

For the Shanghai K2 Xinhua Lu Project, four office towers are expressed as mountain peaks across the site, celebrating the powerful taper forms with diagonal cuts, which lead the eyes to the top



The dream team

With offices across the globe, Aedas is a truly multi-disciplinary practice that works on everything from architecture and interior design to landscape and graphics. Over the past 10 years, the firm has been working on a large number of mixed-use projects in China, and we recently sat down in Hong Kong with global board directors Christine Lam and David Clayton, who gave us some insight into working in the region

TEXT:
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PHOTOGRAPHY:
Courtesy of Aedas



Christine Lam and David Clayton

Firstly, tell me how you each found your way into the field of architecture.

Christine Lam (CL): I'm going to be totally honest with you... my choice of architecture was totally by elimination. I'm not very good with money, so I couldn't be an accountant; I'm scared of needles, so I couldn't be a doctor... So I looked at what I could do and that was architecture.

Below
Recently completed in Dalian, China, the vision for Olympia 66 was to create a contemporary statement with an oriental overtone

David Clayton (DC): I liked doing art and science at school and I liked doing sculpture, but there's no money in sculpture. But, the idea of doing big sculptures that people have to live and work in

and interact with was fantastic to a 13-year-old ego-maniac like myself. Which is funny as a contrast because Christine is way more talented an artist and a designer than I am, yet she arrived at it through some horrific practical decision, and we've worked on all our projects together since 2005.

CL: Is it 2005?

DC: It's 2005/2006.

CL: It's been a long while.

DC: I always say, "Well, we haven't killed each other yet!" so it can't be all bad. *(They both laugh)*



Aedas, and your team in particular, has been working on an increasing number of projects in China. What makes designing for the region so appealing to you?

CL: In the Hong Kong office, it's about 50 per cent Hong Kong work and 50 per cent China work. If you look at China, one single mixed-use project will have a hotel, offices, a shopping mall, apartments – everything!

DC: The scale of things there is just so amazing, and you become somewhat numb to it: 300,000 square metres here or half-a-million square metres there, and that becomes the norm. But, when you think about that – and especially because I'm from the UK – nothing compares.

CL: In China, all cities are going through urbanisation, as they have so many cities and provinces. So they start to do urban planning where they work on moving people from one province to another. It's not just like looking at one CBD, its large-scale urbanisation.

DC: What's interesting about that is, if you go back in time to the start of working on China projects, a lot of them were about taking what's happening elsewhere in the world and bringing that to China. But now, as the country has been moving so fast and developing so fast, a lot of the best new thinking, like

experiential retail or integrated transport or collaborative work spaces, is coming from the country and going back out to the rest of the world.

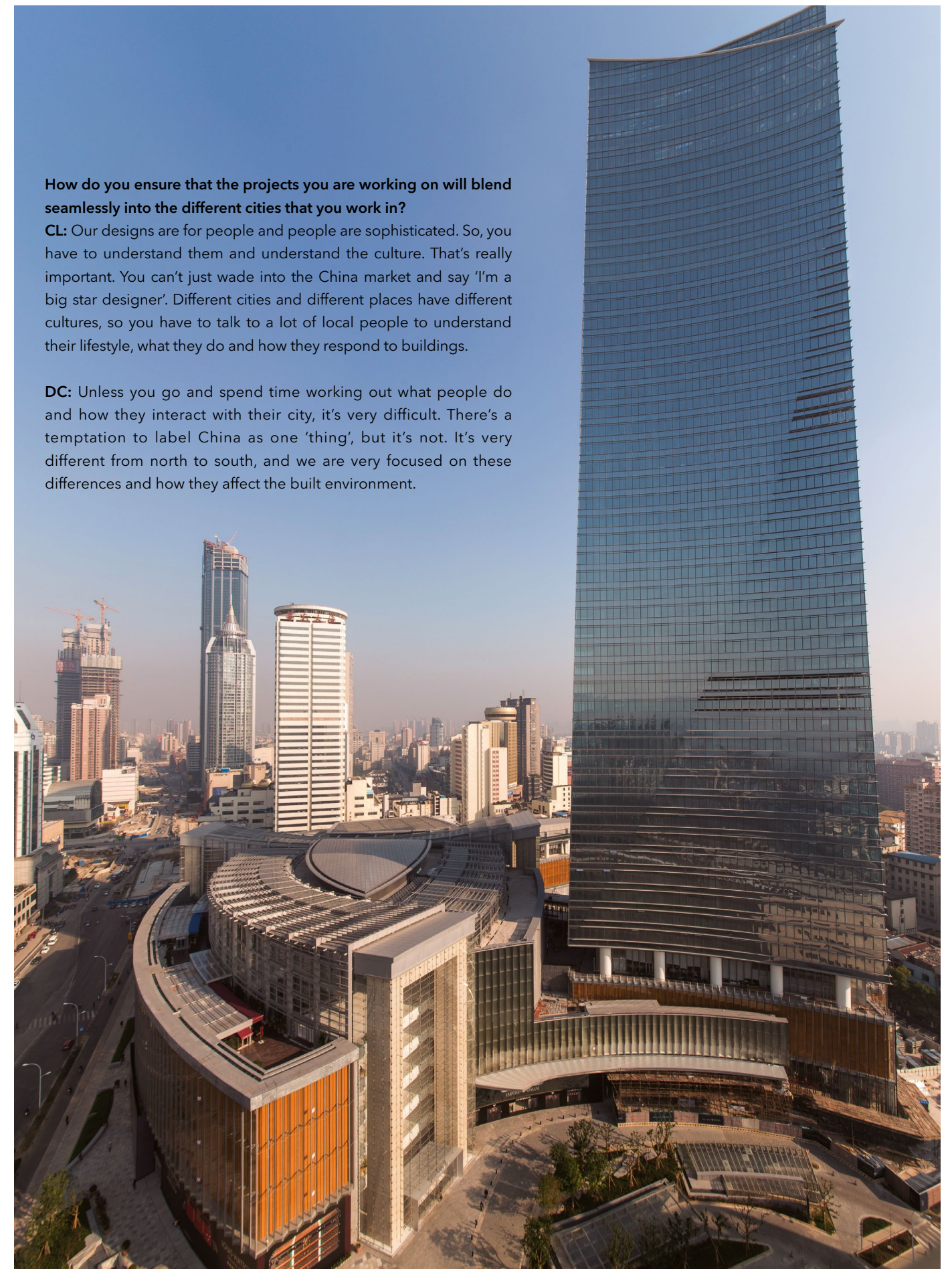
What are the biggest changes you have seen in the country during the 10 years that you and your team have been working in China?

CL: Construction quality has improved by a huge scale. If you look back 10 years ago, the skill set of the labourers was very poor. But because the country has come so far in terms of learning things, now, interestingly, the contractors in China go out and take on a lot of construction work in the Middle East and even in Europe because of their expertise.

DC: The whole China market has become dramatically more professional and sophisticated in the last 10 years. I think that the perception of markets like China from the western world is that there are no rules, which is completely wrong, as China has as sophisticated planning and regulatory systems as anywhere.

Below and right

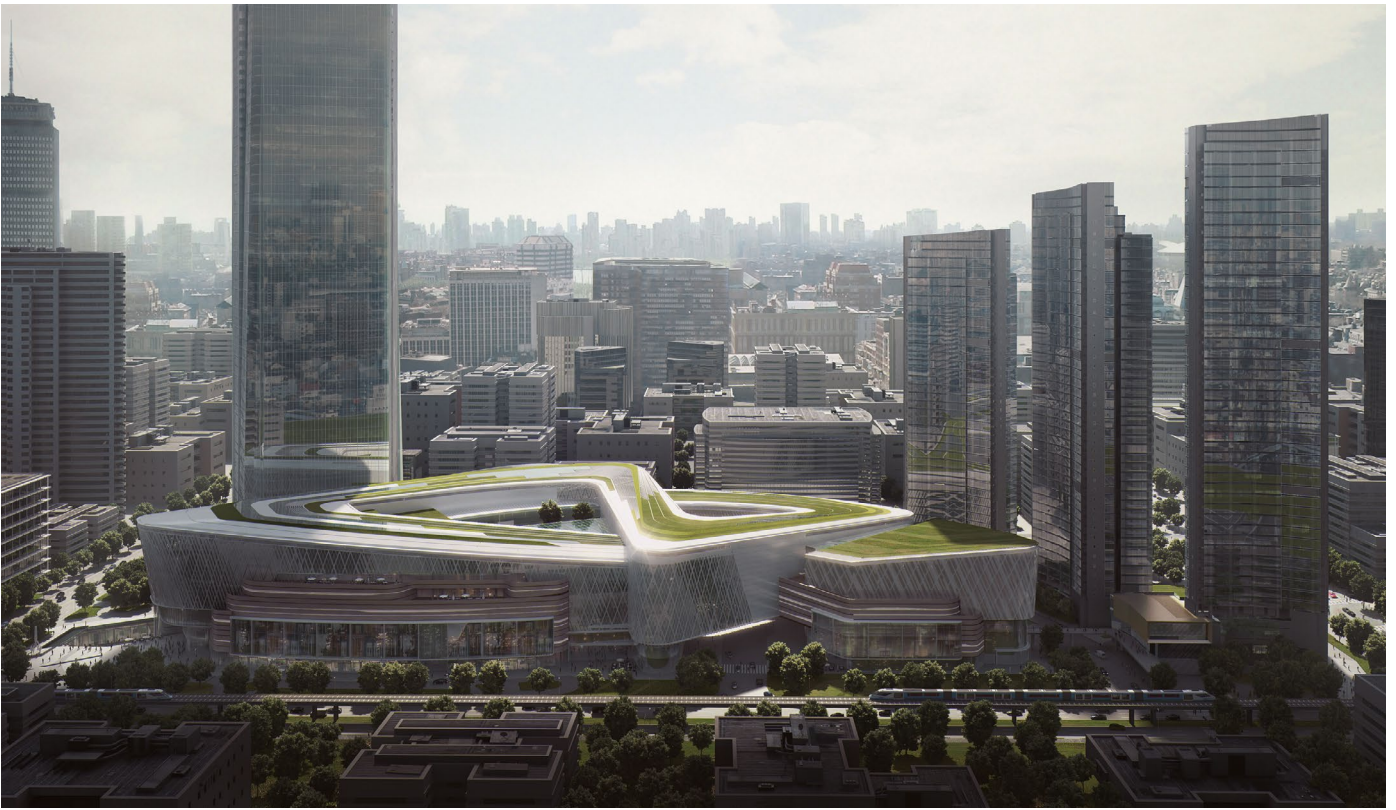
Center 66 in Wuxi, China, is a 52-storey office tower that features a swooping step in the plane of the main elevation from the bottom corner up to the opposite top corner of the curtain walling. This is a visual reference to the cut of the traditional woman's dress, the *qipao* or *cheongsam*



How do you ensure that the projects you are working on will blend seamlessly into the different cities that you work in?

CL: Our designs are for people and people are sophisticated. So, you have to understand them and understand the culture. That's really important. You can't just wade into the China market and say 'I'm a big star designer'. Different cities and different places have different cultures, so you have to talk to a lot of local people to understand their lifestyle, what they do and how they respond to buildings.

DC: Unless you go and spend time working out what people do and how they interact with their city, it's very difficult. There's a temptation to label China as one 'thing', but it's not. It's very different from north to south, and we are very focused on these differences and how they affect the built environment.



What can you tell us about the current projects that you and your team are working on?

CL: In Wenzhou, we have a very interesting theme village where we are trying to combine a theme park concept with retail, street retail. We're making it fun, so that people will want to come and spend the day there. It's not a shopping mall, but we have provided indoor and outdoor spaces because Wenzhou can be quite hot.

Another project is in Shanghai. The client is looking for innovative industries like IT, hot-desker-type offices. That's the new trend for the office space, not the big floorplate with a central core. There are galleries and conference rooms, but it's all vertical.

DC: It's like taking bits of the way that Silicon Valley works; you know, an innovative, sort of tech corridor and combining it into an urban site with a form that is exciting. It's not creation of form by whimsy, it's creation of form for good, solid, practical reason, and the process-driven, British architect side of me likes that! ●

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Scheduled to complete in 2020, Heartland 66 in Wuhan, China, is a mixed-use development that adopts an 'infinity loop' concept as an association with the Chinese art of knot-tying

