Interesting things to do with skyscrapers

Much work has been done on Shanghai’s architecture during the 1920s & 30s. I refer interested readers to the beautifully illustrated work of Tess Johnston. Less has been written on the boom in skyscraper building that we have seen over the past 25 years. The vast creation of private wealth here, combined with a government willing and able to make grand architectural statements, has led to a sustained exuberance in the design of tall buildings.

It all started here. This unlovely building, the Shanghai Union Friendship Tower, was the first skyscraper of the modern era, completed in 1985, just off the Bund. (The more imaginative building in the background with the leaf crown is the Bund Centre, built in 2002.) Before then, Lazlo Hudec’s Park Hotel, alongside Shanghai’s race track, had held the title of the city’s tallest building since its construction in 1934. It was from this vantage point that your correspondent watched President Reagan’s motorcade when he visited Shanghai in April 1984. That’s the Park Hotel to the left, its 22 floors now overborne by the 47-floor Radisson New World (2005), with its “the Martians have landed” motif.

This is a late example of the revolving-restaurant fad. In the West, revolving restaurants were a thing of the 1960s and 1970s. But at that time China was busy with its own Cultural Revolution. So the 1980s was China’s first chance to build something so cool. The best example is in Shanghai’s most iconic, and still rather shocking, building, the Oriental Pearl TV tower. The purple and orange velour of its revolving restaurant deserves a preservation order as a perfect period piece.

The Oriental Pearl, which held the “tallest in Shanghai” crown from 1995 to 2007, also illustrates Shanghai developers’ love of coloured mirror glass – red in this case, but also popular in green and blue. Your correspondent’s office from 1997 to 2005 was in the ugly China Merchants Tower (1995), shown to the right, when it enjoyed a river view which has now been entirely lost.

The last flowering of the “coloured-glass era”, which mercifully now seems to be behind us, was the Aurora Building (2003). With its shining gold façade, this is Shanghai’s “blingiest” skyscraper. What is not evident from the photograph is that the whole frontage lights up at night as a TV panel. To accommodate this, despite the fact that the building has the best view in Shanghai across the river to the Bund, the windows are only half height. Once in passing I saw that the building was showing a public-services ad on the dangers of global warming! This building alone must have counted for several kilometres off the artic icepack. Aurora is a Taiwan-listed company (office furniture). This building is not included among the assets of the listed company, but is owned by the chairman. It is a shame that the building was not built to its original plan, which I once saw in Chairman Chen’s office. In this model, the subsidiary building, which now hosts a fine personal art museum, was in the shape of a large golden egg! Your correspondent’s office is now in the more sensible Citigroup Tower, to the right of the Aurora.
Another fad in the mid-00s was for “light boxes” – large structures stuck on top of tall buildings with no other use than to light up at night. The most notable of these are the twin towers of Grand Gateway (2005) in Xujiahui and Hang Lung’s Plaza 66, a high-end mall on Nanjing East Road where lots of famous international brands have beautiful shops uncluttered by customers. Here Plaza 66 rises behind the fanciful Shanghai Exhibition Centre, Stalin’s gift to the Chinese people in 1955. In the background is the Portman (1990), the first modern luxury hotel complex to be completed. A modern development of the light box is the implanted LED screen, of which I am not a fan, both on artistic and environmental grounds. Every day on my way to the office I must pass Jackie Chan extolling the virtues of Taiping Insurance on a 15-second loop.

Often the more sensible (i.e. dull) skyscrapers are the work of Hong Kong or Singaporean developers. SHK’s IFC towers (2009/10) are a prime example. A couple of corners at higher levels have been shaved in a token “look, I’m not an oblong” way. Above it is shown with its more interesting neighbour in the background. I much prefer the building pictured on the right, Haitong Securities Tower, which has come up with a prettier way of disguising an essentially rectangular structure.

Another bête noir is the tendency of Chinese architects to pastiche; the weird and wonderful Moller House, built for the eponymous Swedish shipping tycoon in 1936, deserves better than the horrible Chinese apartment blocks that now surround it. The architect behind the new Ping An building also got rather carried away with his Greek columns (all Ionic).

There’s nothing token about the phallic Tomorrow’s Square (2003). It looks as though it hosts one of the rocket-killing laser guns favoured by James Bond villains. The central pearl had been temporarily turned into a football in honour of the World Cup. Bocom Financial Tower is the one that Tom Cruise slid down in Mission Impossible III when attacking a group of Chinese baddies. In the lobby it says that these floors are occupied by the offices of China Pacific Insurance, but we know better.
Feng shui is an important feature in skyscraper design here, and this has resulted in a number of buildings with holes in the middle (to let through the qi, don’t you know). The Shanghai Stock Exchange Building (1997) has a hole in the middle of it (no jokes please). The impact of this rather impressive building has, however, been masked now by the less interesting skyscrapers subsequently built around it. The feng shui of atriums would occupy a complete additional letter, but I show the photo below as it combines so many elements. It is symmetrical with two imperial lions either side of the door. There is also water, a regular feature in Chinese atria, though given Shanghai’s relatively high rainfall, one would have thought that the architects might like to concentrate on keeping the water out. Often the stone ball supported by pressure water has stopped working, so kudos to Pudong Development Bank for keeping this ball rolling.

Size matters. Despite the lessons of 9/11, developers still appear to want to achieve the biggest erection. There are a variety of rooftop constructions; I rather like the simple but elegant twisting bands on top of the Jing An China Tower Building (1988), behind the extravagant temple of the same name. The simplest way to increase the size, however, while saving a little money, is to cheat and put a large pylon on top of your skyscraper. In the Shimao International Plaza (2006) the architect has splashed out and gone for two, in a sort of rugby-post style.

Most guilty, in this regard, however, is Dubai’s Burj Khalifa, which is the world’s tallest building, courtesy of its pylon, while our Shanghai World Finance Centre actually has the highest occupied floor. SWFC had a somewhat troubled gestation. The site, a driving range, was dug up in 1997, just before the Asian Financial Crisis. It remained a large hole in the ground for a number of years. After work was re-started, the original design, with a circle at the top, was rejected as looking too much like the Japanese flag (a sensitive subject, as the developer was Mori). Completed in its new approved form in 2008, it is referred to as the “bottle opener”. The glass-floored observation deck on the 100th floor is not recommended to vertigo sufferers. The skyline continues to change each year. The SWFC surpassed the interesting Jinmao Tower, which is all about the power of eight (88 floors, opened on 28/8/08). This most “Chinese” of skyscrapers was actually designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill of Chicago, and has proved a magnet for illegal climbers and base jumpers. Now SWFC is to be surpassed in its turn by the extravagant temple of the same name. The simplest way to increase the size, however, while saving a little money, is to cheat and put a large pylon on top of your skyscraper. In the Shimao International Plaza (2006) the architect has splashed out and gone for two, in a sort of rugby-post style.

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Shanghai is not ideal terrain for skyscraper building. Piles need to be sunk more than 80 metres into the Shanghai mud to support the tallest buildings. The story about Shanghai gradually sinking under the weight is a regular filler for local newspapers in the silly season. But still from my window I can see cranes working on exciting new projects. The one below, built on a record-breakingly expensive plot of land on the river bank, is to be called White Magnolia Plaza. There is talk of a 838m Sky City in Changsha, and a design for a pair of towers both 1 km high, called the Phoenix Nest, has been approved in Wuhan. But these remain pie in the sky. In Shanghai, the dreams are already solidified in concrete, steel and glass.

For readers who would like an exhaustive and illustrated list of Shanghai’s skyscrapers (or to see what White Magnolia Plaza will look like) please see the niche website www.skyscraperpage.com.

Chris Ruffle, July 2014

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