

## Conference Paper

# Contemporary Contextualization: Using Cross-Cultural Practice in Sensitive Contexts

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## Abstract

As a physical manifestation of political, social, and economic forces, architecture has been affected by globalization in the same ways as other fields. It has succumbed to the criticism of the homogenization of its product, and architects continue to search for relevance in this new global context. However, as globalization matures in the twenty-first century, so does the understanding of the need for cultural identity. As new complex contexts arise, they require a sensitive understanding of the forces in play, in order to continue to create humanistic interventions in the built environment. While some may consider global practice a threat to local environments, given today's complex conditions, the lines between local and global begin to blur together. Thus, it can be argued that trans-national practice enhances the ability to respond sensitively to intricate political, social, and urban contexts which are now more common than ever.

Two Sino-French case studies are used here to demonstrate this phenomenon; one in China and one in France. Together they show how these forces manifest themselves through the cross-cultural exchange that is needed for future practice. As the profession moves forward, one can consider that this international sensitivity will be increasingly employed to successfully engage and respond to complex local environments.

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## 1. Introduction

Architecture has always reflected the society in which it's created. It is a built manifestation of political, economic, and social forces, as well as a representation of natural conditions and available resources. This remains true today as globalization has taken full effect in the last century. Meanwhile the development of the architectural profession at the global scale has continued to provoke criticism.

From early modernism and post-war developments, through to the rise and fall of post-modernism, architects and thinkers have struggled to digest the contradictions inherent in the globalization of a profession whose product is nevertheless so strongly rooted in physical place. However, more than a century after industrialization - and several decades after the digital revolution - the maturation of the trans-national community is ripe for international practice.

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As society, organizations, and communities diversify without regard to traditional physical boundaries, previous understandings of space and place have become outdated. Furthermore, as clients and users begin to transgress these boundaries, their projects reflect the need to inherently understand these dynamics in order to meet their needs. Therefore, contrary to the fear of global, architectural monotony, one can argue today that there is a special place for international practitioners who are in fact hypersensitive to the minute complexities of a context and place. Furthermore, international practice is built on a foundation of collaboration, which can be regarded as the key to success in this new global context.

Two Sino-French case studies will be used to display this phenomenon. One being the Bao'an Public Culture and Art Center in Shenzhen - by French based, Coldefy & Associates, and the China based, East China Architecture Design Institute - which called for the creation of an international cultural beacon in a local Chinese neighborhood. The second being the Foundation of China at Cité Internationale Universitaire in Paris (CIUP) in Paris which required a French-Chinese team, Coldefy & Associates with China based, Atelier FCJZ, to interpret and synthesize the needs of a political collaboration. The paper concludes from the study that it is apparent that there is a place for - and value in - site-sensitive, transnational practice today. Furthermore, it could be argued that as society continues toward greater complexity to respond to global networks, site-sensitive cross-cultural practice becomes increasingly necessary in order to create meaningful built solutions in a global economy.

## 2. The Continuing Critique of Globalized Architecture

Practitioners, critics, and thinkers have been occupied with the effects, both positive and negative, of globalization within the profession of architecture for more than a century. The development of the International Style in the first half of the twentieth century represented an era of new promise and practical solutions in the wake of the World Wars. However, its universal approach was soon met with criticism, notably once the movement's impact expanded from the architectural realm to the urban realm. As urban critics like Jacobs protested the erasure of rich local neighborhoods, architects reacted and scrambled to find meaning through superficial symbols. [1] As the shortcomings of the Postmodernist response became evident, the issue was famously readdressed by Kenneth Frampton in his endorsement of a Critical Regionalism, a critique against globalization and the homogenization of architecture. Critical Regionalism presented

a solidified front against a universal style, and a call for the rediscovery of a local connection. [2]

Regardless of the evident deficiencies and consistent criticism, globalization of the architectural profession has intensified with the digital age, creating new social and economic networks around the world. In parallel, the fall of the Berlin wall provided a new economic opportunity for corporate development in previously inaccessible regions, and indeed coincided with the growth of many firms. [3] Despite the evolutions, the critique against globalization is summarized concisely by Theodore Levitt when he remarked, “everywhere everything gets more and more like everything else as the world’s preference structure is relentlessly homogenized.” [4]

In architecture, however, global homogeneity must no longer be confused with the original International Style’s minimalist, universal values. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, after several iterations of “isms,” iconic contemporary architecture has become continuously employed for branding, particularly of new cities that have sprung up in rapidly developing regions. As Bernd Nicolai observes, the quantity of iconic buildings threatens to “normalize architectural uniqueness, flatten it into convention, and marginalize the outstanding.” [5] But while architectural professionals have collectively identified the deficiencies of global practice, they have struggled to respond appropriately. Nevertheless, after a century of maturation, perhaps it is appropriate for the profession to embrace today’s international societal context and rethink the opportunities that global practice presents.

### 3. The Merits of Cross-Cultural Practice

Despite criticism against it, homogeneity is a side effect that is not necessarily mandated by the development of the globalized market. Globalization is, in essence, “the intensification of worldwide social relations in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.” [6] Therefore, the standardization of products is not the driver, but rather the result of the intensifying of networks and relationships. Globalization, thus, has an intrinsic duality that is especially pertinent to architectural practice, global and local. As Robert Adams explains, the development of the global community has replaced the relevance of the nation-state with the growing concern for the localization of place and the politics of identity. Furthermore, Adams notes that these two contrasts must not be considered “totally distinct,” pointing to the famous example of Frank Gehry’s iconic Guggenheim Museum Bilbao which he reminds the reader was completed along with the restoration of Bilbao’s historic core. [7]

Certain firms have begun to address this duality in their project process. For example, the Dutch firm OMA proudly point to a type of internationalism at the core of their practice success. Increased staff diversification, Reiner de Graaf argues, renders even the locals a minority, creating an environment where creation becomes a product of perpetual cultural clash, as given truths are replaced by continuous doubt and argument. [8] This would enable a thorough and critical response to a project anywhere in the world by a design team that represents both global and local understandings.

Finally, the most evident and critical relationship between the global and the local is that of the survival of the planet's ecology. Regardless of an individual's direct participation or awareness at the global scale, everyone directly impacts - and is influenced by - our collective existence. As Adams points out, "this is the supreme challenge for globalization: the cause, the effect and the resolution are and will be global and local." [9]

As a consequence, the time is ripe for the profession to embrace the context of globalism as the new context for practice, one in which worldwide social relations and local conditions are in constant juxtaposition and dialogue. Within this context, the practice of architecture and city-making must address the concern with identity and localization that now goes beyond the specificities of the physical site, as well as the effort in the preservation of the planet. This provides an especially unique opportunity to those firms who do work cross-culturally to directly address these issues and contribute in a distinct and responsible way.

#### 4. Two Case studies: Collaborative design as a tool

The opportunity presented by cross-cultural practice is to move away from homogenization, which has been traditionally associated with globalization, towards work that sensitively addresses both worldwide and local networks. One primary way it can do this is by abandoning the top-down model of exportation that developed in the transition from colonialism to capitalism, instead embracing collaboration and the juxtaposition of ideas. Two Sino-French projects are chosen to demonstrate how this phenomenon plays out through the design process. The success of these projects largely stems from the international design cooperation process, where the collaboration between firms of different backgrounds - from the beginning of the project - allows the synthesis of global and local ideas and conditions.

## 4.1. Bao'an Public Art Center

The Bao'an Public Culture and Art Center (Figure 1) is a project for three art programs – Museum, Gallery, and Art Gallery – on a site in the center of Bao'an district, Shenzhen. The total area constructed is over 90,000 square meters, and the separate functions and operations of the programs evoke the potential for a campus-like environment. The site, however, is extremely urban – at the intersection of two major commercial boulevards and with a small footprint that requires verticality – surrounded by a diverse mix of residential towers, an elementary school, and a large mixed-use commercial center.

The project began as an International Call for Projects, though requiring local Chinese architectural qualifications. From the call for projects, about 70 firms were accepted to participate in the design competition, with the winning design team being the collaboration between Coldefy & Associates, based in France, and East China Architecture Design Institute, based in China. Given the conditions, it seems natural that a cross-cultural collaborative team develop the most appropriate response to the needs of Shenzhen, which was conceived in the age of globalization and is saturated with the local-global duality. The project fits into the city's development plan, building key pieces of public infrastructure as Shenzhen quickly joins the major cities of the world in terms of size and importance. Despite its ambitions as a world-class city, the construction industry in Shenzhen is still very local, with many established restrictions on methods and materials that would elsewhere be considered standard practice for international projects today. Furthermore, as a young city, Shenzhen is still developing its local, physical identity.



**Figure 1:** Rendering of the Bao'an Public Culture and Art Center in its Shenzhen context. Images courtesy of the architects, Coldefy & Associates.

The winning design embodied the global-local duality, through the sensitive combination of different points of view about the project and the city. The project's form responds to the Chinese expectation that a public project of this caliber should be visually "loud." At the same time, the geometric operations are driven by a typically European idea that a civic place is equally defined by its exterior space and the relationship between the public and the visitors. The final volume encapsulates these two priorities in order to create a vertical campus, where each of the programs coexist independently yet work together as a whole, framing a significant amount of public space and plazas. Additionally, the envelope responds to local practical and technological expectations, while establishing a relatable aesthetic dialogue with a more global projection of culture, to which the city wants to appeal. A marble aesthetic was employed (Figure 2), giving the landmark design a weightiness and symbolic link with the western cultural landscape. Yet it was achieved using special glass products within a typical curtain wall system comfortable for the public clients and contractors, and appropriate for the scale of the building.

The unique product of the design collaboration is not a haphazard combination of two species of thought. The final product was pro-actively investigated and curated by the international teams involved. Through the ability to juxtapose one's own value system with another's and the given place, the final product can more appropriately relate to the conditions of the project, which must relate to both global and local demands.



**Figure 2:** Images of printed-glass samples from early in the project development process of the Bao'an Public Culture and Art Center, Shenzhen show different stone textures and opacities possible to apply to typical curtain wall systems. Photographs courtesy of the architects, Coldefy & Associates.

## 4.2. Foundation of China in the Cité Internationale

The project for the Foundation of China in Paris (Figure 3) similarly relies on the transnational abilities of the architecture teams in order to sensitively bring the project to fruition. The program called for the creation of about 300 student residences on

the campus of the famous Cité Internationale Universitaire (CIUP). The CIUP campus contains several dozen residential buildings which host students and academics from around the world. The buildings are organized primarily by nationality, in the spirit of post-war peace and international cooperation and serve an important role in the respective communities. The Foundation of China will house a majority of visiting Chinese citizens and represent a communal “home away from home.”

The design competition was won by the collaborative team of Atelier FCJZ, based in China, and Coldefy & Associates, with offices in both France and China. A particularity of the qualifications necessary to compete for this project was the obligatory collaboration between French and Chinese architects, in order to meet the aesthetic, cultural, and political goals.

The Foundation of China is an example of how social and political networks of globalized community manifest in the physical environment in which architect’s practice. The context of the project requires an architect sensitive to the cross-cultural divide; someone who must understand and balance the needs of all parties in order to create a successful project, or even a project at all.



**Figure 3:** Renderings of the winning design of the Foundation of China in the Cité Internationale in its Parisian context. Images courtesy of the architects, Coldefy & Associates.

The requirement for a transcultural architectural partnership can be considered important for two reasons. The first is the obvious symbolism of the design collaboration, as well as the need for the project to represent the aesthetic unity of both cultures. The project successfully responds to this need by combining Parisian and Chinese elements, using the courtyard as a typological common denominator found in both culture’s traditional housing fabric. Furthermore, the materiality of the facades primarily employs bricks – a common and familiar traditional material in both cultures – with contemporary touches of concrete and wood, relating to present day architectural trends in both France and China respectively.

The second reason for the international partnership requirement can be considered more practical in terms of project management and delivery. The site is under the jurisdiction of both the CIUP campus as well as Parisian urban planners, yet the project owner and investor is a Beijing-based – and government backed – developer; there was a gap in understanding between the different actors in the project that rely on bridging the architecture teams. The dual French and Chinese teams had to be able to respectively receive and interpret conflicting input from two clients, synthesizing them in order to provide solutions that found common ground in order for the project to move forward.

In this case the international architecture team became a social and political mediator. The two clients were aware of the misalignment between their interests and depended on the international architecture team to appropriately filter, address and mediate their priorities in order to find common ground for the project to successfully pass through the design, development, and approval phases.

## 5. Conclusion

As globalization has expanded in the last century, architecture has struggled to positively identify its role in the process. Beginning with an optimistic outlook of “genius architect as ‘curator of society,’” the disappointment linked with homogenization and search for identity has continued to increase. [10]

The twentieth century’s version of globalization relied on an export of knowledge or methods that resulted in homogeneity. Perhaps the twenty-first century represents a new era of globalization, one in which the social networks and communications tools have matured to the point that they require a new kind of global architects to understand their demands.

The two case studies briefly represent the way that these cross-cultural skills are necessary to bring to life certain types of projects, and that these types of projects can become increasingly common as the global networks continue to expand and complexify. The players in the projects move away from linear transfers of knowledge and toward a multifaceted cross-fertilization of different expertise and viewpoints, relating more to contemporary understandings of sociology and anthropology such as entanglement and exchange. Contemporary architecture can capitalize on cross-cultural practice to engage the sensitive contexts of today’s society, allowing the built environment to engage the global-local duality and strengthen the identity of place.



## Conflict of Interest

The author fully discloses his role as a Director at Coldefy & Associés Architectes Urbanistes, who are involved in the two projects used as Case Studies. These projects were chosen due to the author's intimate knowledge of their content and process.

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