

CITYSPACE by Christopher Choa

a new twist

the world financial center aims high



ImagineChina

a scale model of Shanghai's architectural marvels rotates magnificently in The Planning Museum's huge lobby, much like a giant crab on a New Year's banquet table. All of Shanghai's landmarks are there – the Peace Hotel, the Pudong Development Bank, the Grand Theater, a mast of the Nanpu Bridge; well, you get the idea. But there is one element on display that has never been built: the Shanghai World Financial Center (WFC). It's not the tallest element in the sculptural composition (the Pearl Tower holds top honor), yet it steals the show.

Throughout the world, high-rises are often created for emotional, not rational reasons. In China, high-rises are symbols of political prowess and economic potential. As such, they are frequently planned and built without much relation to the price of land, the rental market, planning requirements, or the environment. In Shanghai, an entire district, namely Pudong's Lujiazui, was developed primarily for its visual effect – skyline first – much like a theater set. Although the physical urban environment in that area is generally unfriendly and unsustainable, as agitprop the Lujiazui skyline is a success; it screams "World Class City".

But first impressions can deceive.

Take a closer look at Pudong's skyline and once you get past the undisciplined array of decorative hats, endless appendages, and the cantilevered bits, you're left with slim architectural pickings. Not much more than pointless fussiness, bad taste, and some pretty awful environments at ground level. But for a moment, let's love a shape and consider the yet-to-be completed Shanghai World Financial Center.

More than a decade ago – eons in the chronology of modern architecture – the New York architecture firm of Kohn Pedersen Fox began designing the WFC for Minoru Mori, a prominent Japanese developer. This is the same architecture firm responsible for 333 Wacker Drive in Chicago, a striking design for its time. Today, that taut, gently curved façade is a bit of an architectural cliché, but back then it was astonishing. In some ways, the Mori building is also a throwback to simple, heroic tower buildings. The WFC is unapologetically minimalist, elegantly lean. And, of course, very tall. Depending on how you measure these things, it will be the tallest building in the world, for at least a few minutes.

The tower rises from the podium as a perfect square and gradually tapers to a blunt flat blade at the top. In the plan views, this progression is very straight-

forward, almost banal; as the building rises, the opposite corners of the square floorplate gradually step back, making the tower thinner. But the resulting shape is enigmatic; the sides of the building form paired sets of impossibly graceful creases that make the tower look as if it were somehow twisting. These lines are the echoes of the early days of computer-aided design; the compound, hyperbolic shapes are made possible by Boolean operations in a digital-modeling program. Little over a decade ago, computers in the professional mainstream were just starting to be used for this kind of design.

The top of the WFC is its signature: a monumental opening pierces the seemingly thin blade at the top of the building. A gate to the sky, if you will. In the original design, the opening was round, a platonic shape that contrasted elegantly with the flat chisel top of the tower. But some people saw it as a meta-image of the *himawari*, the rising sun of the Japanese national flag. And they didn't want it flying over Shanghai. This is nonsense – nobody owns circles, and the round opening had plenty of potentially practical functions – it might have nested a giant Ferris wheel, relieved wind pressure on the tall tower, or framed the observation deck. Whatever.

Practicality aside, the circle could be justified purely on esthetic grounds. The opening was beautiful. But it was not to be. After some strained behind-the-scenes meetings, government officials announced that the tower top of the WFC was to be modified; the circle was to be squared.

The new look isn't as good as the older one, but it does the job. If you look closely at the WFC model in the Planning Museum, you can just make out where the new rectangular opening was grafted over the original full-moon circle. Like the after-image of stars that come from explosions light years away, the final shape of the WFC is a record which reflects a strained political discourse but also marks a time when architectural shapes met computers and buildings took a startling new path. One day, soon, it will become a reality. ■

Christopher Choa is an architect and Design Principal of EDAAW (design, environments, economics and planning)