

## Interview with Prof. Dr. Kongjian Yu

Professor Dr. Kongjian Yu is China's most prominent landscape architect. His firm Turenscape, founded in 1998, has completed many architecture, landscape architecture and urban design projects across the world, at all scales. He is Professor and Dean of the College of Architecture and Landscape Architecture at Peking University. His research and teaching interests are focused on the use of ecological infrastructure to achieve resilient and sustainable cities.

He is a member of the Global Schindler Award jury, and he spoke with the Global Schindler Award team about the changing role of the landscape, and landscape infrastructure in China – and their potential impact on the future of Shenzhen and the Pearl River Delta.

GSA: What has been your experience with landscape issues in the Chinese context?

Kongjian Yu: The Chinese concept of “Landscape” is quite new in comparison to the Chinese conception of the garden. Large-scale urbanization happened quickly in China, and this has led to a recent rediscovery and reconsideration of the landscape. Before, we did not think about landscapes, we thought about gardens or parks. Now that has changed; with urban sprawl for instance, we find that landscape is vast, it surrounds the city and it is within the city. We have begun to look at its role in the city. For the Pearl River Delta, this means we have to look at the landscape history, at cultural issues and the environment. We have to think of the landscape as more than a park or a garden or green space – it must be considered as a process within urbanization.

GSA: How can landscape be leveraged in China to become an active element of urbanization processes?

KY: Landscape in China needs to be considered as infrastructure, which allows it to be used to address big issues. We have air pollution, water pollution – pollution is everywhere. We have over 600 cities in China, and all of them have air pollution. Before we thought of the landscape as ornamental, but the landscape must be reframed as productive infrastructure. Not only in terms of agriculture, but also energy, clean water, raw materials. The landscape should be a producer and not a consumer. If we look at Shenzhen, Beijing, Shanghai, the landscape is always a consumer of resources like energy, water and labor – but the landscape is also a resource. This is especially important for us to understand in China because we only have 10 percent of the world's arable land and 20 percent of the world's population.

GSA: The idea of the landscape as an ornamental thing, as an observed and passive part of human settlement has shifted in China, in many countries. How has this cultural role of landscape changed, and how will it shift in the future?

KY: More than half of Chinese people live in the cities now, a change that occurred over the past 30 years. This has significantly altered social and cultural life for people. Landscape and urban design can help to rebuild the social and cultural infrastructure, to address issues of social harmony and equality – and cultural identity. Massive migration in China led to a loss of identity as they left the places that where they had deep roots. In the past 30 years we did not ask the questions “Where do we come from?” and “What are we now?” and we have suddenly found that we are alienated from our cities. Now these questions of cultural identity and place have become urgent and important. Landscape can help to define people’s identities, orient people by making places. Some of these questions were first asked in the Western world half a century ago, talking about place, space and identity but we are asking them now because for us it is only in the past 30 years that we lost our identity, our traditions. Globalization, urbanization, modernization, Westernization... all of these contributed to these broad issues and, as urban designers, we must consider all of these factors.

GSA: What is the relationship of urbanization and landscape in the Pearl River Delta?

KY: In the Pearl River Delta, half of the land is still open, productive agricultural land. But there is little awareness of it – it is essentially invisible because you are always travelling on the grey infrastructure, on the roads, or isolated in your building, and your water comes through pipes and so on. So there is little awareness of the landscape, but it is there. If awareness of the landscape is increased through urban design-based strategies, we can reconnect it into a holistic system, one that has a high ecological value, and therefore protects the landscape, and the people in it.

GSA: What caused the landscape to come into this crisis of ignorance?

KY: We made a big mistake in China over the past 30 years. We basically copied the US model of urbanization, copying the idea of car-dependent cities. The landscape disappeared, the whole Pearl River Delta almost disappeared – but if we dig deeper we still find rice paddies, banana trees, but they have become invisible, non-functional. The cities have also become dysfunctional with flooding, traffic jams and pollution. We have this crisis because we lost the landscape. We have to define the landscape and critical ecological systems first and begin repairing and restoring them. That is what I call the negative approach or negative planning: we cannot only build, we must also balance, recover the landscape as a space – one that is part of urbanization.

GSA: Considering the breadth of the environmental concerns, what is one particular aspect that an understanding of landscape as infrastructure could address?

KY: Water. In China the problem with water is not only with pollution but also with resource availability. Shenzhen in particular has this problem. The city is essentially

running out of water. Water quantity and quality, is certainly important, but also we have to look at the seasonal aspects of water supply. Shenzhen has a monsoon climate, so water fluctuates in extremes. Most of the rainfall happens in three or four months, which causes serious floods and urban inundation. The remainder of the year is very dry and the urban green spaces consume a lot of water. The natural water system in Shenzhen is almost completely destroyed, with little resilience; the rivers and lakes are heavily polluted and waterfront is misused. Landscape based design can be used to address this seasonal change in addition to the pollution – and it can encourage the wise use of waterfront. We have to shift the situation away from draining away the surplus water in the wet months to storing it and remediating it for use in the dry months. Landscape must be a solution to save water, to mediate the volume, to clean the water. This is the key concept for creating a “sponge city”, a water resilient city.

GSA: How would you make a landscape productive, into a resource instead of a consumer?

KY: Philosophically we need to go back to the ethics of the land. We need to consider that nature can take care of itself, and all human resources come from the landscape. The landscape must be thought of as something that supports life – and not just something for people to exploit. The city is a human-generated ecosystem. We can look at how the landscape contributes to this ecosystem. Landscape as a system is about its ecosystem services, or rather landscape services; how and what it can produce for human use, and also how it can mediate and regulate environmentally; how it can support biodiversity; and how it can inspire human creativity and imagination. Cities today in China, in the whole world, are mostly dependent on grey infrastructure – pipes, highways, power lines – which provide services for humanity. Landscape can be thought of systematically, it can provide similar services, but in the form of a living system or as ecological infrastructure. For example landscape systems can be used in the remediation of pollution or regulation of flood and drought. The landscape also supports biodiversity – it should be productive for the whole ecosystem.

The landscape is also a source of inspiration for culture, for education, it is a primary factor in the attribution and creation of cultural meaning and identity, including spiritual aspects and inspirations. In the urban villages of Shenzhen or Guangzhou for example, all the large Banyan trees are sacred, they are protected to help create identity and meaning in communities. There is life on the streets in the urban villages, people walking from place to place, small-scale commerce. The urban villages should be preserved, not removed; they have a sense of place, the elements of true urbanity – and social and ecological diversity and resiliency. New development should help create new areas in the city, using retail, residential and open space together. The areas of the city must be connected with each other and into the city as a whole, the Delta as a region.

GSA: How can this reconnection, the creation of urban identity be achieved in a city like Shenzhen?

KY: We need to think about integrating systems. If you design a bike path, or pedestrian way, it needs to be integrated into the city. Changing the mobility infrastructure will influence people's movement, gatherings and of course where and how people travel – these are systems in the urban landscape, infrastructure for cultural and social functions. The landscape structure in the city is the key to placemaking: for example, the streets, pedestrian sidewalks and waterfronts give identity to the city, to the people – and all of these are part of the urban landscape. In Shenzhen we have mountains, rivers, mangrove swamps, and those help to give the city identity. Landscape can be the element that defines the city structurally, more than architecture. In China, we have Feng Shui, which defines space according to the environment and landscape: mountains, water, forest – so our culture already defines space in accordance with the landscape. The landscape reflects the social form, and the social form comes from the landscape. This is a reciprocal process that can be guided by frameworks to achieve goals and respond to problems in the urban areas.

GSA: How can urban design strategies be used to recover the landscape in Shenzhen?

KY: The landscape as a social and cultural aspect is very important in this competition, for urban designers. Shenzhen was the first city of China that developed when China implemented Deng Xiaoping's 'open' policy in late 1970s. We have things there that should be preserved, that are part of our cultural heritage, such as the first factories, or places that Deng Xiaoping made important visits to. These should be identified, as they are part of the development of the city, and of China. First identify what is there, and integrate it into an urban design strategy. Find where the rivers are, the mountains, the larger urban open spaces, the social and community functions and look at them as systems, look for places where the systems break down at the larger scale. The rivers were channelized, the drainage was cut off, the mountains fragmented. The small scale is also important for the life of the people, and new spaces must be created as part of this larger system. But all of these elements can be reconnected as part of the landscape infrastructure.

GSA: What is the relationship of Shenzhen's urban form, mobility systems and the landscape?

KY: Shenzhen has lanes of traffic, not streets and this makes the city blocks almost walled off. That does not create urbanity, it only creates island-like blocks where people live or work, isolated and disconnected. We can begin to change the walled blocks into urban spaces – into places. The traffic lanes have green medians, but

these are not functional; they are merely ornamental and they consume a lot of energy and water to maintain. Things like this are not sustainable; we must come up with sustainable, functional kinds of landscape infrastructure. You often have to drive or take public transportation to reach the large central parks in Shenzhen, and they seem like monuments, tourist sites. We can imagine how to reducing their size and redistributing the open space throughout the city, could result in a more integrated, holistic city fabric, one that is accessible enough for people to use on a daily basis.

GSA: Why is now a unique time, why are people in China asking these questions now?

KY: As the economy of the city changes, economic policy, political policy change, and we need land use policy. Shenzhen was a city of industry, and now it changes, the population changes; it is increasingly a city for the middle class. People's expectations change, their use of the city changes. We need to look at things environmentally, ecologically, socially and culturally, to create a new sense of place for the city and new lifestyle for the residents. Because of changes in the national policy, the economic slowdown, changes in people's expectations for their cities, we have the chance to reevaluate urbanization, culture, the landscape – and that is what the Global Schindler Award competition entries should be about.

Kongjian Yu has been a professor of architecture and landscape architecture at Peking University since 1997. He is also the founding dean of the newly established College of Architecture and Landscape Architecture at Peking University. He is the founder and president of Turenscape, one of the first, and largest, private architecture and landscape architecture practices in China. Dr. Yu is also a visiting professor at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design, and served as a Master Juror for the Aga Kahn Architecture Award. Dr. Yu publishes widely, including more than 250 papers and 17 books. He is the chief editor of Landscape Architecture China.

He has won numerous international awards for his ecologically and culturally sensitive projects. In 2004, Dr. Yu was awarded the Overseas Chinese Pioneer Achievement Medal by the Chinese central government for his overall contribution to the nation. He serves as consulting expert for Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development of the People's Republic of China, Ministry of Land and Resources of the People's Republic of China, and the cities of Beijing and Suzhou, among others.