WU Liangyong: The Humanistic Architect of Our Time

By XIN Ling (Staff Reporter)

In the glow of the rising sun, a white-haired elder is slowly pushing a cart stuffed with books and walking across the campus of Tsinghua University towards his office. He is bowed with age, but his steps are steady and firm. His wrinkled face shines to tell a man of vigor and vision. He is Prof. WU Liangyong, a distinguished architect, city planner and educator, Senior Member of CAS and CAE, who receives the 2011 national top S&T award for his outstanding contributions to urban planning in China and life-long pursuit of "making a good house for everyone".

Prof. Wu Liangyong.

New siheyuans for an old hutong

Born in the 1920s, Wu Liangyong has been engaged in architectural and urban studies for over six decades. From the construction of the Tiananmen Square to the planning of major Chinese cities including Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen and Suzhou, from an active protector of historic buildings to a leading architectural theorist, and from participating in founding the Department of Architecture at Tsinghua University in the 1940s to setting up the Center for Human Settlements in the 1990s, Wu Liangyong is known to generations of people in China and architects around the world.

However, his most famous work is not some magnificent opera house or surrealistic airport, but a few new-style siheyuans (courtyard houses) lying quietly in the depths of Ju'er Hutong, a traditional alleyway near the heart of Beijing.

"Compared with public buildings, I'm more concerned with dwellings because human habitation is the core of architecture. A true master architect does not have to make immortal structures like the Eiffel Tower, but shall be able to house his people", Prof. Wu asserts.

In the 1980s, the Beijing municipal government invited Wu Liangyong to preside over the rehabilitation of several derelict siheyuans in Ju'er Hutong. Each of the courtyards was overcrowded with nearly 100 residents. They shared a common water tap and sewage, and the nearest bathroom was more than 100 meters away outside the yard.

To improve the living conditions of local inhabitants and maintain the aesthetic patterns of the neighborhood, Prof. Wu decided to use a new siheyuan scheme based on "organic renewal", a methodology that had been fermenting on his mind for almost a decade.

In the new scheme, the old trees and yards were preserved when the shabby bungalows were replaced by two- and three-story apartment buildings. With white walls and black tiles these buildings adapted perfectly to the hutong's ancient beauty. When the residents moved back, they were surprised to find their new homes too "spacious" and "convenient". They were also happy to greet each other in the courtyard and play Chinese chess together anytime they liked, as they used to.

According to Prof. Wu, "organic renewal is like sewing patches on an old garment. When a garment is worn out, we don't have to throw it away. As long as we make efforts to patch it up, it is still wearable and beautiful. So are the courtyard houses in the old city of Beijing. They are not necessarily to be pulled down and replaced with brand new ones. Instead, we choose to keep the part still in good shape, repair some of the walls and roofs, and make new

New siheyuans for an old hutong: the rehabilitation project of Ju'er hutong in inner Beijing city was completed in 1989 and won world recognition.

construction only when we have to."

The Ju'er Hutong courtyard housing project was completed in 1989 and won world recognition. It received the Golden Prize of ARCAISA (Architects Regional Council Asia) in 1992 and the World Habitat Award in 1993. It is regarded as an exemplary model for rehabilitating old cities in many developing countries.

"It is a coherent and well thought out approach towards inner-city redevelopment, and the experience gained and the lessons learned from this city and this project have a much wider appeal," wrote Peter G. Rowe, Raymond Garbe Professor of Architecture and Urban Design of Harvard University, in his foreword to Wu Liangyong's book *Rehabilitating the Old City of Beijing: A Project in the Ju'er Hutong Neighborhood*, which was published in 1999.

"Professor Wu initiated the Ju'er Hutong Neighborhood Renewal Project in the inner part of Beijing, which successfully addressed some key issues that we are still grappling to find answers to, such as how to maintain the traditional architecture of the modernizing city of Beijing, how to keep its local identity in a broader urban context, and how to uphold its social values in the changing environment," UN-Habitat Executive Director Dr. Joan Clos remarked at the International Seminar on Sciences of Human Settlements in February, 2011.

Unfortunately, these new siheyuans are the first and probably the last experiment of Wu Liangyong's ideal on human settlement. In the early 1990s, the follow-up rehabilitation projects in Ju'er Hutong were halted due to their "low economic returns" amid an unprecedented economic growth and real estate boom in China.

New humanistic visions on architecture

As a city planner, Wu Liangyong has not only renovated the inner cities but masterminded the strategic development of new urban districts. Under his leadership, the blueprints for an S&T development zone in north Beijing's Zhongguancun district (now China's silicon valley) and a new commercial hub in east Shanghai's Pudong district were completed. He also chaired the consultation on the layout of an emerging southern city, Shenzhen, which later grew into one of the most successful special economic zones in China.

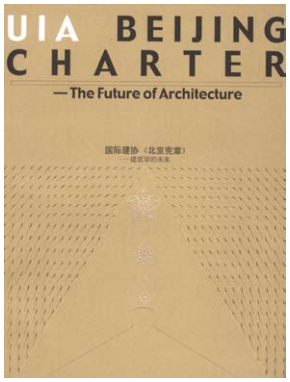
Based on many years of architectural practices, Prof. Wu put forward a series of original architectural theories.

In 1988, his book *A General Theory of Architecture* was published, defining architecture in a much broader theoretical framework. According to the author, architecture is a very intricate discipline; it involves only the physical structures but related human factors, for instance the social relations, culture and even religion of the people living in those structures.

Five years later, this theory was developed into a brand new notion — the Sciences of Human Settlements. For the first time in the world, Prof. Wu and his colleagues advocated for an integral architecture for creating a liveable and sustainable habitat for everyone. The Sciences of Human Settlements is a fusion of architecture, landscape architecture and city planning, and involves interdisciplinary studies ranging from geography to engineering to social sciences.

His theories were embraced by the world at the 20th Congress of the International Union of Architects (UIA), which was convened in Beijing in June 1999. As Chairman of the Scientific Committee of the Congress, Wu Liangyong drafted the *Beijing Charter* based on his human settlements theories, aiming at formulating "a conscious plan of action for a better and liveable human habitat of the 21st century". When the *Beijing Charter* was unanimously approved and adopted by the Congress, it became the first charter in UIA history, and marked that Wu's doctrine had been widely accepted by architects around the world.

"Wu developed an optimistic and challenging definition of architecture as a complex discipline of multiple disciplines, a profession of integrity and responsibility targeted to produce an environment sustaining life and culture… It is a view of architecture relevant not only for China, undergoing an immense transformation today, but also for the world," notes Prof. Alexander Tzonis, a renowned Greek architect and professor emeritus of Delft



The *Beijing Charter* provides a new humanist vision on the future of architecture. It was drafted by Prof. Wu and adopted at the 20th Congress of the International Union of Architects in Beijing in June 1999.

University of Technology of the Netherlands.

Saving lost cities with traditional culture

When the hutongs are falling prey to the overwhelming urbanization in China, Prof. Wu Liangyong is using all his strength to avoid this ultimate fate. As a central figure in the architectural community, he has been speaking out, in a loud but sober voice on various occasions, the crises and pitfalls in China's urban development.

His concern over the poor protection of ancient architecture is evident. "Ancient architecture is the symbol and pride of a city, but they've been treated casually in many places in China. Some are torn down to make way for modern commercial complexes. Some have skyscrapers as new neighbors, which ruin the architectural pattern of the area as a whole."

When historic buildings are replaced by high-rises, cities gradually lose their identity and look similar to one another. One of Wu Liangyong's favorite games is to show his guests some pictures of throngs of high-rises in four major Chinese cities and let them guess which city it is. Few, even the top architects, can spell out the differences between those tall buildings and give a perfect answer.

Prof. Wu is also upset to see that many eccentrically-structured "avant-garde" buildings, designed by known or unknown foreign architects, are being erected one after another in big cities in China. "Such buildings shall only exist in textbooks or magazines. They are changing China's cityscapes as their designers are largely unconcerned with visual or historical continuity. Besides, they are extremely expensive, and China is not so rich that we don't need to count the cost."

"Today's China has become an abused testing ground for international architects. Those buildings are the irreversible scars of our time," he points out sharply.

The key to these puzzles, according to Prof. Wu, is the Chinese culture, tradition and heritage, because they are "the root and soul of a city, the point where we stand up".

In fact, in his decades-long practices, Wu Liangyong has always upheld the essence of traditional culture and used it to serve the functions and aesthetics of his works.

In designing the Confucius Institute in Qufu, hometown of Confucius, Prof. Wu borrowed some typical architectural patterns and traditions around the Warring States Period (475–221 B.C.) such as "he tu", "luo shu" and "jiu gong" to highlight the impact of Confucianism on China for over two thousand years, and combined them with modern designs to build up a "cheerful holy land" for commemorating the sage and spreading his thinking.

To build the new campus of China Central Academy of Fine Arts in northeast Beijing, Prof. Wu studied old-time public lecture halls like the Buddhist courtyards in ancient China and the abbeys in the West, and merged their architectural characteristics into his design.

He also participated in designing the new National Library of China, which features a 63-meter-high pagoda-shaped stack building, blue glass roof tiles and white marble railings, resembling the elegance of an academy of classical learning in ancient China.

"It is obviously a misunderstanding and confusion for today's officials and architects to forget about our traditions. Instead, we must treasure the traditions, the culture and the history, see them as the very foundation of our civilization, and try our best to connect the past, present and future," his appeal sounds so earnest and urgent.

An architect responsible for his people and nation

Indeed, responsibility is one of the most important messages Wu Liangyong wants to pass on to young architects in China today.

As Prof. Wu looks back, though his life has changed with the rise and fall of his nation, his faith in architecture and "making a good house for everybody" never moved.

Wu Liangyong was born in 1922 in Nanjing. As a boy he showed special interests in drawing and the local gardens handed down from skilled craftsmen of the old times.

In the war-ridden years, he studied at a middle school in Hechuan in Chongqing, southwest China. Half of Hechuan was occupied by the Japanese army, and frequent

bombardments turned it into a city of broken walls and burning houses. "Even the dogs were crying", Prof. Wu recalls. It has become his sorest memory ever since, and made up his mind to "study architecture at university so that one day I can rebuild my homeland".

In 1945, thanks to a paper he had published in the university bulletin, Wu was invited by Liang Sicheng, a famous architect at that time (now regarded as father of modern Chinese architecture) to join his study on architectural relics. Later, Wu arrived in Beijing to help establish the Department of Architecture at Tsinghua University. During that period he learned a lot from Liang, including new thoughts in architecture as well as Liang's ideals. "Prof. Liang is the first to put forward the goal of 'everyone has a good house'," Prof. Wu emphasizes.

Under the recommendation of Liang, Wu Liangyong arrived at the Cranbrook Academy of Art at Bloomfield Hills, Michigan in 1948. There he fulfilled a master program on architecture and urban design under the supervision of Prof. Eliel Saarinen, and participated in designing the automobile body design building of the General Motor's Technical and Research Center in Detroit.

In Wu's eye, "Prof. Eliel Saarinen was a very inspirational teacher. He emphasized the correlation and expression of architecture, and encouraged me to combine Chinese traditions with modern western concepts. He was very nice, patient and hard-working, always serious and responsible in work. Such influences have stayed with me since then."

After he returned China in 1950, Wu threw himself in the construction of New China, including the expansion of the Tiananmen Square, the Monument to the People's Heroes and the planning of new Beijing. When the Cultural Revolution ended, he picked up his architectural ideals and set out from a new starting point. In 1984, he set up the Institute of Architectural and Urban Studies at Tsinghua University. In 1995, the Center for Human Settlements was inaugurated at Tsinghua under his leadership.

A pioneer educator in architecture in China, Prof. Wu set up the first garden major in Chinese universities. As former deputy director and director of the Department of Architecture at Tsinghua, he accelerated the development of many fundamental disciplines including architectural technologies, architectural history and the preservation of cultural relics, and advocated for an integrated education methodology combining teaching with scientific research and practice.

Today, in his nineties, Prof. Wu is still active in teaching and supervising graduate students. As long as health permits, he will give the first and last lessons of a course "An Introduction to the Sciences of Human Settlements". He is also instructing several students with their doctoral theses in a detailed way.

"He's a strict but open-minded teacher who encourages free thinking. He emphasizes that our study shall be systematic, problem-solving and forward-looking," according to SHAN Jixiang, Curator of the Palace Museum and a former student of Wu.

Prof. Wu Liangyong is not only regarded as a top scientist in China, as Senior Member of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the Chinese Academy of Engineering, but enjoys high reputation in the world. He is laureate of UIA's Jean Tschumi Prize for 1996 and winner of the Prince Claus Awards in 2002. In 1999, he received the Cavalier Medal of Culture & Art from the French government for his outstanding contributions to the cultural exchange between China and France.

As the first architect to win China's top S&T award, Wu Liangyong is now in the spotlight with national attention. "By putting forward the human settlement theories, I've just lit a small candle. I hope one day its flames will shine in every corner of the world. Human habitation is a common goal for billions of people in the world. For China, most of our problems can't be solved by following the Western model. We must find our own way out and take up the responsibility we owe to the world."

We shall not admire only the magnificent sceneries or amazing landforms. In fact, we must treat every corner of our planet equally, as a member of both nature and society. — *Prof. Wu Liangyong*

I'm full of pride to witness the achievements of my country in the past century, but keep asking myself, 'what kind of a world are we going to leave behind to our children and grandchildren?' Not merely the gardens, buildings, cities or the natural environment, but more importantly, the ideal for human welfare and the spirit of mitigating the miseries of the poor, held by famous architects and nameless craftsmen, as well as the experiences they gained and the lessons they learned through arduous work over hundreds, even thousands of years. – *Prof. Wu Liangyong, in his keynote speech at the 20th Congress of the International Union of Architects held in Beijing in June 1999.*