

CITYSPACE by Christopher Choa

# origin of the species

## the ascent of the magnolia

**A**round the time that Charles Darwin published his epic treatise on the theory of natural selection, Shanghai's local species (architecturally speaking) were busy evolving. They had to in order to survive in the urban jungle. Needless to add, it was a struggle for artistic survival.

Even in these early days of the Western Concessions, foreign-built edifices expressed a riot of classical architectural forms, mixed visual metaphors and outrageous outlines, all clamoring for attention. Since then, not much has changed. Today's skyline displays any

number of outrageous, attention-grabbing "tops", which is not surprising given the level of competition. Like natural selection strategies in the wild, architectural precreation starts with getting noticed.

There are many reasons for Shanghai's flamboyant hats. Yet the overriding truth is that the designs of many of the city's modern buildings are cranked out fast, and architectural tops are the quickest way for a harried designer to make one set of identical floor plates a little different from another. That said, many good architects are also (and always will be) desperate to find ways to hide elevator cores and

mechanical equipment. Just look for the different ways we struggle to camouflage the tops of buildings. It's good sport; spotting the endless permutations of hoods, caps, cupolas, wings, or colonnades can make you feel like an urban geneticist out on a field survey.

Developers are also in a struggle for survival. Many request decorative flourishes that would make a peacock blush. And local officials encourage this evolutionary trend. For many prominent projects, planning bureau committees need to review at least three competing design options for every submission. Fanciful tops become the inevitable focus of the juries, drawn, for the most part, from local institutes. The subtleties of various architectural and urban designs take a lot of time to parse through, and it is just plain easier to pick a favorite maozi. In the early 1990s, for example, one high-ranking government official in Beijing was a big fan of building tops, and the design of all major buildings had to go past his desk. Shanghai's public officials take a similarly keen interest in the tops of their city's structures.

Magnolias are the symbol of Shanghai; indeed they have become the city's most popular architectural metaphor.

The top choice, if you will, for many high-profile building. You can spot magnolia DNA in the "flowering blossom" of the Bund Center (originally modeled on an inverted metal beer-bottle cap, I kid you not) and the giant "vertical bud" of the proposed North Bund cruise ship terminal. More magnolia blossoms are evident in the planometric undulations of the Oriental Art Center in Pudong, and the motorized petals of the brand new, 15,000-seat Masters Tennis stadium in Minhang. Yes, the magnolia rules the skyline; it is the city's most successful cross-pollinator.

Of course, alternative top initiatives exist. I was once invited to an architectural slugfest just to design a new top for an already completed high-rise building (in the end, all of the various international non-magnolia-like entries were deemed "spectacular," but mysteriously none of them "won"). One time, someone copied the top of one of my high-rises and used it on one of their own buildings, everything reproduced in detail, including all the mistakes! But that is a seed of a different sort.

In the late 1990s, many brutally plain, low-rise, flat-topped residential housing blocks in Pudong, and elsewhere, were improved by the superficial addition of pitched roofs. It was a modest exercise in redesign, but one that arguably humanized the landscape. Occasionally, genetic dead-ends are saved by a late design mutation. The struggle continues. ■



Bund Center