By no means do I suggest an end to the current economic boom in China any time soon. Instead, I am only saying that, in the day after, when it eventually comes, there will be life, and architecture, which will be different from the products of hyperactivities.

The abstract city (as site)

The urbanization presently unfolding in China has had a singular task to fulfill: to facilitate the economical growth. The new Chinese city is about offering jobs, generating business, and making deals. Living quality, let alone urban pleasures, has been hardly the issue. To be sure, life does occur in the new city but likely in a competitive manner especially if one is successful: s/he is concerned with showing off the newly acquired wealth, if not too busy acquiring it, than creating comfort or leisure for oneself. Of course, the nouveau riche does consume, more often than not for the sake of consumption as well as competition: the most exotic, the most expensive, the most luxurious, and the largest, possible. The starters and the less-fortunates meanwhile would only participate in the struggle of maintaining the basic capitalist routines. City is thus first and foremost a machine for producing. Architecture is indeed a decorated shed. Decoration in the sense of winning a medal. After production, city is a pedestal for trophies. The sweatshop is its foundation. This city is a remake of Fritz Lang’s Metropolis. People in China have put up with this city of mono-function so far. An economic slowing down will be surely one way to inject real life back into the urban arena of kill or fail and possibly to develop a social agenda that includes public transportation systems, public spaces, and public housing programs. As recent as a few weeks ago, the central government issued a policy that demanded a 70% of apartment units with the size no bigger than 90 square meters for any real estate development in the country. This is at least an indication of the increasing awareness of the social disparity. The city of abstraction has to be restructured to accommodate the more mundane yet human needs of urban dwellers. Specifically, urban density may be reconsidered; the wide and widened streets/roads narrowed for pedestrians, everyday shopping organized as part of the city infrastructure, just a few examples. Perhaps I should and shall remain vigilant rather than optimistic but I do like to point out the possibility for a post-boom-but-no-doom urban scenario.

The swing of architects (as context)

Once upon a time, a clean and simple building that was free of decoration could send the establishments, inside and outside of the architectural profession, disgruntling. It was not accepted by the prevailing taste. The few good-willed clients became unsure. The time was the early 1990’s and the place China although it may sound like a reincarnation of the story of the European Modernist movement around the turn of the twentieth century. To some extent, the new Chinese architecture did reflect a Western influence but what was important was the fact that the particular formal language did constitute resistance and rebellion to the Beaux-Arts-PoMo domination of the time. That was history. Today, an architect working in China can fairly easily push through a
modernistic or stylistically Avant-Garde design. Both the clients and the media are happily embracing Minimalism as one of the correct fashions to follow. Forms and styles of all kinds are being consumed and become only the new fuel for the commercialist frenzy. Form can no longer form a critical agenda. While some independent practices are still focusing very much on the good taste (meaning an European Modernist flavor), a raising voice for social concerns from the architectural milieu as well as media is heard, loud and clear, and it is again familiar: it echoes the questioning of “Architecture or revolution?” by Le Corbusier from 1920’s to the debates in the American academia in the 1960’s. The danger is for the pendulum to swing to the other extreme: the promotion of social responsibility of architects over politicizes architecture and leads to anti-design, or paralyzes design at least. Needless to say, income disparity, poverty, democracy, etc. are of paramount importance for the people and society. Architects, individually and/or collectively, should participate in any efforts that help to improve upon these issues. However, between the two above-mentioned polar positions, i.e. purely formal and purely social, there are territories that concern the well-being of the populace that architects can make significant contribution with expertise in design, beside the ones previously mentioned in connection to the remodeling of the defunct abstract city:

Such as
Development of new urban morphologies;
Redefinition of urban planning codes: FAR, lot coverage, height limitation, setbacks, daylight distance, etc;
More sustainable living environment;
Energy conservation;
Housing, including both market housing and public housing;
Public spaces;
Accessibility;
Relationship between pedestrians and automobiles…
These not-so-radical endeavors will not be so easy to accomplish but may make a radical difference in the end. After all, architects serve society first through design.

Chinese pragmatism (as critical regionalism)
The specific-problem-solving attitude may sound pragmatic. Deng Xiaoping’s “Black Cat, White Cat” theory defined a Chinese pragmatism: As long as one delivers, his/her ologies and isms do not matter. It was an imminent response to the post-Great-Cultural-Revolution situation. Long-term interests have not been given the same chance as a quick fix. The speedy approach has been creating almost as many potential problems as it solves.
Another aspect of Chinese pragmatism is further rooted in the Chinese placement of prosperity as priority in life. Yet, as in prior discussion, a close look of the Chinese prosperity would reveal a more abstract notion of success that may be manifested in numbers, sizes, titles and/or facades with nothing behind, rather than in the enjoyment of life. We live for our faces. Thus, this is a pragmatism beyond functionality. Chinese cities are inundated with face projects. This particular value preference also further explains the current popularity of iconic, symbolic, and sometimes extravagantly expensive, architecture.
Chinese or not, another side of pragmatism is a practical care for quality. Perhaps, that dimension of pragmatism should if not already beginning to return as livability and vitality of cities and the
The incomplete system (as theory)

One may ask: Is there architecture in an architectural ambition that seems no more than tinkering? I would suggest that to achieve what has been proposed above in the Chinese context demands tremendous innovation and invention. On the surface, China may appear as totally lack of systems but in fact only not Chinese systems are in existence and they are extremely complex since they are usually incomplete ones. When a Chinese says grid, s/he would never mean an absolute grid but roughly a grid. The approximate grid was how Beijing was organized. Looking from a map or aerial photo, one may think s/he sees the gridiron in place; however, once in Beijing on the ground, one can never find one’s way by following blocks as one does in Manhattan. They ain’t blocks anyway. I am not hinting at a complexity or chaos theory with Chinese characteristics. The Chinese complexity is a result from a passion for flexibility and exceptions, to the extent that reservations or appointments are rarely made, if not in the very last minute. A system in China may start simple but after overlaid with a myriad of anticipated possibilities and an open-endedness for the unforeseens it will be anything but straightforward. Each case is thus more or less unique. To comprehend the system, on the other hand, is an art of approximation. A perfect structure, on the other hand, may be perceived as banal or inhuman. It will be extremely tantalizing to take on the incomplete system theoretically. To pursue it in practice is extremely challenging. Therefore, while I may have rendered a seemingly clear Socialist agenda, I cannot at all predict the outcome of my own projection. All I know is that it will be more than visual stimulation.

A cultural synergy (as local resources)

Although the run-away economy of globalization may sooner or later brake, the local cultural productivity in certain metropolitan areas in China will likely become a major force that further redefines the post-boom Chinese city along with other bottom-up experiments of urbanity. Culture will first produce a creative industry and promote tourism, as it is currently doing, and then give content and identity to an instant and/or generic city. History reminds us that culture may sustain sometimes a longer life than a rocketing economy. With the zeitgeist being having an open mindset, there are plenty opportunities to exchange ideas among diverse cultural operations and develop interdisciplinary collaborations. Yet an exceeding number of engagements for the
individual architects/artists/designers/scholars have reduced the amount of actual interactions across different fields. Architects may want to join the cultural alliance to stay relevant and keep architectural creativity alive. Some architectural practices may even switch gears, going from the mode of massive building production to the one of multi-disciplined versatility. In another words, if architecture has been an economic engine during the boom, it may get another life as a cultural apparatus. As for now, Beijing is already energized by lively visual art, film, drama, and music scenes. Guangzhou also enjoys a high frequency of art activities. Shanghai and Shenzhen may lag slightly behind but are equally hopefully. In these cities, despite the overwhelming work load, a small group of activists from different fields have made a conscious effort to stay in touch and worked together on various occasions. The common bound is a shared belief in culture.

The fabric city, the everyday city (as one or more approaches)
As far as my practice, we have started already to contemplate other urbanisms that are different from the Boom Town yet could substitute the prevailing typical city of objects hopefully at any given time. For the moment, we have come to an architectural organization that is from inside out and has the ability to adapt variables and expand in different directions, similar to the traditional courtyard house in its conception of spatial structure, but without nostalgias. From that architectural pixel, we venture to weave a new urban fabric that will interconnect spaces, public and private, indoor and outdoor, small and not-so-small, and accommodate changing life styles at the same time. Thus the issue at stake is not preservation. The historic city is an inspiration. So is the everyday urbanism conceptualized by the American urbanist Margaret Crawford. It is perhaps premature to deliberate or define further the notion of fabric city since it is still in an early stage of development.
In any case, the speculation of a post-euphoria architecture has already redirected for me in a number of on-going commissions of various scales. Take them for rehearsals.