

保存中国民居建筑特色

# TAMING *the* CONCRETE DRAGON



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## An Interview with Scott Slaney by Thomas M. Colbert and Raj Mankad

SWA Group Houston  
Wednesday, February 16, 10 a.m.

**Cite** | What are the big differences between working as a design firm in China and in Houston?

**Scott Slaney** | There are three primary differences. One is the greater scope and scale of our work in China; the second is speed; projects happen at an incredibly fast rate; the third is design depth. We take most of our work in China only to a design development level then work with a local design institute who will prepare construction documents, seal drawings, and provide some construction observation, though typically pretty light. Taken together, greater scope and scale, speed and relatively shallow design depth, the net result is that building projects that live up to our quality standards is a real challenge. Meeting this challenge is one of the key reasons our SWA Shanghai office has been established. The good news is that more and more clients are asking us to get involved in construction to ensure that the design intent is realized in an enduring fashion. We characterize our role as “design oversight during construction.”

**Cite** | How did SWA Group get involved in China?

**SS** | In the late 1990s a Chinese-speaking profession-

al joined our Houston office. She earned a bachelor's degree from Beijing Forestry University, then came to the U.S. to get her master's in landscape architecture from Ohio State. About the time we hired her, friends she had made in college were moving up in influence within various Planning Bureaus in China. She had one classmate who became a Planning Bureau Director for a district east of Shenzhen and through her relationship and our credentials a project opportunity came our way. Concurrently, *World Architecture Magazine*, a Beijing-based publication, published an issue on SWA. That issue became very popular; they couldn't keep enough of them printed. So personal connections, coupled with name recognition, led to the first significant design commission, Da Meisha, led by Kevin Shanley, SWA's CEO. It began as a design of a coastal highway, like U.S. 1 along the Pacific coast, to access previously undeveloped land east of Shenzhen. In the process land-use suggestions were made for one valley particularly well suited for development, with two mountain streams dropping into the sea. A plan had already been created by a large international AE firm, which would have buried the two streams in box culverts under the valley floor. We argued for a plan that daylighted the

streams and that multiplied the waterfront property ten-fold; 18 months later the landscape infrastructure was built—roads, lakes, bridges, beachfront parks, palm trees, everything. People then came along and bought parcels for prices greater than downtown Shenzhen land. Michael Graves designed hotels, Gensler designed an iconic tower, WATG has designed and built housing, Steven Holl has designed and built corporate headquarters, etc. The Premier of China sited Dameisha as a model for new economically successful and environmentally sensitive development in the country. This Planning Bureau Director talked to another in Nanhai, that gentleman talked to another. Most of our work in China has been, and still is, from referrals and repeat clients.

**Cite |** Sounds like you are on an amazing adventure. You sound excited.

**SS |** Houston is a young city still defining itself; the opportunity to do things that help a city define itself while improving quality of life, environment, and economic vitality is every designer's dream. The same thing is true in China. It's wonderful to work in cities that are established, but for design professionals, the impact you can make on cities that are very mature is somewhat limited. We are interested in bigger gestures. China, like Houston, offers these.

**Cite |** Is there an actual interplay of design ideas between your work in China and in Houston?

**SS |** I'll give you one small example in China. We have been exploring the idea of shared-use streets: people, bikes, transit, and cars all coexisting in one "great street," streets for people that have a visual quality, identity, and character that allow them to become a "defining" element within a city or district. In Houston we've explored some of these same ideas under the leadership of the Uptown Development Authority as well as other high-density private developments. If they work for the density of traffic and pedestrian use that you see in China, they will certainly work in Houston.

**Cite |** Tell us about a completed SWA project.

**SS |** In Hangzhou, China, we were asked to create a redevelopment master plan for the 1.5-square-kilometer historic Hubin District. Hangzhou is a really beautiful city, probably my favorite place in China. There is a lake in the center of the city called the West Lake. It is a World Heritage Site, green hills dotted with preserved temples built by dynasties long gone. As the city was modernizing, the fabric of the district was being bulldozed and replaced with a car-oriented, suburban development fabric—big wide boulevards, huge blocks, and "really big" commercial development. Our client, a real estate developer, had purchased six blocks within the historic Hubin District. The client felt that the direction in which the district was headed was not a good thing. So the city, our client, and other private developer

stakeholders partnered up to create a redevelopment authority. The redevelopment authority then asked us to create a master plan for the Hubin District fronting West Lake. The master plan focused on re-connecting the city to West Lake and preserving the historic fabric of the district and its rich pedestrian environment while accommodating new development and related mobility needs. The equivalent of a Westheimer Road had been constructed along the lakefront separating the district from West Lake. Its function was to carry through traffic. Its impact was to totally cut off pedestrian and commercial connectivity to the lake, the cultural and economic engine of Hangzhou. It was clear to us that the city had to be re-connected to the lake and that through traffic must go elsewhere. During one workshop in Hangzhou we recommended that a two-kilometer-long, six-lane tunnel be created under the lake to divert through traffic. The tunnel was built in nine months. The entire area was redeveloped in 18 months; it is now Hangzhou's top-ranked tourism attraction and Hangzhou is now China's top-ranked tourism destination. In 2005 the project was awarded the "ULI Global Award of Excellence," the first project in China to receive this level of international acclaim. Pretty rewarding.

**Cite |** What key project in China do you think our audience should know about?

**SS |** There are many being added to China's landscape every day. A lot of people know about Xintiandi in Shanghai. The architect was Ben Wood. It preserved a fairly good stock of historic Shikumen architecture and repurposed it into retail and entertainment uses. Coupled with adjacent park and public realm improvements, a catalyst and placemaking device was established that spawned other mixed-use development around it. The project is beautifully designed, constructed, and operated. Its success has brought substantial attention to the value of historic preservation in modern China.

**Cite |** What should we be telling the Houston community about China?

**SS |** China is in the process of making great cities, cities that function, places where people will want to visit, live, and work, near and long term. It's wonderful to see how a bit of vision, long-term planning, strategic investment in infrastructure, private development, and placemaking in the public and private realms are quickly transforming cities in China into global centers of economic growth coupled with a



**WE ARGUED FOR A PLAN THAT DAYLIGHTED THE STREAMS AND THAT MULTIPLIED THE WATERFRONT PROPERTY TEN-FOLD; 18 MONTHS LATER THE LANDSCAPE INFRASTRUCTURE WAS BUILT—ROADS, LAKES, BRIDGES, BEACHFRONT PARKS, PALM TREES, EVERYTHING.**



**ABOVE** Dameisha Waterfront.  
**BELOW** Beijing Finance Street.

A **SIGNIFICANT PORTION** OF SWA'S CURRENT WORK IN CHINA DEALS WITH AGRICULTURE, HOW TO **PRESERVE** IT, HOW TO **INTEGRATE** IT INTO URBAN SYSTEMS, HOW TO KEEP IT PROXIMATE TO POPULATION CENTERS, HOW TO **RESPECT** THE "CULTURE" OF AGRICULTURE.

desired quality of life and environment. No doubt there's much to accomplish but China is headed in that direction. Soon, if not already, Houston and other U.S. cities will be competing with cities in China for the best and brightest. Houston needs to continue to invest in itself in a serious way or it could easily fall from consideration based on a sub-standard quality of life and be relegated to a Wal-Mart status, competing on its low-cost way of life alone.

**Cite** | That's a marked shift from the story we normally hear. We read about rates of urbanization that are exhilarating but also scary. China seems to be teetering on the edge of major environmental collapse. The country can no longer grow enough food to feed itself. Are there examples where architecture supports rather than obliterates ecology and agriculture?

**SS** | Improving environmental quality and preserving precious agricultural lands are two of China's current urbanization challenges. Both are receiving a good deal of attention, creative thinking, and investment. A significant portion of SWA's current work in China deals with agriculture, how to preserve it, how to integrate it into urban systems, how to keep it proximate to population centers, how to respect the "culture" of agriculture.

In far southwestern China, near the border with Myanmar (Burma), there is an incredible little town called Tengchong, not unlike Aspen: it's at an elevation 2,000 meters above sea level. Around it are mountains that reach way above that. It is in a beautiful valley. The Flying Tigers were stationed there in World War II, positioned between Myanmar (Burma) and China, shooting down Japanese airplanes ferrying supplies to their forces in central China. It's a fascinating town with only 600,000 people, which by China's standards is small. The central government in China is trying to promote development and tourism in western cities of China. The migration over the past 20 to 30 years to China's eastern seaboard just can't continue. So the government is trying to invest in the western cities and Tengchong is one of them. We are doing two projects there. One, Mayu Valley, is a 13-square-kilometer site with mountains that surround a verdant valley. The area is like a National Geographic photograph, terraced agriculture cascading down mountain slopes, plots of rice and corn. There are about nine historic villages on the site and the government's goal was to populate it with hotels and golf courses, displacing

villages and the agricultural land the villagers have worked for generations. The tack we have taken is to embed planned tourism facilities on the margins of the site, in previously disturbed forest areas overlook-

ing agriculture, preserving villages and their related agricultural lands. OK, simple enough, but how do you preserve the "culture of agriculture"? How do you convince farmers working fields today and for



LEFT Beihai Wetland Park  
BELOW Mayu Valley





generations to come to continue farming? How do you incentivize agriculture? This is really a social design problem.

Working together with our client and the government, we found a way for the developer to become the purchaser of everything grown on the site at a good price—one that will guarantee a good income. We are designing two new villages, or town centers, that are at the outer edge of the site and will serve as markets. Everything grown on the site will be taken to these markets. People who are vacationing or living in Mayu Valley or Tengchong can buy fresh produce and proteins, have dinner, catch a movie, be entertained, and have fun. Profits over and above the developer's "guaranteed price" will be split between the farmers and the developer.

Typically with a tourism destination development, the hook is golf. In the original land plan, there was golf all over the site displacing agriculture. After seeing the site, we said, "What's wrong with agriculture? It's beautiful." And it's amazing for anybody who hasn't spent life in an agricultural setting to see people working fields, maintaining the vertical faces of terraces, planting and harvesting rice, or tending water buffalo. Let's find another place for golf or abandon it all together; agriculture will be the hook.

Fortunately, we had an enlightened client who agreed and government representatives who saw the social and environmental wisdom in the approach. While the government in China owns all the land, improved private property rights have made the cost of relocation quite high; preserving agriculture avoided an enormous relocation expense. Agriculture is being preserved, and new architecture within the site is being planned to be scaled and arranged to be similar to that of existing villages. Villager and tourism circulation is separate allowing each to go about their lives without interruption. The Banyan Tree Hotels have now purchased three of the six planned

**ABOVE** Hubin Waterfront street and landscape diagram.

**TOP RIGHT** Hubin Waterfront aerial view.

**BELOW RIGHT** Shanghai Xintiandi.

hotel sites and have begun physical design based on master plan principles.

The second project, in the adjacent valley, is a 15-square-kilometer site, one of China's National Parks called Beihai National Floating Wetland Park. It has an amazing story. Millions of years ago, there were volcanic eruptions and lava spilled into the valley, creating a dam resulting in a five-square-kilometer lake. The ash from the volcanoes was pumice, which settled on the lake creating a one-meter-thick mat of what are now floating ecosystems. However, in the 1950s, the natural dam was breached to expose arable land for farming. The wetland shrank from five square kilometers to 0.5 square kilometers and a good deal of the floating wetlands vanished along with the water. But now the government is rebuilding the natural dam and the lake will be restored to original extents and in partnership with a private developer. We hope to create one of China's great eco-tourism destinations. The park will be made accessible to the public, park attractions, and environmental education. Wetland museums will all be developed and adjoining lands will see private tourism facilities away from the view of the wetlands.

Like Mayu Valley a series of historic villages will be preserved along with their related agriculture. Tourism and villager traffic will be separated. Three

hotels will be embedded within the site. Fortunately, it's a big valley with huge mountains around it and the wetland park in the middle. There is a "pop up" mountain that comes out of the southern end of the wetland. From that point on, it's a whole separate watershed, so all the intense development is planned to reside in the second watershed avoiding water quality issues for the wetland. The area around the wetland is mainly preserved vegetation or agriculture serving as a buffer to the park.

One person who toured us through the wetlands grew up there as a young boy. He used to go out with a machete and cut out a three-square-meter piece of the wetland. A bunch of his friends would get on it with some bamboo poles, and they would scoot around the lake all day. They would disembark their wetland canoe and leave it for the next day. He also talked about cutting out a bigger section and getting their water buffalo onto a piece of floating wetland. All the kids would get on the back of the water buffalo and just float around the lake. We hope to provide future park visitors with just these kinds of delightful experiences together with an education about this precious ecosystem. The first-phase visitor center is now under construction and scheduled to open in the summer of 2012, just in time for the annual blooming of native iris. 文明