven't been able to yet?**

In China, we've been having all kinds of opportunities with cultural projects and urban landmarks. Now we're interested in urban planning. In that scale we can apply our philosophy better.

I'm also interested in the Western context. What we've learned about modern cities in China was always from the West. But after 30 years of this practice, we see problems and new ideas emerging. What if we apply these new experiments in Western cities? Now, we're talking about a different understanding of nature—not from a technology angle, but more from an emotional, spacial, environmental angle.

How can these ideas transform architecture and high rise buildings in a high density, urban context? It would be great to bring this thinking to the West.