

**H**AVING your business name linked with madness might not seem a savvy move, but it has served Ma Yansong well. During the past few years both his name, and that of his small architecture studio, MAD – which stands for Ma Design – has built an enviable reputation. Ma, who has buildings under way in countries from Canada to Costa Rica, is the first Chinese architect to win an international competition outside of China. Recently he also won the *SCMP* style award for architecture. For a guy not too long out of his master's degree, and with only one thing actually built, he certainly

knows how to create a buzz.

This psychic angle makes more sense when you look at his buildings; they have an almost human element. Underneath each image of steel, concrete or glass sits an ideology, a thought process about technology, society and quite often, politics. "We use architecture as a tool to communicate, not as a product," says Ma, a casual, slightly hunched 33-year-old with a goatee. "We use certain formats or shapes to comment. We make topics, not buildings. It's like art work."

This puts him in a similar boat to his one-time teacher and employer, Zaha Hadid. After a degree in Beijing, Ma applied for a master's at Yale so he could study under the radical Iraqi architect, a visiting professor who is now to architecture what Bjork is to music. Back then, pre-Pritzker (a prize dubbed the "Nobel for architecture"), few of Hadid's conceptual designs had made it to the building stage, but she fascinated Ma with her molten modernism. He had followed her career through magazines from his university library.

Time at Yale widened Ma's horizons – he had only travelled within China before that – but more importantly it gave him the confidence to run with his more outrageous ideas. Debate was rare in China in the 90s, but at Yale it was a way of life. "All their professors are famous visiting architects and during school time if they have a different opinion, they fight," says Ma. "Students get this idea that there's no right or wrong. After all those arguments I found there is no answer, you have to believe in your own ideas."

After his degree, Hadid offered to employ Ma in London. He'd caught her eye with a project proposal for the new World







Guangzhou Twin Towers.

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A few years ago one project, Beijing 2050, took MAD ideas to an international audience at the Venice Biennale. “We did the whole project because nobody talked about the future very much in Beijing,” Ma says. “They’re too practical.” The three schemes that made up 2050 each tackled a social issue in China’s capital city: congestion, its treatment of old buildings and lack of public leisure spots. For the last theme Tiananmen Square got a makeover, from concrete pasture to forested park. It was a clear protest but was quite soft in its way; after all, Ma notes; who doesn’t like a park? Last year two members of congress saw the proposal and suggested the studio take the idea to the national committee. Debate, it seems, is no longer so rare in China.

“Because I’m interested in ideological topics, even Tiananmen Square is not about the trees, it’s about the whole of China,” Ma says. “In cities around China you feel a power behind them. I think architects can add to that power to change things. We are not politicians, we cannot make decisions about open spaces being public, but from our level we can do something.”

This link between politics and design can be less abstract. Throughout the country, even the lowliest of towns has a monumental town hall, and Ma has decided that these should be his next target. He has already found one: the mayor of Beihai in Guangxi province was willing to let him work on their centrepiece, and Ma plans to replace the hard edges and grand proportions with something more human and natural. However, this has all happened in the past year or so, and as recently as 2006 Ma, Hayano and Qun were still finding commissions hard to come by.

That year they entered an online design competition for a residential skyscraper in Mississauga, Canada’s sixth-largest city. Their building was sensuous, almost sexy, and it was competing against hundreds of entries. Dubbed “the Marilyn Monroe building”, it caught the imagination of both the jury and the media, and won. The project, officially called The Absolute Tower, was MAD’s first building to be realised without skulduggery, and the first time a Chinese architecture firm had won a competition outside of China. When the developer called Ma last year to report that they needed a second tower – all the flats had sold – Ma told him that there could never be two Marylins. He conjured her a companion – and →



MAD designed the Hongluo Club in Beijing.

that also sold out. The commissions have since gushed forth from around the globe, and though happy, Ma is apprehensive about seeing his first large-scale project in the “flesh”. “I’m feeling nervous, because I haven’t had anything built, not like other people who start their own studio after 10 years with another office,” he says.

One MAD-designed skyscraper in Tianjin will soon become the first super high rise designed by a Chinese architect (all the others in China have been built by large multinational firms). It will have more than 80 floors and distinctive honeycomb-shaped windows. Ma is also looking forward to seeing another of his small projects in Denmark – one for which the owners got way more than they had bargained. “They wanted something Chinese,” he says. “But what does that mean? We took a building by Mies Van der Rohe, used the same dimensions. Then we melted the whole thing.”

The Denmark Pavilion, which will be very curvy and organic inside, blurs the line between man-made and natural

and will feature a courtyard. It will also be made in China. “They agreed in the end,” he says. “It’s hard to control from far away, and also we wanted to examine the concept of Made in China, [and counteract] its meaning as low, poor quality, mass production. We’ll ship it to Denmark when it’s complete.” The developers, who had planned to sell it on, have since decided to keep it as a show flat, and are thinking about living there themselves.

Despite a host of awards and accolades it hasn’t been easy taking on so much so young and Ma has endured plenty of criticism from his peers. Many think his head is far too wedged among the clouds, others look down on his youth and a sparsely built portfolio. However, he is already starting to sing a tune usually trilled by architects twice his age.

“I’m far too busy to have time to really think deeply,” he says. “I really want to slow down, but China doesn’t allow you to do that.” It seems Ma may soon need a new method to his madness. ■