

# French firm helps China plan harmonious urban landscape

BY HAN TIANYANG

Jean-Marie Duthilleul, architect and president of the French architectural firm AREP, has been interested in Chinese culture since he was a student at Polytechnique in the 1970s. Now, as part of AREP, he has contributed to the country's development with the company's advanced urban planning expertise.

According to data provided by AREP, China's urban inhabitants increased from 77 million in 1953 to 190 million in 1980, and had surged to 470 million by 2000.

Today the figure stands at a staggering 650 million, about 45 percent of the nation's total population. The proportion is forecast to grow to 60 percent in the next decade.

The speed of urbanization is just as impressive as the population. Over 246 new towns have been built since 1990 and another 400 are scheduled to emerge by 2020.

"China is in a period of rapid growth, to which urban planning and architectural design brings the physical form and image," Duthilleul said.

In the eyes of Duthilleul, travel facilities play a crucial role in people's lives since how people move through and experience public space is just as important as how they live and work.

Planning of transportation hubs in modern cities should reflect "the dialectic of mobility and immobility", he said, giving an example of the South Shanghai Railway Station, which combines both elements.

By mobility he meant the surrounding environment where people and automobiles are moving; while the station building with impressive image and complete function brings peace and quiet in

the heart of the fast-paced city.

Duthilleul also noted that all kinds of forms of moving like walking, driving, and taking buses, or taxis should be considered when designing a transportation hub, adding that it's a lesson that AREP has learnt from past mistakes in France decades ago where railway



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PRESIDENT OF AREP

stations only connect railways.

"A transportation hub between two cities should connect not only track traffic but all kinds of vehicles," he said.

"When we designed the South Shanghai Railway Station, though it is a project under the Ministry of Railways, we thought about railways as well as other transportation forms."

The office buildings in Shanghai are often confined and isolated from the natural environment, which is contradictory to the traditional Chinese idea of harmony between man and nature, said the enthusiast of Chinese philosophy.

When asked about why he came to do architectural design in China, Duthilleul said that China and France are both countries with long histories and rich

culture, which should be inherited and embodied in the modern architecture. "I am very passionate about the subject," he said, adding: "it's another dialectic that should concern city planners."

When modernization and globalization drive societies forward, people have to keep the historical memory and unique feature of their own city at the same time, he said.

"When we designed the Capital Museum, our idea was to build an international and contemporary museum while representing the characteristics of Beijing."

"We adopted the layout of a traditional royal building and used local materials, but the technique is modern."

According to Duthilleul, sustainability is also among the agenda of urban planners, "cities have to be eco-friendly and energy-saving." Problems include how to reuse the wastewater, how to purify the air with green plants, as well as how to make use of solar power by special construction materials, he added.

The sustainable and eco-friendly ideas have already been applied in many buildings in France, and we hope to have opportunities to bring them here to China, he said.

This time Duthilleul came to China to visit the Shanghai World Expo as a member of French President Sarkozy's delegation. "Of course what I want to see most is the Chinese Pavilion," he said with a big smile.

He thinks the World Expo provides a great opportunity for

people across the globe to think about the future of their cities.

He also believes that cooperation is a good way for city planners and managers to share their experience. He noted that several cities in France and China have established friendly relationships as sister cities, including Shanghai and Marseilles, Chengdu and Montpellier, Chongqing and Toulouse.

Duthilleul also offered some suggestions for Chinese city planners to help avoid problems, based on his experience in France.

In the future, China will build thousands of kilometers of subway and lots of underground projects, the planners should try to make the natural light reach the underground space no matter how deep it is, he said.

"The method is simple, just dig a hole with diameter of 10 m, and the natural light can come in," he said.

"Once the natural light comes, it will change people's feeling when traveling underground," Duthilleul said, as he believes that high quality public space should make people feel happy.

In the past decade, AREP undertook several projects in China, especially transportation-linked programs, including the South Shanghai Railway Station and Xizhimen transportation hub in Beijing.

Now, the company is constructing the railway station in Qingdao, as well as complex buildings above subways in Hangzhou and Shenzhen.



Xizhimen transportation hub is located in the northwest of Beijing, by the 2nd ring road and Xizhimennei Street. It was completed in 2006.



Completed in 2006, the South Shanghai Railway Station is more than a simple hub, assuming its role as the city's south gate.



An artist's view of the Beijing-based Air China Group's headquarters.



The Capital Museum opened in June 2006 on Chang'an Avenue that cuts across Beijing from east to west. It distinguishes itself by blending past and present.



Jean-Marie Duthilleul,  
president of AREP

## Architecture important to a better life in a better city

BY WANG DANNA

French architectural firm AREP, has been deeply involved in development in China over the past decade.

Fleur des Diguères, director general of AREP China, spoke about AREP China's development over the past decade and the art of leadership with Beijing and Paris attaching great importance to French President Nicolas Sarkozy's three-day state visit to China starting April 28, at the occasion of the opening of the 2010 Shanghai World Expo.

### Important to society

Fleur des Diguères joined the company when AREP entered the Chinese market over 10 years ago and has participated in every step of its development.

AREP has created many landmark buildings in Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and other large cities, such as Wuhan, Chengdu and Shenzhen, including the Beijing Capital Museum, the Xizhimen Transportation Hub and Business Center, the South Shanghai Railway Station, Wuhan Railway Station and the Tianjin TEDA Financial Center.

Due to the fast pace of the Chinese construction industry, AREP has been deeply involved in China's march towards a better life for its people. AREP China's work has therefore contributed to improving urban life, echoing the Shanghai Expo theme of: "Better City, Better Life."

Fleur des Diguères said she thinks buildings should use high technology but should also complement the surrounding environment and express the regional culture. She believes every building is a book without words but with its own symbolic language.

Fleur des Diguères has been at AREP for 10 years and loves her job. Her way of thinking comes partly from her mother. When encountering difficulties, Fleur des Diguères is always calling her mother for help to get comfort or encouragement. Her mother once took part in some battles during the Anti-Japanese and Liberation wars, which enables her to understand life better than others.

Fleur des Diguères said her mother told her success is often attributed to dedication and commitment as well as collective consciousness



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FLEUR DES DIGUÈRES  
DIRECTOR GENERAL OF AREP CHINA

and capabilities of observation and analysis, which helps Fleur des Diguères understand quite well with her job and her team.

"If you buy an item of clothing, you can throw it away if you don't like it. But a building will stand there no matter whether you are proud of it or ashamed of it. Architecture is a part of our history that cannot be undone. We must be very careful and spare no effort to make every project an example of unique and practical architecture."

Not every building is perfect and sometimes projects generate a mediocre result or cooperation with a partner doesn't work out. Fleur des Diguères said that imperfect results "like a miniature version of society,

are the first steps to success."

### Respect and trust

Communicating with local municipal officials, project owners and French designers is an integral part of Fleur's job. This means that she has to learn about the urban planning of a city, the requirements of the municipal government, the practical functions of the targeted project as well as the local culture and customs. She informs her French designers of all this information.

She also has to translate her French designer's architectural language into acceptable Chinese thoughts and concepts and persuade the local officials, project

owners and citizens to accept it.

Under such circumstances, Fleur des Diguères often finds herself in an awkward situation. She has to negotiate a plan that will suit everybody. "According to each different situation, I have to know who the decision-maker is and where the feasibility lies."

"Learning to respect Chinese culture is always of the most importance. Not all the projects in China have been a huge success, but we try to express our design concept in language that the Chinese can fully understand," she said.

Fleur des Diguères attributes AREP's success to the excellent architectural team, both the innovative French architects and the talented Chinese designers, who turn original ideas into landmark buildings.

"Our industrious and experienced team members such as Tang Jun and Shen Xiang have contributed to building a bridge between the French and Chinese design and culture."

Since AREP is a team with both Chinese and French members, mutual cultural understanding is indispensable. Fleur said: "The

team are very talented, and also get on well. They communicate and cooperate with each other and our partners.

"When competing in the current market, we need to highlight our special characteristics. We analyze the market, so we know what is really needed. We have a lot of potential and I hope AREP will continue to be essential for the Chinese market and enjoy a healthy and stable development."

After participating in consultations to rebuild the Nanjing Railway Station in 1999, AREP established a representative office in Beijing in 2000, and has since enjoyed rapid growth from a one-person representative office to a company with more than 40 architects.

AREP will participate in the exhibition of the China Metro section in the French Pavilion with the presentation of the metro depot development projects in Hangzhou and Shenzhen, which are set above subway stations, two of the best examples of its kind in the world following a similar project in Paris' Montparnasse Train Station, on the left bank of the Seine River, another masterpiece devised by AREP.