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COVER STORY

Time capsule of the pandemic: London in lockdown

Page 5



Yintong talks with...

Paul Finch OBE, creator and programme director of World Architecture Festival

Hailed as the Oscars of the architectural industry, the World Architecture Festival (WAF) is one of the largest and most prestigious international architectural awards ceremonies. Taking advantage of the quieter Covid period, I sought out and spoke to Paul Finch, the festival's creator and programme director, in advance of WAF China and WAF Virtual due to take place later this year.

Scale

I first came across Paul and WAF in 2017 when my photography business was a sponsor at the Festival's Architectural Photography Awards. I was given the chance to be on the same stage as the architecture giant Norman Foster, who won a 'legend' prize. I was impressed with the scale of the event – thousands of people from all over the world, many from China – and was eager to learn more about him and his new Chinese venture.

Paul Finch started his professional life as a journalist in the early 1970s, eventually becoming editor of the renowned Architectural Review (AR), founded in 1896, and with whom he launched the first WAF in 2008. "I often wondered why there was no annual global event specifically for architects, where they could gather to compare and discuss their work," he told me.

Emap, media company owner of AT, bought into the concept and, after a rocky start impacted by the financial crisis, annual WAFs have taken place in Singapore, Berlin and Amsterdam since the inaugural event in Barcelona in 2008. But for the pandemic, this year's gathering would have taken place in Lisbon.

The initial aim was to open the awards to everyone and anyone could attend. Profitability is, essential to proceed but the motives of those most directly involved were as much about the promotion of high-quality architecture and the culture of the profession in an increasingly globalised world as they were about money.

Significant shift

I understand that the WAF is about the world's architects coming together, but why has Paul started a new venture, with the sole focus on China? "At the beginning of our



festival, the entries from the China region were patchy in quality and low in number," he explains. "But over the last three or four years we have seen a significant shift. For example, out of our 1,100 entrants last year, 40 per cent were from China and I believe the trend is still on the up." Stats back this up. The Chinese construction market has grown substantially in the last 30 years. It is as big as the rest of the world combined. "In the next 20 to 30 years, I can see business opportunities both

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ways between China and the rest of the world," Paul says. "From one of the studies I learnt that between 2015 and 2035, there will be 80 billion square metres of new buildings to be built globally, of which, 38 per cent will be built in China. Chinese architecture's influence on the world will be immense, both as a laboratory for architectural experimentation and as an incubator for growing expertise."

After two years of negotiation, a five-year licence has been established to create WAF China which was officially launched in 2019 with a conference in Chengdu. "So far, we have been very impressed by their commitment and compliance to our guidance," says Finch. "That integral event paved the way for this year's first WAF China with the theme 'Green City'.

Challenging

With WAF events changing into a

digital format, I wondered how they would fare in these challenging circumstances? "Obviously Covid is tremendously damaging to a lot of businesses; it will no doubt change our way of life and challenge our business," Paul shares, "But I am not pessimistic about the future and feel that, at the same time, it will open up new revenues for business. Before Covid, all businesses did some online activity but from now on, virtual activities such as live streaming and webinars will be compulsory for all businesses.

Connectivity

"Subsequently, knowledge-sharing will become more democratic, despite the geographical differences and time zones; it will strengthen connectivity and push globalisation even further. For our business in the meantime, because of its far-reaching nature, our sponsorship generation hasn't been hindered; in fact, more sponsors have come forward. In 2021, we aim to hold a physical event, and definitely with a live stream attached. The main purpose of all these events is to connect people, so whatever the channel or platform this is still the end game," he says.

Life-enhancing

I ask if Paul is still enjoying his festival experience after all these years. "In overall terms, I think we have largely stayed true to the spirit of what we envisaged the festival and its awards might be. Our team has certainly enjoyed every festival and I like to think that those attending the event have a chance to remind themselves about why they wanted to become architects in the first place. It is a life-enhancing experience, to build a constructive future with team spirit. That can be no bad thing," he concludes.

www.worldarchitecturefestival.com

Yintong Betser is managing director of ACTIVE Anglo Chinese Communications (activeukchina.com) connecting business cross culture with PR events, including the recently-launched The Global SinoPhoto Awards www.sinophoto-awards.com