Foreword by Sir Peter Cook

Whatever happened to the avant-garde? It was a very useful term 100, 70 or maybe 40 years ago for it covered the notions of newness, wit, inspiration, originality – or at least work that was in the direct slipstream of the highly original. It also played, from time to time, with shock and bravado. Yet now we are hesitant to reinvent the term: are we thus feebly eschewing the value of the new, the witty, the original, the daring?

If only we can concoct this new word we surely then have an appropriate tag for Ma Yansong who can be all these things. Like many of the former avant-garde figures he slipped into the scene just at the right moment and from the right place. From Beijing as it was emerging out of a long period of mystery and paranoia and then found blinking at the crossroads of Yale in the start of the twenty-first century where Zaha Hadid was given the stage against a backdrop of an extraordinary variety of contradictory talents. This, rather than a dense positional platform, would enable the talented young guy from China to discriminate, choose, enthuse, become a courtier to the wonderful Queen of form and surface – and then himself explode.

Smaller incursions into building were dwarfed by winning the competition for Absolute Towers: demonstrating such fluency with architecture of the rippling body that – of all places – polite old Canada can never look back. To what extent their gestation parallels the investigation of tower structures with parametric roll-over in the Hadid office may interest those with a chicken-and-egg view of architecture. More significantly, Yansong had undoubtedly been one of the most fearless people in her London office (a hothouse for such fluency) in the period before.

Yet it is the Harbin Opera House that causes us to sit up and salivate. Even Hadid's Alyev Center in Baku, with which it may be compared, holds back the total breathless moment until we reach the interior, whereas Yansong's gentle mountain is somehow total in the elegance of its rises and falls. Much has been written about its mountainous characteristics, and about his empathy with the locale. For me, its exhilaration is simply the product of a far more inventive and fearless motivation than being merely responsive or quotational. It suggests that Yansong, though he is encouraged to make such statements as, `the world itself is already a great textbook,' or to invoke an interpretation of `Shanshui Spirit' ... to stay out of nature but then return to nature ... with an emotional response to the surrounding world ... is responding verbally to the current pressure upon architects to justify and codify.

He has surely reached a position of enviable fluency and brilliance that can be regarded in its own right?

And it is the Ordos Museum that continues this fascination. It is as if the establishment of scale or any specificity of any part of its surface is deliberately deflected. If the Opera House is a subtly evolving crescendo, this strange five keeps you guessing right until you enter, but then usefully breaks down into functioning parts.

This architect is the bringer of the new fluency: clearly they emerge out of a very real sense of weight, substance and, above all, form but they seem to have no fear of the hicups that European or American architecture often gets strangled by – which then have to be resolved, or `played' by niceties of articulation or grammar. At this point it remains for one to pick out from his architecture some intriguing characteristics. Of materiality: that one senses the inherited palette of glazed openings and universal white surfaces may be starting to bore him? That he is still happier with some degree of axial formality that in the West, we associate with pomp, but that he has the spirit to scramble all of it at any minute and make an apparently random plan arrangement.

The old avant-garde figures often went out so far that in their mature work they either lost their public or had seduced them so far that they forgot there had ever been any other type of proposition or aesthetics. It is interesting that Ma Yansong is a frequent lecture visitor to the West, but what does he need from us? The incentive, with this work is reversed, for he has surely bewitched us.
MAD Works by Ma Yansong

People often ask what MAD stands for; sometimes, I explain it stands for MA Design, but I like MAD (adjective) Architects better. It sounds like a group of architects with an attitude towards design and practice.

I think it is important to practise architecture with an attitude, to be critical and sensitive to the issues and challenges in our world. Unlike professional technicians and service providers, who usually say ‘yes’, architects should raise the intellectual issues and occasionally say ‘no’; they should never be satisfied and always dream of the future. Architects not only represent social and cultural values, they are ultimately the pioneers of these values.

Nevertheless, attitude is a very personal noun as it is associated with one’s body and spirit – it goes beyond architecture. Everyone has something to say in society today, but not all have the power, as architects do, to construct something of relative permanence. Buildings serve and subtly influence our daily lives, they also define how humans live and think. Architecture can be inspiring, but only if it carries the ideas and emotions of the creators. It is a form of art.

Like many other young architects, before having the opportunity to build anything real, I designed small-scale objects. What may have initially seemed to be a developmental stage of a young firm continues to provide conceptual material for new projects, as demonstrated throughout this book. One such early work, entitled Fish Tank, I treated as architecture for fish as well as a metaphorical challenge to modern architecture. Ink Ice was an installation for a calligraphy exhibition; left outdoors and untouched, the 27-ton (29 tonne) cube melted in three days, until it eventually disappeared. This transformation revealed a variety of dynamic shapes sculpted only by natural forces. For Feelings Are Facts, the artist Olafur Eliasson and I collaborated on a spatial installation in which we created an environment that challenged humans’ experience and perceptions of reality.

Of course, I ultimately imagined something bigger. For Beijing 2050, a self-commissioned project, I envisioned a floating city and furthermore, transformed Tiananmen Square into a forest. The concept of ‘Shanshui City’ was initiated in an art exhibition; a dream of a future urban environment that reconnected nature and humans spiritually.

These highly conceptual projects will most likely remain on paper or seen inside exhibition halls; however, I use their methodological themes as a means to discover my thinking and categorize my works. As a point of origin for all my work, these art pieces reveal my attitude toward architecture.

In this monograph, all the projects are organized and categorized according to the aforementioned art pieces and their subsequent relevant ideas in architecture. It is important for readers to understand MAD Works from these conceptual perspectives.

MAD is an attitude that works.
Conversation with Aric Chen

Aric Chen: When we first met nearly ten years ago – I think it was 2007, at your studio – you’d only recently won the competition to design the first Absolute Tower outside Toronto, which is arguably the commission that made you famous. You’d presented some important and critically engaged proposals like Beijing 2050 (Fig. 1), but you were still at the very early stages of your career; I think many people had a hard time seeing beyond the purely formal aspects of your work.

Now, when your name comes up, the first thing that comes to mind is this new direction you’ve been taking with ‘Shanshui’ [literally ‘mountain-water’], a term borrowed from traditional Chinese landscape painting that reflects on the relationship between humans and nature. Where did this come from, and what do you mean by it?

Ma Yansong: I started to use ‘Shanshui’ maybe three or four years ago. Early on, I didn’t have an agenda or direction; I just tried to get a sense of a place and follow my first, instant reaction to it. But after I had more projects to reflect on, I started to look at them all together. I tried to understand why I did this or that (Fig. 2). And the one project I tried to understand most was for the World Trade Center [a 2001 proposal for a massive, cloud-shaped structure hovering above the site] in New York. That was actually my thesis project in school. I had a lot of discussions about this with the artist and critic Bao Piao, whom I consider my tutor. He was often in the studio. This was eight or nine years ago, and he said, ‘I’m interested in you because of this one project. It’s very emotional, and looks nothing like modern architecture.’

We talked a lot about how my proposal wasn’t about specific or momentary issues, or memorializing September 11. As a student, I had been stuck and didn’t know which way to focus. I couldn’t put anything in this void [where the Twin Towers had stood]. Then one day, I had a dream about something floating above the site. I sketched it, and that became my proposal (Fig. 3). Bao Piao thought that this was very valuable for our era, which can be seen as the end of Modernism. It wasn’t about a certain logic or rule, but was instead about personal feeling, hope, and something very human. He always encouraged me to look back to this, and why I did it this way.

AC: Let’s talk about Qian Xuesen a little more. He was a scientist who co-founded the Jet Propulsion Laboratory at CalTech in the 1940s before being suspected of communist sympathies under the Red Scare. He returned to China to found its rocket programme, and it was only later in life, in the 1980s, that he started talking about Shanshui. Is that correct?

MY: Yes.

AC: From what I understand, he was trying to reconcile Chinese philosophical concepts with, for lack of a better term, Western scientific rationalism. Maybe this is the age-old, perpetual problem of ‘modern China’: this constant struggle to reconcile ‘Chineseness’ with ‘modernity’. I find it problematic that the two are framed as opposites.

MY: Qian was a modern scientist, but he also liked traditional gardens. He was very much into art and culture; his wife was a musician. This was at the early stages of China’s urbanization and, having come back from the US, maybe he expected to find beautiful gardens and old cities, but instead he was seeing modern architecture and urban planning. He was suggesting a new way, and thought we could learn from traditional cities and gardens. But he didn’t know how.

MY: Qian was a modern scientist, but he also liked traditional gardens. He was very much into art and culture; his wife was a musician. This was at the early stages of China’s urbanization and, having come back from the US, maybe he expected to find beautiful gardens and old cities, but instead he was seeing modern architecture and urban planning. He was suggesting a new way, and thought we could learn from traditional cities and gardens. But he didn’t know how.

I visited [the architecture critic] Gu Mengchao, who frequently corresponded with Qian when he was the chief editor of Architecture Journey [Jianzhu Xuebao] magazine. Gu showed me these letters, which he also published. To me, everything Qian was talking about was very general. He was talking about humans, and human emotions, as part of nature. It’s not like the modern concept of nature, where you have architecture, which is very machine-like, and then you put trees and greenery inside it. Instead, [the architecture] had a curve, and you think it’s a mountain. Something else might seem like water. It could be anything in nature; it’s not an exact re-creation or copy. It’s imaginary. So for the World Trade Center, although I proposed putting green and water on top of this cloud, even without them, the architecture itself becomes about nature to me.

After I realized this, I started to look back. When I was a kid, I studied ink painting, and then in college, a lot of my projects had to do with nature. And then Shanshui came into it when I read an article by [the Chinese scientist] Qian Xuesen. He talked about Shanshui, though in terms of big, high-rise modern buildings with trees and green and all of these natural elements combined. But he wasn’t an architect and didn’t say what Shanshui architecture would look like. And so three or four years ago, I started trying to define Shanshui architecture for myself.

AC: So this was the beginning of your self-realization as an architect who works in an expressive mode?

MY: Yes. I find that the beauty of Shanshui is in the emotional expression. It’s not about the duplication or insertion of natural elements. It takes a broader definition of nature that sees
methodology, data and science, like he was thinking about national policy. For me, there's no way to define Shanshui so that it applies to everyone. I think that's a totally Modernist way of thinking. You find the methodology, and everyone can use it, instead. I think Shanshui is very personal. So there's a difference, but I decided to use the same term because I think we share the same concerns.

It's like the old city of Beijing. I think it's beautiful: the Drum Tower, the Bell Tower, the lakes, bridges, mountains. Not only is it green, the layout is quite well planned. It's very functional, but at the same time, it's very poetic. There is a philosophy behind it. That's something that's lacking in modern cities. Modern cities are all about traffic, function, and so on. But that focuses too much on daily life and not on the quality or soul of the city. I think there should be a philosophy, a very high level of thinking, behind it (Fig. 4).

AC: However, I wonder if one of the biggest points of friction that comes about when you do your work, or even when you talk about your work, is this reliance on binaries – between emotion, personal expression and experiential qualities on the one hand, and function, symbolism, and technical concerns on the other. Are the two necessarily at odds? Does one have to come at the expense of the other? Or maybe what this comes down to is that you're defining the 'Chinese' idea of nature as being different than the 'Western' conception of nature.

MY: When we talk about nature, it's already an emotional concern. People are talking about nature now because they think we need better environments where not everything is controlled by machines. They need a release. That's already quite a spiritual, emotional need. But when this translates into architecture in the professional realm, people are still following the modern methodology or way of thinking that assumes humans can control everything. So when they think about how we create a better environment, the answer is just to add greenery, or control everything. So when they think about how we create a better environment, the answer is just to add greenery, or control everything.

MY: I use it more for myself. But I do sometimes try to use this Shanshui term, which nobody understands, because if you say 'nature', people already have a preconception that might be misleading. So I don't want to mention 'nature'. If anything, when I have an opportunity to explain, I might even say that I'm talking about 'natures'. I need a more abstract word that gives me time to define things little by little, to find a language people can understand.

AC: There's an emotive, but also a critical, aspect to your work. Going back to your World Trade Center scheme, it started out as an intuitive gesture, but it also became a critique of our constructed world of symbols and abstractions, and so on. And then there was your Beijing 2050 proposal, which you presented at the Venice Biennale in 2006. Among other things, it introduced the provocative and historically loaded idea of turning Tiananmen Square into a park. There's been a continuous thread of criticism built into your work.

MY: Yes, I think my practice always starts from criticizing. And that's how I understand, and learn from, our environment and current issues. And then I try to respond to those issues. People need to rethink their relationship with this world. So somehow, they use nature to express their own values sometimes. They go to the ocean, They think it's beautiful. Or they go to the forest or look at one flower or one rock on the ground, and they automatically feel a response to it. But it's not about the rock or the flower. It's about themselves.

So I think that gives nature a social role because when nature becomes symbolic or a symbol of human emotions, human spirit, and human life and values, it makes everyone the same. You need to rethink your relationship with nature because a social device that makes people more equal.

That was the idea, I think, with the Tiananmen Square proposal (Fig. 6). That square is very symbolic. If we can change it into a forest, it becomes a place that connects more deeply to individuals. It becomes nature or Shanshui as a social agenda. We're interested in how we can transform the industrial or modern city into a more human oriented city, and in how nature can create multiple meanings in this new society. It's not

more like English gardens – which are, famously enough, highly constructed to not look constructed (Fig. 5).

In any case, I'm wondering how well your idea of Shanshui translates abroad. Like when you meet with, say, developers and clients in the USA or Europe. Do you talk about Shanshui and, if so, what's the reaction?

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AC: With Shanshui, you say it's not just about the appearance – that's a social project. But in your case, the social benefit is very important to the appearance and the form. To many people, form and substance are not the same, and are even at odds. But I think you're saying that, for you, the form is the substance.

MY: You know, before I adopted the Shanshui concept, I had my own preferences for form and language. At times I talked about the curves I used as curves in water, and some people talked to me about how I was using curves as basic shapes. I was interested in the geometry. It's more like traditional Chinese paintings and gardens; you know, sometimes they're actually a bit ugly, but the ugliness is part of it (Fig. 7).

AC: There's beauty in the grotesque.

MY: Right. That makes it more alive to me. But after I started talking about Shanshui, some people started to think of it as a custom of style, or a certain shape, like mountains.

AC: Which is understandable, given your design and built quite a few mountain-shaped buildings. You even named one of them Fake Hills.

MY: Sure. I think creating mountains in a modern city can be very nice. But I started to worry about that wasn't my only intention. When I talk about a space, or the emotion of a space, it's not just visual. In fact, I can convey a feeling with objects by using other means, that can be quite good. That's why, recently, I started to think more about the experience; I've tried not to rely on shapes, or just natural elements.

With some projects, I've tried to see if we can create something spiritual at a large scale. With the Chaoyang Park project [a complex of mountain-like towers in Beijing], I think the layout, the composition, is more important to me at the lower and ground levels. But while the two towers create a very strong silhouette, it's more about the context, the statement I want to make. I want it to look strong and stand out because I know there is another 'skyscraper' not far away, with the CCTV tower and the China World Trade Center nearby. On the one hand, I think Chaoyang Park's curves work well because of the park next to it. But also, I want it to stand out so people will be curious about why we're doing it this way.

Maybe in the future, it won't be necessary to do this.

AC: Speaking of Chaoyang Park, you've told me that that beautiful, smoky glass glass/orientation reference to Mies and the tinted, bronzed glass he was known for.

MY: The yellow glass?

AC: Yes. By applying it to the building's curvaceous forms, you said you were melding Modernism, reforming Modernism. I'm glad you said that because it helps clarify a critical dimension of your work for me. But I'm wondering instead of deforming Mies and Modernism, maybe you're modernizing nature.

MY: The fish tank that I designed in 2004 was like that. I also did an art installation called Ice [2006]. I made black ice blocks and then melted them in a distorted way, with holes that took a very organic shape, formed by sun, wind, natural forces. And when I did the first rendering of the Chaoyang Park towers, I was thinking about sliding rocks or sculptural mountain lines, like a split rock. From the side, I wanted you to see different lines and freer shapes.

A long time ago, I did a house proposal called Melting Mies. It's a single-storey white building where the structure starts to change and the space becomes more organic. Actually, I like Mies. In my MAD dinner book, I did a conversation with him. I asked him questions, but there were no answers. I'd ask another question. Still no answer. Maybe he doesn't need to answer (Fig. 8).

There's a scholar I know who did a lot of research on Mies. He lived in a Mies building and said that every day he stepped outside the building, he felt so dirty. He didn't want to walk outside. But he thought the space inside was clean. He didn't want to leave that reality for another. I find that so interesting.

Actually, I think that Louis Kahn's Salk Institute – that's my favourite work – is almost like Shanshui.

AC: Because of the relationships between the buildings and landscape?

MY: Yes, between the water and the sky and the ocean and the people themselves and this space. It's funny, people confuse Shanshui within modern architecture because his work is so clean-lined and geometric, but there are other ways of looking at him.
AC: This makes me think of the Bauhaus, and how our understanding of the Bauhaus is so much more complex than before. We used to associate it almost purely with functionalism, the unity of art and industry, and so on. But now, we know the Bauhaus was much more singular and more nuanced than that. For example, there was this whole spiritual side, especially at the beginning, that was almost New Agey. There were any number of competing factions and ideological battles. And recently, this opening up of our conception of the Bauhaus, and perhaps even Modernism more generally, came to a head for me when the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation awarded two very different proposals first prize in its design competition for its new building.

MY: Right. It was a bit unexpected.

AC: It was almost schizophrenic. You had one scheme [by Gonzalez Hinz Zabala] that was essentially a sober Mission-style, but then another [by Young and Ayata] that was the complete opposite: an unruly cluster of indiscet pods that evoked the Bauhaus as a more colourful and diverse cacophony of voices. It’s like even the Bauhaus is still struggling to define the Bauhaus, and in the process the way which you can consider Classical. But if we can represent the Bauhaus as a crazy cluster of indiscet pods – if we open ourselves to looser, unorthodox and even countercultural interpretations – then maybe we can also think of Louis Kahn as Shanshui because, despite the clear formal differences, many of his interests do seem to align, or at least overlap, with yours.

MY: He was a Modernist, but he was also Classical. His inspiration came from the past. His Salk Institute layout was mostly symmetrical, which you can consider Classical. However, traditionally, there would have been a monument, building, or other object at the focal point, whereas at the Salk Institute, the focus becomes empty. The axis leads to the building, or other object at the focal point, whereas at the Salk Institute, the focus becomes empty. The axis leads to the ocean and nature beyond.

AC: It’s fascinating to hear you bring a more Chinese reading to these architectural projects by Western architects. It resonates with a lot of what we’ve been talking about so far. How do you think about the unity of art and industry, and gardens and architecture, and gardens at every level. Inside, at every three levels, we have shading louvres, and behind that, we have a lot of balconies and gardens at every level. Inside, at every three levels, we have a void. The elevator only stops at every three floors and people walk up or down. So this void becomes a garden and also a social space, a community space. This is the kind of condition we aim for when thinking about how people can live in vertical environments.

MY: I’m not against the high-rise. I’m against the high-rise becoming a monument. The old-fashioned way to make a high-rise is to simply stack all the spaces and create a strong image. The powerful and formalistic image – that’s something I’m against. I think if we need density, it makes sense that people have to live vertically. But you still have to design the space for people; it shouldn’t just be a big machine that you go inside.

AC: You’ve talked before about how you think your work is maturing, how you’re thinking more about the ways individuals experience space at the micro-scale. With the Chaoyang Park complex, for example, you’ve narrowed some of the outdoor areas to make them feel more intimate.

MY: When I say micro-scale, I’m not really talking about the scale or size of the space. Thinking about the Salk Institute, I’ve been there, and I watched somebody cry in that space. I don’t know why this person was crying, but they chose to sit there, facing the ocean. I think that’s a really touching space.

AC: How does all of this apply to your biggest project at the moment, the Lucas Museum of Narrative Art in Chicago?

MY: I think some clients, they can feel the beauty of the image, the beauty of your architecture, even if they cannot explain it. They appreciate the logic of that. George Lucas is like this; he’s a very special guy. I think he liked the very relaxed and romantic atmosphere that I’ve been trying to create...
image of my scheme. At the same time, the building has a strong layout based on very rational thinking. So Lucas thinks it works well as a building, while also providing a new experience.

I remember the first time we met, before we started working on the competition. He invited several firms to participate, and I was curious about why he invited us. I asked him what he expected from us. He said, “I don’t know what I expect. That’s why I invited all of you guys because you’re all creative. Just go to the site and see what’s best for the site and show me what you think.”

You know, he first planned to build his museum in San Francisco with a totally different kind of [Neoclassical] architecture. I realized he’s someone who first needs to see things, and then he knows what he wants. I gave him my book and asked him which projects he liked. He said, “I like this, I like this, I like this.” He liked a lot of our previous work.

I found that he liked very free, organic, even romantic architecture, which described a lot of what we do. There were five architects presenting their proposals to him over three days. After I finished, he said, “I like this, I want it.”

AC: So he responded immediately to it.

MY: Immediately. So if I say that my design expresses my emotions, he gets it. I don’t have to explain a lot.

AC: What about science fiction? Has that influenced your work at all? We talked about Qian Xuesen. But this also makes me think of Wang Dahong, the father of modern architecture in Taiwan, who proposed a monument to America’s moon landings and wrote a science fiction novel himself.

MY: The funny thing is, Lucas really liked our Ordos Museum [completed in 2011 in the Chinese city of Ordos, Inner Mongolia]. That’s the reason he invited us. He saw the pictures somewhere. I designed it to be like an object that landed in the desert – and that was an inspiration from Star Wars. There is a scene in one of the Star Wars films where a spaceship lands on the desert, and you see the reflection of the sand on the metal body of the vessel. I watched this many, many years ago and actually forgot that it was Star Wars. I just remembered the image, which kept coming back to my mind. Later on, I tried to find where it came from, and it turned out to be Star Wars.

AC: I wonder: if we think about science as something that’s supposed to be provable, there’s an inherent contradiction in the idea of ‘science fiction’ in the same way that the ‘artificial nature’ that we see in so much of your work can sound rather oxymoronic. Yet these terms resolve themselves; their built-in contradictions describe something new and, in the end, quite graspable. Maybe this is another reason your work resonated with Lucas. It’s rooted in some kind of plausible reality, but it still takes you totally out of that realm.

MY: Right. I wanted to make the Lucas Museum not an object, but something that is completely part of the landscape, in an organic but also futuristic way. I wanted it to merge with the landscape and the green, where people can walk on this plaza, which is merged with this building that’s like a mountain. And then inside, the space and circulation are very linear and fluid, and there’s a garden and observation deck. You can go on this observation deck, and you’ll feel like you’re communicating with the sky. It’s very surreal. I think this is a new kind of architecture, a new experience. Maybe at some points, you think you’re not even on earth any more; you think you’re on the moon.

AC: I think this is a fantastic way to conclude.
1. Fish Tank

Unlike human living spaces, the fish’s world of water is relatively free of gravity’s restrictions. Nevertheless, they are usually housed in an unimaginative cubic structure, which is shaped by the way humans experience life on land. The lack of surprise and ambiguity in the fish tank could be said to echo the generic, repetitive spaces of a typical modern city. And the inexpensive cost of a goldfish — around 40p (60 US cents) — echoes the powerlessness of China’s “low value” population. But unlike in cities, the architect encounters relatively few barriers in an attempt to improve living conditions for the common goldfish.

To re-imagine the fish tank cube, we tracked the movement of fish. We deformed the cube according to the users’ swim paths, employing stereo lithography modeling to transform the external space by pushing the borders inward. We created new connections within the volume, and a more interesting underwater world evolved.

Fish Tank traced the behaviour of fish to understand how space is defined based on individual feelings. Like fish, humans are individuals with character and feelings, and should not be limited to living within the generic geometric confines of a box. The following projects challenge the stark mass-produced architecture that is inundating cities. Instead, these projects reference nature and break open the hermetically sealed boxes to dissolve thresholds; they imagine the interior and exterior as interchangeable spaces.

The sinuous form of Absolute Towers (p. 20) challenges the functionality commonly associated with the tower typology. Inspired by the adjacent river, the fluid form of Harbin Opera House (p. 30) carves out dynamic interior and exterior spaces for exploration. The slender East 34th (p. 42) disregards the typical lonesome tower and instead offers a subtle organic form, softening a city skyline pierced by pointed and squared crowns. The sculptural tower, Urban Forest (p. 48), elevates the urban lifestyle with high-density nature through the articulation of irregularly shaped floor plates that are emphasized by floating gardens.
1. The Absolute Towers provide an iconic landmark for Mississauga, Canada.

Absolute Towers
2006–2012
Mississauga
Canada

La Corbusier’s famous twentieth-century statement, ‘A house is a machine for living in’, exemplified Modernist principles. As we leave the machine age behind and the scale of our cities continues to exceed the archetype of a centralized urban organization, we must consider the message architecture should convey and what constitutes the ‘house’ of today.

Like other rapidly developing suburbs in North America, Mississauga is looking for a new identity. Absolute Towers creates a residential landmark among an emerging skyline of conventional towers. The iconic project offers a new type of urban life that moves beyond functional efficiency and instead thrives on density and differentiation. The project prompts an emotional connection between residents and their hometown.

In dialogue with each other and the surrounding nature, the two towers appear as though they have been shaped by the sun and wind. The rotating towers correspond with the surrounding scenery. Deceptively simple in organization, this rotation derives from the stacked oval floor plates around a central axis. Continuous balconies surround each floor and eliminate the vertical barriers traditionally used in high-rise architecture. Light plays across the reflective glazed surface, responding to and amplifying changing diurnal conditions of weather and activity. Shifting and bending in shape as one walks or drives past, the towers appear to be at once sharp and soft, compact and extended, skinny and fat, naturalistic and futuristic. With its expressive, alluring form redolent of the human body, it suitably inhabits its local moniker, ‘Marilyn Monroe towers’.

Type: Residential Condominium
Status: Completed
Tower A Building Area: 45,000 square metres (484,376 square feet)
Tower B Building Area: 40,000 square metres (430,556 square feet)
2. The sinuous design has been dubbed the ‘Marilyn Monroe towers’ by locals.

3. Continuous balconies wrap the facade, each residential unit has an outdoor space and looks to the sky.
4. The space between the towers is equally as dynamic as the buildings themselves.

5. Absolute Towers’ seemingly complex forms are rationally constructed with a central core, as revealed in the section drawing.
6. The typical floor plan rotates around the central core by varying degrees, which produces a unique floor plan at each level.