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# LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE

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## SWA

A new kind of street in Shanghai

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### STEPHEN STIMSON

How modern New England looks

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### A DEATH-HUNGRY BUG

Danger for the burying beetle

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### FORESTRY AND DESTINY

America and the sum of its trees

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THE 2013  
LAM  
PRODUCT  
DIRECTORY



# THIS WAY, SHANGHAI

AMID THE MADNESS  
OF AN UNSTOPPABLE CITY,  
A GREAT SAVE BY SWA.

BY MARY G. PADUA, ASLA

TOM RIDE



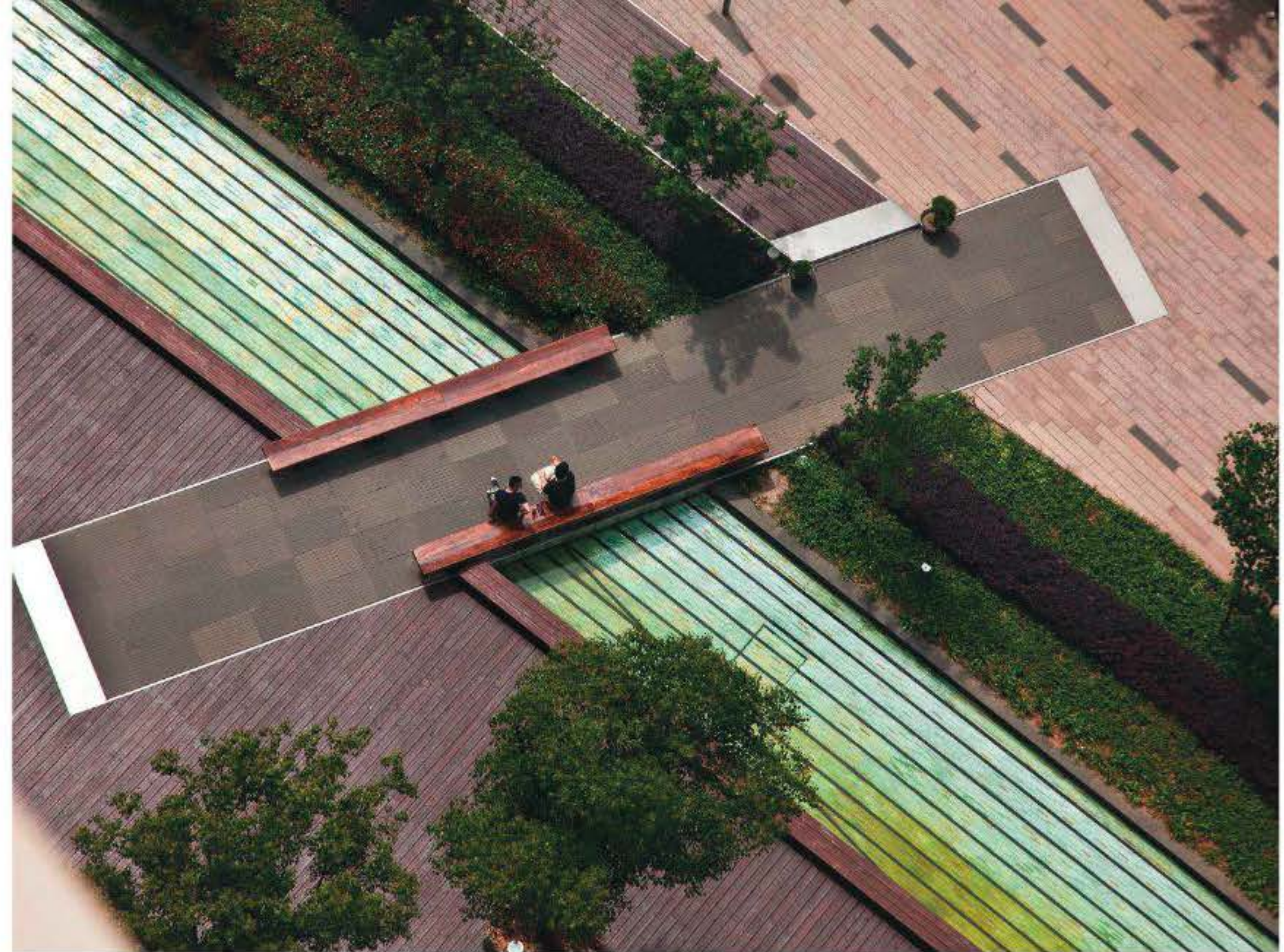
**T**HE GUBEI PEDESTRIAN PROMENADE SLICES THROUGH WHAT WAS A VAST AND FORGETTABLE CANYON OF APARTMENTS

in western Shanghai with a half-mile stretch of relative tranquility, an oasis in this hyperdense city of 18 million people. All around the promenade are tall towers that house foreign professionals and their families, and these are many of the people you see in the street, relaxing or talking by fountains and garden nooks, cycling, rollerblading, or practicing Tai Chi. It is a remarkable space amid Shanghai's unbridled growth, not least because its designer, SWA, has helped to break the spell of classical European revival designs that officials have for so long found appealing and has demonstrated how sustainable infrastructure in crowded Chinese cities might look.

Like so many parts of urban China, the Gubei neighborhood is fairly new. Shanghai's government first set it up in the 1980s to house the expatriates who would be coming to work in a nearby "economic technological development zone," one of 14 such zones set up to accelerate growth in China (there are now about 50 of them). Gubei covers more than 150 acres in the Changning District. Until the 1980s, Changning was mainly agricultural land with a few low-rise colonial villas. Government officials saw the area as prime residential real estate and a natural place to expand Shanghai's traditional "upper quarter," the French Concession, where foreigners, wealthy Shanghaiese, and high-level Communist Party officials lived in villas with walled gardens.

In 1986, the Shanghai government formed a public-private joint venture to coordinate Gubei's development. Its first phase housed a huge number of expatriates—mainly from Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (hence the nicknames "Little Tokyo" and "Little Taipei"), and also from the West—in more than 50 acres of high-rise luxury towers and single-family garden houses.

TOM FOK



The architecture of this first phase was Western European and neoclassical, a style that was popular in China during the 1980s and 1990s. Leaders of the Changning District had decided that the buildings and gardens for Gubei should follow this expensive, ersatz "Continental European Classic Style." Although contemporary landscape designs could be found in some areas of Shanghai, and in other Chinese cities, Gubei's developer—the Shanghai Gubei Group Corporation—carried the neoclassical design language into the second phase of the project in the late 1990s. The Phase Two design brief was for a traditional European-style promenade to serve as the shopping and recreational center for Gubei.

But the developer grew frustrated in its search for a landscape architect, which was an invitation-only affair. By 2005, it had invited four different design firms from Europe and Singapore

TOM FOK



**OPPOSITE TOP**  
Before the promenade the space was barren.

**OPPOSITE BOTTOM**  
Bold design geometry is interwoven with green infrastructure.

**ABOVE**  
A bridge crosses the constructed waterway and a vegetated bioswale.

**LEFT**  
Seat walls give locals a place to relax.



## PLAN

- 1 WEST ENTRY PARK
- 2 WEST ENTRY PLAZA
- 3 WATER FEATURE
- 4 OUTDOOR RESTAURANT DINING
- 5 ARCHITECTURAL FOLLY
- 6 PEDESTRIAN CROSSING
- 7 STREET TREE PLANTING
- 8 COMMUNITY SCULPTURE
- 9 INTERACTIVE FOUNTAIN
- 10 GARDEN FOR SENIORS
- 11 TREE BOSQUE ON VIEWING PLATFORM
- 12 GINKGO BOSQUE
- 13 EAST ENTRY PARK



SHANGHAI



GUBEI NEW DISTRICT

- 1 HONGQIAO ROAD
- 2 YAN'AN ELEVATED ROAD
- 3 GUYANG ROAD
- 4 GUBEI ROAD
- 5 YINZHU ROAD
- 6 NA'NAO ROAD
- 7 LANBAOSHI ROAD
- 8 YILI ROAD
- 9 HONGBAOSHI ROAD
- 10 MIDDLE RING ROAD

to formulate master plans, but none proved satisfactory. Tess Pan, who was the representative for the developer at the time, says the fourth rejected landscape master plan was too static, complicated, and overdesigned.

Finally, because of a brief previous encounter with SWA, the developer invited the firm to propose a concept. The formal brief was the same, for a classical European linear park that would be consistent with the style of Phase One.

Ying-Yu Hung, ASLA; Gerdo Aquino, FASLA; and Kui-Chi Ma of SWA in Los Angeles flew to Shanghai to meet the prospective

client. In the initial meeting, the team learned that the developer wanted an exciting outdoor setting along the promenade and that it had a clear program for each of the three blocks: From east to west, there would be a luxury retail zone, a central public space, and a restaurant zone. SWA would also have to make room for emergency vehicles along the pedestrian corridor. (The space was originally planned as a vehicular road but reconceived as a pedestrian corridor before Phase Two.)

During the short, single week the designers had to work up their proposal, they dug into research and design exploration, hoping to secure the contract before they went back to their office in Los

Angeles. Hung was the principal designer for the project. Diplomacy, she realized, would be essential if SWA was to propose stretching the given design parameters in ways that would still satisfy the developer's needs. The team decided to educate the client about fusing the strengths of both traditional French and modern design grammar seen in Paris's contemporary parks: the classical axis, topiary and sculpture, and ground cover and path.

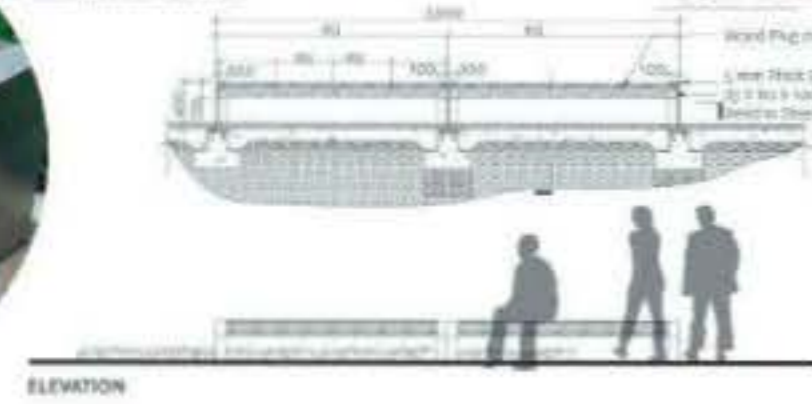
SWA formulated a notion of "cultivar gardens," drawn from the idea of a plant cultivar created for its parents' desirable qualities. This was a "new species of landscape," SWA said in its client presentation.

SWA DESIGN TEAM

SWA DESIGN TEAM

WOODEN BENCH

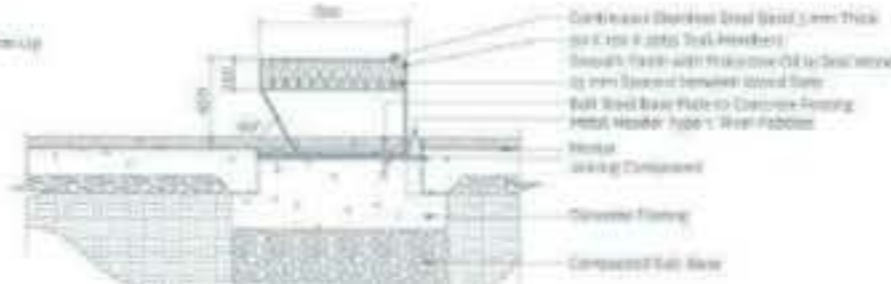
LONGITUDINAL SECTION



ELEVATION



DETAIL SECTION

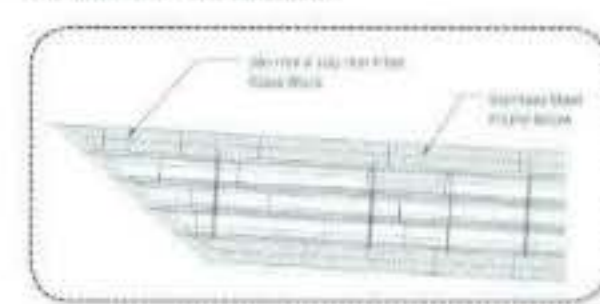


POLYCARBONATE BENCH

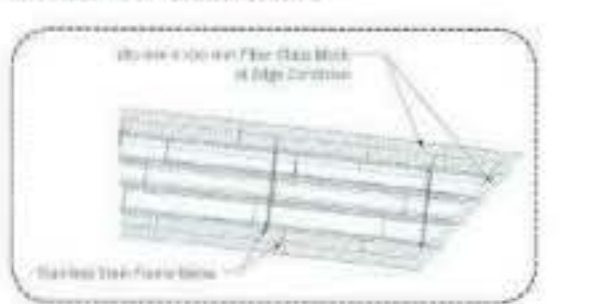
FIBER GLASS BLOCK LAYOUT



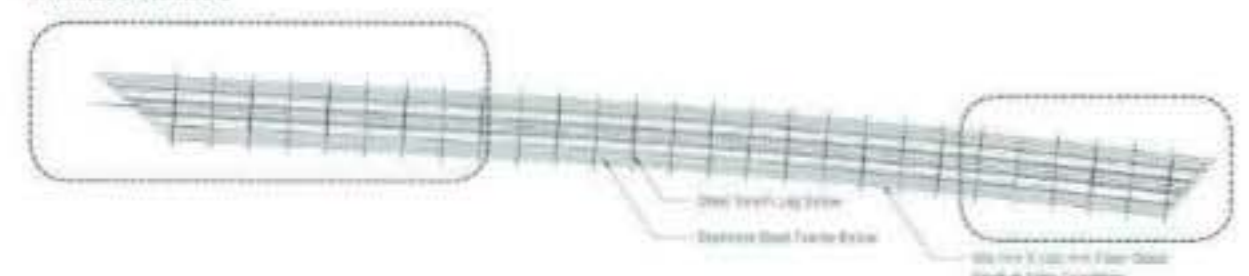
ENLARGED PLAN—END CONDITION A



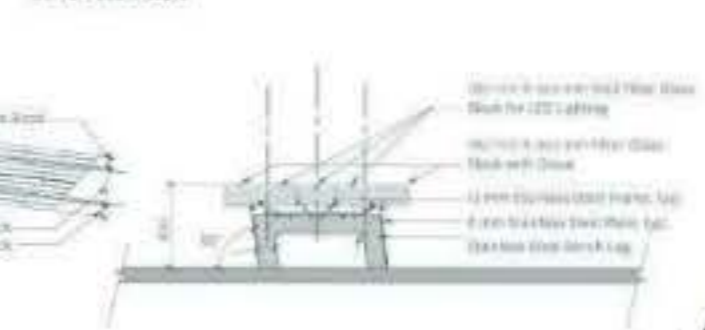
ENLARGED PLAN—END CONDITION B



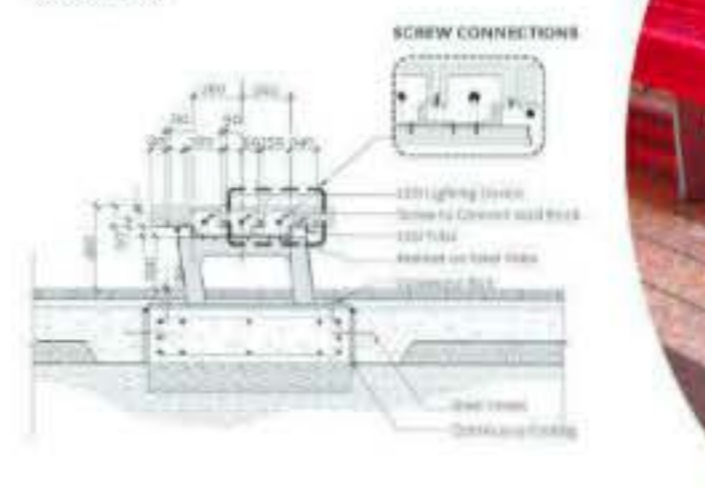
STAINLESS STEEL FRAME



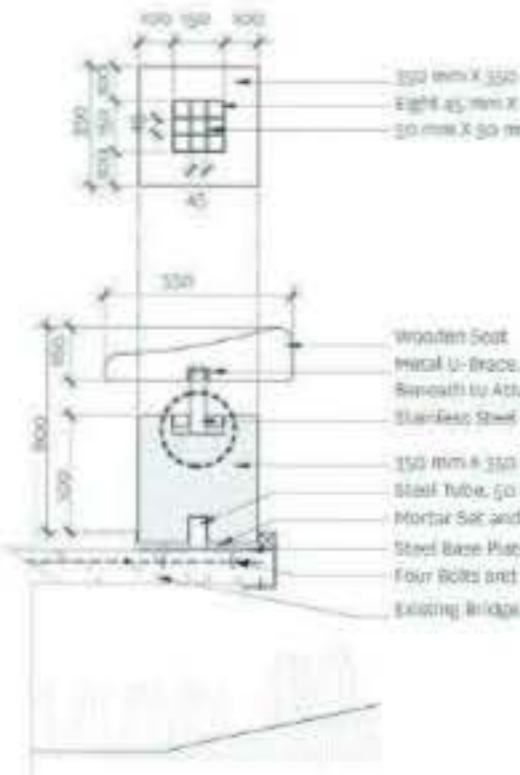
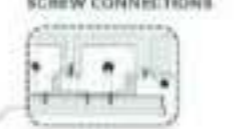
BENCH ELEVATION



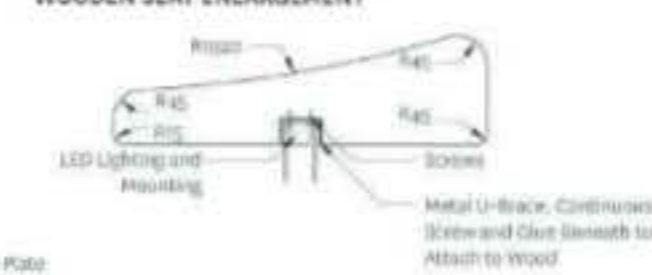
BENCH SECTION



SCREW CONNECTIONS



WOODEN SEAT ENLARGEMENT



SWA DESIGN TEAM, ALL DRAWINGS, GERDO AQUINO, TASLA, TOP LEFT; TOM FOX, ABOVE CENTER; YING YU HUNG, ASLA, BOTTOM LEFT

SWA DESIGN TEAM, DRAWING, YING YU HUNG, ASLA, TOP RIGHT

By this time, in 2005, the neoclassical trend was waning in Shanghai and other Chinese cities. Shanghai had become more globalized. The Pudong District, across the river from Gubei, had emerged as a sandbox for signature designers from around the world, such as the American architects Adrian Smith and William Pedersen, who helped create a skyscraper district to rival Hong Kong's. A two-block pedestrian retail and entertainment area called Xintiandi (the name means "new heaven and earth"), completed in 2003, integrated new buildings and old *shikumen* (stone gate) houses. Designed by the American architect Ben Wood, it was the first commercial project in China to demonstrate the financial benefits of adaptive reuse and has since become a development model duplicated throughout China.

Meanwhile, innovative landscape design was emerging in other Chinese cities. Betsy Damon's Living Water Garden, completed in the late 1990s in Chengdu, was the first urban ecological park in China with biomimetic water-cleansing processes (see "Teaching the River," *LAM*, March 2004). Zhongshan Shipyard Park in Guangdong Province won an ASLA award in 2002 for its designers at Turenscape, China's first private landscape architecture firm (see "Industrial Strength," *LAM*, June 2003). EDAW (now AECOM) received a 2003 ASLA award for the Jinji Lake Landscape Master Plan in New Suzhou (see "Future Scale," *LAM*, August 2004).

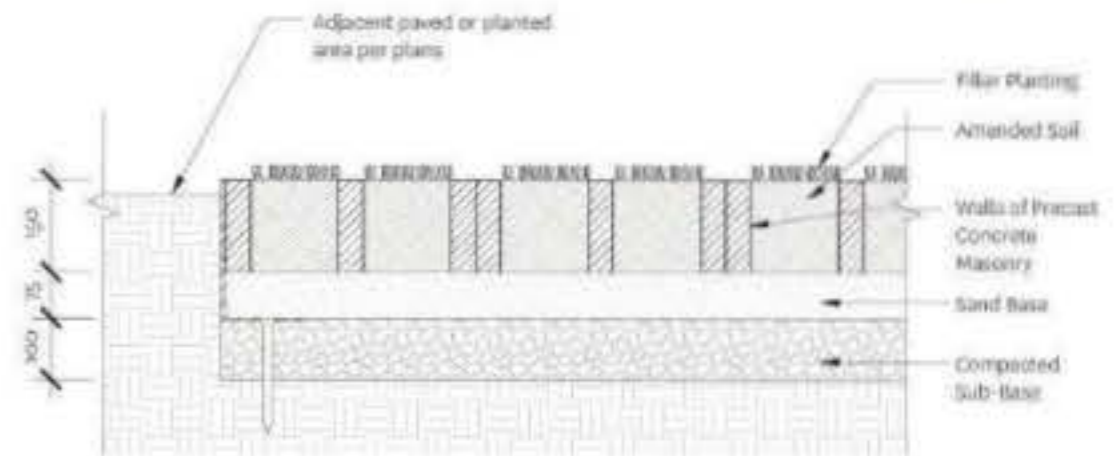
During its weeklong workshop in Shanghai, SWA came to grips with program elements, technical requirements, and the promenade's spatial geometry. It has three voids that span more than 200 feet across on average, and its edges are defined by curvilinear facades at the podiums of high-rise towers. The whole 11.4-acre site spans three city blocks and is traversed by two local streets that run north-south.

Once it had done analysis and section studies of the site, SWA produced three design alternatives and, from those, a final conceptual master plan. The master plan carved out a variety of spaces for people within the site. It represented something new in Shanghai—a kind of outdoor living room for the people who live in the towers around it, which rise 15 to 28 stories. They could use the promenade as an extension of their small apartments, much as Parisians use their parks.

UNIT PAVING DETAIL



AXONOMETRIC VIEW OF UNIT



SECTION



The idea of the cultivar garden, when it was fully fleshed out, was to fuse modern and classical European garden designs but also to plug them into Shanghai's urban heritage (small lanes and alleys of traditional courtyard housing) and the Suzhou garden tradition, which emphasizes rocks and water. Hung was inspired by the intimate scale of the Suzhou gardens and by the hybrid Chinese-European architecture of the nearby French Concession. She persuaded the developer that the intimate pedestrian-oriented scale should be their guide.

The Gubei Pedestrian Promenade was built block by block, from east to west, between 2006 and 2008. The phased construction turned out to be fortunate for SWA and for Hung as the principal designer. She was able to perform the additional service of construction oversight in the implementation phase—something not typically offered to international design firms. She reviewed materials, mock-ups of various types of flatwork, and other construction details.

That extra oversight paid handsome dividends, as I discovered on a visit to Shanghai in late May. I walked the promenade with Tess Pan, the former client representative, who studied landscape architecture at Shanghai's Tongji University College of Architecture, a Bauhaus-influenced school. It was midday, and families were using the central plaza. Parents watched their children play. People sat by the fountain and read or worked on their laptops.



Pan gave a running description of the promenade from the developer's perspective. Ground-floor uses in the easternmost block are given to high-end retail shops. The curvilinear architecture of the central block created the largest plaza, which has become a natural place for people to gather. The proximity of the western block to Gubei Street, a commercial corridor, lent itself to a restaurant zone with outdoor dining. However, Pan was quick to note, Changning District officials had felt strongly that the promenade should be an open space accessible to everyone. She pointed out curbside parking spaces on the cross streets that are free—no meters—to bring in people from beyond just the surrounding high-rises.

As we walked along, my brain's RAM spun through the usual list of high-end retail corridors: Avenue des Champs-Élysées in Paris; Fifth Avenue in New York; Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, California; Omotesando Dori in Tokyo; Orchard Road

in Singapore. These are outdoor pedestrian shopping places built around haute couture and next to lanes of vehicular traffic (except Orchard Road). The scale of these iconic retail streets varies, and except for Orchard Road, the architecture is memorable and has character. There are buildings by noted architects on these streets, for example, by Jean Nouvel on the Champs-Élysées, by Frank Lloyd Wright on Rodeo Drive, and by Tadao Ando in Tokyo. But I quickly concluded that the Gubei promenade was not part of this luxury-class typology. It has an entirely different sensibility.

The promenade does have three distinctive architectural follies (individual one-story buildings including a bakery and a pub/restaurant), but it is designed to work in a number of ways for the neighborhood, not just as a high-end retail street. Amid the breakneck urbanization of Shanghai and China, the promenade is part of China's larger post-Mao urban ex-

TOM FIDK



**OPPOSITE**

An elliptical plaza has a densely planted edge that separates activities along the promenade.

**LEFT**

A simple bridge crosses the heavily vegetated bioswales that serve as stormwater filters.

**BELOW**

The interactive fountain in the central plaza is a popular place for children living in the residential towers to play.



periment. Over only a few decades, China grew from a rural peasant society to an urban one, developing at a pace and on a scale unmatched in history. But just since the 1990s, as China started to allow more Western designers to practice, have the Chinese begun to embrace Western contemporary design language and concepts of public space.

SWA has created an open, flexible, safe outdoor place where a variety of things can (and do) happen, in the manner of the West. But its design draws on Shanghai's specific type of public pedestrian ways, on the fine-grained quality of the alleys and lanes in the French Concession, as well as its mature tree canopies. The majestic street trees in the French Concession—stands of London plane trees (*Platanus acerifolia*)—date back to the early 20th century.

The design team was also aware of Shanghai's consumerist bent and the popularity of the commercial walking streets such as Xintiandi and Nanjing Road. The westernmost block of SWA's promenade, next to commercial Gubei Street, is the most urban; as you move east from a gateway area with fountains, the park becomes denser and greener. In addition to the (single-purpose) follies, there are shops at the ground level, but they are small in scale, and among them are businesses such as banks and dry cleaners that serve people who live nearby.

Throughout the promenade, the level of craftsmanship is quite high. The main fields of paving were made of custom-cut granite. At the eastern end, the paving contrasts grays and beige in a chevron pattern and transitions to a reddish color, with episodic black segments in the central area. This height-

TOM FIDK

ens the sense of movement from the western block toward the plaza. In the quieter, secondary areas, SWA specified porous paving—custom-made precast concrete units with curvilinear forms inspired by Chinese roof tiles. The custom-designed furniture, water features, and wood decks are of exemplary quality, especially compared to shoddy construction I've seen in recent landscape projects in other Chinese cities—I would attribute the difference to SWA's ability to oversee construction.

The greatest revelation of the Gubei promenade is SWA's authenticity as landscape architect—its homage to the importance of the tree canopy and a mastery of planting generally across the project. More than 1,000 trees were planted: allées of *Ginkgo biloba* as gateway elements; *Osmanthus*, planted throughout and to define the main path systems; flowering cherry trees as specimens. SWA made a number of bold geometric strokes for definition, such as the ordered bosques of



**ABOVE**  
Contrasting granite pavers in a chevron pattern mark walking spaces and light-colored pavers surround sitting areas.

**OPPOSITE**  
An architectural folly made of metal panels is located in the central block of the promenade.

*Zelkova serrata* in raised rectilinear platforms and plantings that follow and reinforce the curve of the glowing red polycarbonate bench in the central gathering space.

Clearly, SWA understands that an urban forest performs crucial ecological functions to offset urban heat, sequester carbon, generate oxygen, and remove pollution. In the promenade's western zone, heavily vegetated and crisply ordered bioswales become a major design element. Along with the permeable paving, they help manage stormwater. SWA did not provide formal stormwater management on the project, but Hung nevertheless wanted to show that it was possible—and desirable—to minimize the amount of hard paving. She believes the bioswales serve an educational purpose as well.

Many parks in China conform to what I call the Chinese Picturesque—containing rockery, a lake, a green lawn with trees, and pavilions. Early post-Mao public spaces were plazas in harsh environments—big and empty, with expensive stone paving. By contrast, parts of the Gubei promenade are as wide as a six-lane highway, but when you walk up a few steps onto one of

the platforms, you feel as if you're on a shaded private island. What Hung and SWA have done in Gubei was to change the narrative for one project. But as design professionals from around the world converge on China, and as China's younger professionals travel more outside its borders, this new narrative is likely to be repeated many times over. ●

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**Project Credits**

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TOM FOK, THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE

