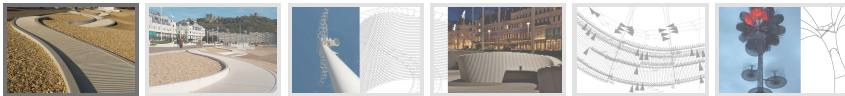


The stories of Tonkin Liu

Glass chats to Tonkin Liu about the changing face of architecture



Dover Esplanade, Image: Mike Tonkin



Architecture is a unique profession that sits at the centre of a spaghetti junction of art, craft, design, technology, sociology and anthropology, and seemingly countless other concerns and disciplines. The role of architecture in the 21st century is more complex than ever as societies morph and change, requiring the utilisation of virtual and conceptual, as well as merely physical spaces.

The work of London-based architects Tonkin Liu takes in all of this and more besides. Mike Tonkin and Anna Liu met in Hong Kong, and founded a practice in 2001 to explore their common interests in 'observations of human behaviour that tell us about culture', and 'nature, as a system of form and function.'

'Every time we do a project it is about understanding a place, and making something that is specific to that place', says Tonkin. Each project is subjected to a rigorous process of understanding that they call 'asking, looking, playing, making' (which also happens to be the title of Tonkin's 1999 book).

'We take the brief apart completely, and ask ourselves, "what is this really asking?"' says Liu. 'It is like psychoanalysis, trying to find the subconscious of each project. I think that there is a collective subconscious that drives a project; it's not just about a place but an ambition, and the time we are working in. We spend a lot of time ripping the brief apart, and then piecing it back together, to try to find the underlying vision.'

This Carl Jung-inspired trend of simplification and demystification is typical of their work. As in the case of every other modern practice, a lot depends on digital models, structural analysis and geometric optimisation, but what lies beneath are simple stories and archetypes that are broken down and made specific to a particular situation.

The busy duo have recently enjoyed the public unveiling of one of their latest projects, the new Dover Esplanade, for which they built three 'waves': Lifting Wave lifts people up on to the esplanade, Resting Wave creates a sheltered space for people to sit out of the wind (complete with a rippled surface that discourages tagging), and Lighting Wave provides light for the esplanade, which, as a whole, forms a picturesque triptych with Dover Castle and the narrowest part of the English Channel. Coincidental to the process was a riff on the White Cliffs of Dover,



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




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which the architects didn't realise was apparent until half way through. Tonkin often mentions the use of nature as inspiration and occasional medium, most stunningly demonstrated in their Roof Garden Apartment, a white, steel structure sat on top of a factory that used to make and store needles for record players, that over time, is slowly being engulfed by fragrant climbers, growing like the client's family of four children. Moreover, the integral airflow allows for cold air to enter and escape as warm air, whilst simultaneously circulating a light perfume throughout the space.

Nature also played a leading role in their recent Widnes Future Flower Project, or "flower in the mud", an operating work of art that represents something beautiful growing out of a difficult situation, namely the polluted, neglected riverfront land of Southern Widnes, Cheshire. Along with the forthcoming Mersey Gateway Bridge, it signifies the beginning of a complete regeneration of the 200-acre site, culminating in the realisation of a modern business park and associated leisure facilities that will bring over a thousand jobs to the area.

'These projects are always all about the future,' says Mike Tonkin. 'In Widnes they want to attract funding and investment to turn all of that polluted land into some sort of habitable land.' A fourteen-metre tall flower that turns wind into red light references the Pied Piper of Hamlyn and ticks the sustainability box by 'celebrating the elements that nature gives us for free.'

'We are interested in sustainability on a symbolic level as well,' he continues. 'Most of our products rely on an absolute minimum of materials, and work with wind, light changes, and rain, which are always there, but changing all the time.' And the 'sculptures' change all the time as a result. Take the Singing, Ringing Tree of Crown Point, Lancashire, a beautiful construction of pipes of varying lengths, that requires no energy at all but the power and whims of the wind in order to play music. How close is their practice to art?

'We are making projects that can be called art because they are so extreme, allegorical or symbolic in what they are doing, and we are doing it through very simple means,' says Tonkin. 'It just so happens that some of them don't have a very architectural brief, like the [Singing Ringing] tree on top of the hill, but they actually are incredibly architectural. They rely upon an understanding of structure. Architecture is an art and a science, and it has always had a relationship to nature. We are interested in science, nature and stories, and somewhere between those things is the playground in which we want to make our projects happen.'

It is all very well to talk about architecture as art, but architecture also has a role to play in social interaction and the politics of space. With the increased trend of people looking to escape into some sort of virtual reality of their own, whether it is something as simple as an iPhone video game played on the Tube to full-time residency of Second Life, comes a question as to how people may want to live in the future. Will a well-to-do middle-class lady travelling across London on the bus tolerate for much longer the young rude boy playing gangsta rap on his mobile loudspeaker? Could it be within the realm of architecture to find different spaces in which these people would not have to interact?

Anna Liu's answer is quick and blunted on reality. 'I think it should be the opposite. We should have more sharing of facilities. Resources are going to become more and more scarce. The lady and the guy with the music are going to coexist much more closely, perhaps using the same electrical supply, making that a much more efficient and sociable act. We think of ourselves as individuals, but we could become more like ants, working individually but acting effectively as a society. This is really important, otherwise we will continue to waste a lot of things.' Perhaps then it is people's attitudes towards sharing space, time and resources that needs to change, not necessarily the space itself. 'If you live in a city you expect to share a lot of things with a lot of people,' she adds.

And what of the city? The Georgian house they chose to base their office, in Wilmington Square, 'is used all the time for different purposes,' says Liu. 'People know when they can go and use it. We would like to see less privatised spaces. In the last five years the trend has been for more effort to be put into public spaces, and spaces in between buildings. This is a good trend, and I hope it continues. If you live in a city, you don't want everyone to have small gardens that use up more land. You want to give that space over to a larger plot of land that everyone can share.'

London is famed worldwide for its many and varied green spaces, but given the brief, what would they do to improve it? 'London is great as it is,' says Tonkin, 'but it needs to use the river as a linear heart. Many of the buildings along the Thames are terrible, and need to be knocked down and rebuilt to face the river. The river is controlled by three or four families, and until that power is removed from them, how are we going to turn it back into a transport system, like it should be? It should be one long public space that people around the world come to.'

The pair are also very much inspired by vertical cities - they met in Hong Kong, after all - and would encourage London councils and developers to build higher, particularly around the boundaries of the congestion zone. Following the example of their own Roof Garden Apartment, they would also like to see people being allowed to build an extra storey on top of their own houses, as is done in the famously populous and efficient Tokyo.

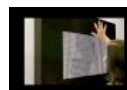
However, when asked which city in the world they feel has a particularly progressive and



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environmentally conscious attitude, their choice is typically unconventional and poetic, yet understandable. The 3,000 year-old Yemeni city of Shibam, sometimes called 'the Manhattan of the desert' for its height and density, is a city made out of mud. Air and light move freely through the nine storey heights, and when a building crumbles it is rebuilt from the same ubiquitous material, making for the ultimate sustainable city. Sharing amongst residents is paramount, and the whole model works structurally, environmentally and socially, as evinced by its survival (even of a suspected al-Qaeda attack). Moreover, Mike Tonkin once wrote of Shibam that it is one of the cities 'most generous with [its] lessons. My kind of city draws me into a story, makes me ask questions, and look for answers with all of my senses.'

by Paul Mendez

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