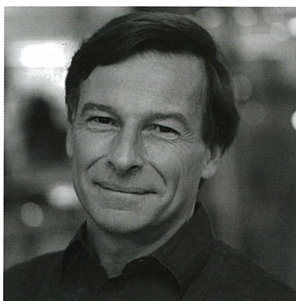


ARCHITECTURAL FURNITURE DESIGN IN CHINA

British furniture designer Luke Hughes has recently completed his first major project in China. He speaks to **Tom Pattinson** about his ground-breaking library at the new Keystone Academy in Beijing



From inside his central London studio, Luke Hughes is grinning with delight as he flicks through photograph after photograph of old silk screens, maps, prints and books.

Pictures of Mao Zedong working at Peking University Library in 1919. Prints of the Rosetta Stone, and copies of texts from 16th century Italian Jesuits in Beijing.

Architecturally sensitive buildings can't be pulled down but still have to be proved relevant

It's not every day you meet someone who is so clearly enthralled with the work he does.

Luke Hughes is showing me his latest finished masterpiece and his first work in China.

Hughes is the founder of his eponymous company that creates furniture architecture. They design

and manufacture furniture for site specific locations, and his first China project – a school library in Beijing – has clearly excited him. But more on that later.

It's surprising that Hughes hasn't worked in China before. His connection with the country goes back to the mid-1970s.

"From 1974, I spent a year working on a merchant navy vessel, and got a job as supernumerary

midshipmen," he says. It was during that gap year that he docked in Shanghai and got to experience China first hand. However, a crewmate on the ship left a lasting influence on him – one that would define his future career.

"On the ship was a carpenter who was from Hong Kong and was



very creative. He used to fish bits out of the water and by the time he got home to Hong Kong, he'd have a new side board or something."

Hughes went on to Cambridge University, initially to study history before changing to history of architecture, where he made the connection between architecture and carpentry."

After graduating in the late 70s, Hughes moved to his first studio in Bloomsbury to make furniture. He rapidly realised he needed to create a niche if he was going to succeed in a challenging industry.

"It struck me that architecturally sensitive buildings can't be pulled down but have to be proved relevant."

"If you concentrated on getting the building to work better – and look better – you could make these buildings more useful and relevant."

Hughes spent the 1990s "knocking on the doors at Oxford and Cambridge colleges" and helped reinvent many of the great buildings that date back to the 13th century. Rethinking the venues to enable conferences and corporate activities enabled the colleges to monetise them during holiday periods.

After adapting the style of the furniture in over 80 percent of the buildings at Oxford and Cambridge, the growing Luke Hughes company was now redeveloping American academic institutions such as Harvard and Yale. Before long

the company was working with buildings including law courts, synagogues and libraries.

Fast forward 40 years since Hughes first set foot in China, and he was back on the mainland, putting together his first Chinese project.

His brief was to create a library for the newly built Keystone Academy in Beijing that "had a soul and embraced both Chinese and Western educational practices and styles."

If you concentrated on getting the building to work, and look better, you could make these buildings more useful and relevant

For Hughes it was important to give some kind of value to what a traditional Chinese education and a modern education system might mean, and what that message sends to parents and students alike.

The library is dotted with cross-cultural references, and nods to the written word and the printing press. A series of modern calligraphy was commissioned, some in English and some in Chinese. One piece reads: "By Leaves We Live" – a triple play on the words "trees, the leaves of books, and departures," Hughes explains.

Adorning the walls are photos of libraries from around the world: The Bibliothèque nationale de

France in Paris, the Strahov Library in Prague (where the Jesuits in the 16th century were sending texts to China) and the British Library, where Karl Marx wrote Das Kapital.

"One of the things we were trying to do was get a link between the best of the East and the West traditions – also the old and the new – and to try and give the messages to the students that there is a continuity of not just learning and access to books but also to exploring each other's cultures."

The librarian at Keystone Academy, Kacy Song, who is originally from Fujian province, worked closely with Luke Hughes' team on ensuring the venue was culturally relevant but not too kitsch.

Hughes brought Song to London and took her to a whole host of venues across the country including the Needham Research Institute, the House of Lords Library and the Supreme Court.

"The reaction of the students has been absolutely fantastic. If you get the design right, the emotional reaction is almost as important. 'Wow isn't it pretty' is all very well but they've got to want to work there. They are so

enthusiastic," says Hughes.

Hughes hopes his first foray in China will lead to more new projects. His company has been commissioned to do a boutique hotel project in Beijing and he expects it to lead to more.

"It comes at a time where we are growing our business anyway, post Brexit. We are a relatively small business but if we are going to grow, we grow on the back of our past projects. That's what people know us for. These kinds of projects are absolutely what we do well." 

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