

**China Talk: TSINGHUA University, July 06, 2006**  
**Jan Wampler**

Thank you for having me here today. This is about the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>h</sup> talk I have given at Tsinghua and it seems the only time that I have to put together some thoughts: there certainly is not time for this at MIT. So, it is a luxury to be able to do this.

The title of this talk is “Another Architect” and I would like to try to weave together several ideas that touch on the political condition of the world, the urbanization issues of the world and our role as physical form makers. By physical form makers, I mean all people that affect the physical world, not just architects. I hope I can make this clear by showing some examples of my work and my student’s work for what I hope may be a new future. Bear with me, please.

A recent article by Emanuel Pastreich and Eric Marler along with the work of Jane Jacobs - one of my heroes - and her last book “Dark Ages Ahead” has helped me understand our challenge for the future. Jane states that our civilization is on the decline and she has several indicators of this. Education is first, or the lack of emphasis on it. We all know the cutbacks in the basic liberal arts education in most parts of North America. The second indicator is when a civilization stops thinking about its future and thinks instead only for the moment. The third is the lack of a community at any scale. She goes on for 200 pages predicting that unless there are great changes, there will be an end to what we all just take for granted, our way of life. **“I would call it the end of the US Dynasty.”**

Emanuel and Eric have written about the parallel of the end of the Qing Dynasty through the poor management of Empress Dowager Tzu-His and the present poor management of President Bush.

**Quote**

“A distinguished historian wrote thus about a world power that had slipped into irreversible decline as a result of its citizens turning inward and its elite refusing to concern themselves with the fate of the nation.

“When intellectual irresponsibility and moral degradation fell to this level, it meant that scholars had become oblivious to their duties to the society and had lost track of the importance of the unity of knowledge and action. The society was deprived of real leadership.”

Although Professor Immanuel Hsu was referring to China in the late nineteenth century, the description has a chilling similarity for those who observe the inaction of the establishment in the United States, as a small group slowly drags the U.S. towards a reckless war with Iran. I would add to this the war in Iraq, cutbacks in social programs, misuse of public funds, lack of medical programs, and a lack of concern for global warming.

### **Quote**

“Just as China, once the great power of the known world, found itself fettered by the indifference of its own best and brightest at the moment that opium and European economic domination posed a threat in the early nineteenth century, those Americans who could make the greatest difference in our own time are oddly silent as the nation drifts into dangerous straits. The United States faces an erosion of its social, civic, and community institutions that allow cynical politicians to manipulate at will the course of events. Any assumption that a mere change of characters on the political stage would change this state of affairs overnight is naive.”

And I would add here, that any hope for the Democratic Party to change is long lost.

“At the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), educated Chinese hid themselves away behind their red-walled mansions, devoting themselves to family with little sense of a larger purpose in their lives. As a result, they allowed the opium trade to flourish and Beijing to face devastating trade deficits that drained its wealth.”

Again I would add the similarity of spending in US today while rich are receiving tax cuts.

“Today we see educated Americans sequestering themselves in affluent neighborhoods or gated communities in an attempt to keep (issues) at a distance. The fact that everyone within a controlled social unit treats each other as an equal makes it possible for Americans who do not wish to see the radical class fragmentation to ignore it.”

### **Quote**

“The efforts of Ambassador Bolton to dismiss the United Nations as ‘irrelevant,’ or Vice President Cheney to humiliate other nations and remind

them that they are lesser powers has more to do with reassuring those in power, and the folks watching at home, of imagined American predominance than with any meaningful strategy. So also U.S. criticism of human rights abuses in China are an effort of the Bush Administration to deflect criticism regarding its own disregard for human rights.”

I add again that CNN and Fox news keeps these notions alive.

### **Quote**

“The ugly and shameful truth is that Americans have neglected their longstanding traditions in terms of political commitment and citizenship. Although one might expect that just about now Americans would start organizing themselves in response to a looming national crisis, we find that those with the political and economic power to make a difference in America bury themselves in the trivia of the ‘This Week in Arts’ section of The New York Times or chat about their recent trips to Tuscany.”

I add, that we now barely notice that dozens of innocent Iraqis and US soldiers are killed each day.

### **Quote**

“A useful parallel might be drawn between the corrupt shams that passed for modernization efforts in late imperial China and the reshuffling of Executive Branch departments and bureaus under the Bush Administration. The modernization movement in China known as ‘self-strengthening’ included reforms of the military that did little besides enrich those around Tzu-Hsi. The Summer Palace that she built with funds earmarked for a new naval fleet brings to mind the use of Homeland Security contracts to enrich the politically well-connected or the decision to turn FEMA into a dumping ground for political party functionaries.”

Finally, China suffered terrible flooding in the nineteenth century because the dikes and irrigation systems were allowed to fall into disrepair. The neglect of domestic responsibilities pointed out by the failure of New Orleans's system of levees during Hurricane Katrina comes readily to mind.

“The first step towards meeting the present challenges and correcting the nation's current erratic and irrational course will be for Americans to recognize that the ultimate responsibility for the erosion of the American democracy lies neither in the Bush administration, nor in foreign foes, but in

our own ... lack of participation in the public life of our communities and the nation.”

Now, I am sure you are asking: what does this have to do with us? It is simple. We are followers and not leaders, decorators and not creators. Highways are built, neighborhoods destroyed, programs developed and we have little power to change that. Why are we not blocking the machines that are tearing down neighborhoods in Beijing, for example? We are the one profession that might be able to lead the world out of the chaos that has been started since the Industrial Revolution, yet we do little. We become more and more irrelevant, or worse: theoreticians with little background or grounds for thoughts.

In short those that are making decisions every day that affect our physical world dismiss us and we do nothing. This studio here, however, is a wonderful exception to the norm of the “New York Black Coat Architects” who treat the world as a continuous exhibition opening.

I trace the beginning of our end to the Industrial Revolution that we are still struggling with and have never really understood. We have not understood it in terms of the physical consequences or the social economic implications. It was a time of great invention but also of great upheaval. Without it there would not be Engles, Trotsky, Marx or Dos Passos. There would not be the constant issues of unemployment, lack of housing, starvation, highways, wars of resources, and the general state of overall poverty. It has been used to exploit many for the profit of few and in the process perhaps is destroying our resources and our most precious resource – earth.

There must be another way.

My message is simple. Lets us work together, truly together, to try to become strong and resolve the conditions of the times. The work we are doing here this summer follows these thoughts. It will be published in “World Architecture”, which is a great honor. But a greater good might be to be published in “Time” magazine to show that some of our profession cares about the larger issues of our times. Thank you.