

## Interview with the Architect of the LTS Campus

**Ruth Y.C. SUN\***

(Translated by Angela GEE)

Plato says in his book *Republic*, “Good architecture is like poetry or other form of art that can display beauty, harmony and rhythm. Only such architecture can exert a subtle influence on the human mind and enhance a person to reach a distinctively intellectual state.”<sup>1</sup>

One can easily spot that the Lutheran Theological Seminary (LTS) campus is built in Chinese architectural style, but perhaps few realize that LTS’s collegiate architectural philosophy is integrated with environmental elements. Chinese colleges are often built on beautiful and quiet sites where natural environments are amply utilized, like expanding flexibly along mountain slopes; either vertically or laterally; combined with high and low ranges of courtyards; so well accommodated to local landscapes that all things are integrated into a remarkable local cultural site.

In general, the architectural functions of a seminary consist of basic components such as lecture rooms, library, worship centre, offices, canteen, dormitories, or even activity and resting facilities for seminary faculty and students. Artistic design of courtyards is employed in order to match a Chinese garden style. All these can be seen throughout the LTS campus. Though LTS buildings are situated on a small mountain, her territory is comprised of compartments, linkages and channels built by partitions, corridors, archways, tracery walls, patios, fishponds, pavilions etc. Such an immensely interesting design reflects the ‘harmonious’ relationships between humans and nature; people and buildings as well as among buildings. There are also green plants and serene dormitories along the slope; a partition wall of ‘Nine Fruits of the Holy Spirit’ and a

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1 Shen-Keng Yeung, *A Study on Plato’s Theory of Aesthetic Education* (Taipei: bufbook, 1973) in Chinese, p.136.

parking lot with a windowed-wall design. All form an orderly layered structure; low in front and high at the rear, and is nicely matched with the neighboring natural environment. Such vibrant scenery indeed broadens LTS's natural open landscape.

In October 2007, it was my honor to visit our campus architect to understand her design of our present new campus. On 13<sup>th</sup> November, 2007 in the afternoon, I finally met this pretty short-haired and gentle architect, Ms. Helena To Hiu Ming, Director of *The Architects' Mission*.

**Ruth Sun (below referred as Ruth):** Ms. To, I am one of LTS's faculty. It's my great pleasure to meet you. The theme of our next annual journal *Theology and Life* (issue no. 31) is "Theology and Aesthetics". We'd like to introduce the architectural aesthetics of our present campus. As you were the architect of our seminary, you are the best person to brief us on this topic. May I ask in which year you accepted the project of building LTS's new campus? What was the situation back then?

**Helena To (below referred as Helena):** In 1984, my friend introduced Dr. Herbert G. Schaefer to me. Back then Dr. Schaefer was teaching at LTS and was appointed as the project manager for the relocation of the LTS campus. He had a grand vision for the ideal theological seminary and thus was very enthusiastic about this project. We often had long discussions on the project, even till mid-night. Afterwards, our firm was given the opportunity to serve God as we were appointed as the architect of this project.

**Ruth:** How did you feel being invited for this project? And why did you accept this job?

**Helena:** As a Christian architect, it's our honor to be chosen as the architect of a new seminary campus! We thank God who granted us this chance to share LTS Former President Rev. Dr. Andrew K.H. Hsiao's vision of "See, I'm doing a new thing" and to witness the birth of LTS's new campus. To serve our Lord faithfully, we accepted this challenge and recommended the appropriate

design, use of materials, construction, financial management, etc. for the new campus. It gave us an invaluable chance to learn.

**Ruth:** Was this your first time to design a seminary building?

**Helena:** Yes, this was my first time to work on a seminary project. I had designed some church buildings before but working on a seminary project was definitely a new challenge. When I was drafting the initial blueprint, Dr. Schaefer had helped me to understand the seminary's operation, like details of LTS community life and devotion areas. I'd learnt a lot from my first seminary project. it was a very precious experience.

**Ruth:** I heard that LTS initially requested to build her new campus on the same mountain as the Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre and to match its architectural style as well. How did you construct the overall blueprint? Were you asked to reflect an indigenization of Christianity in your design?

**Helena:** Yes, they asked me to employ Chinese architectural style but not necessarily the same as the Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre. All architectural designs are subject to different restrictions, e.g. the lease conditions, topography etc. Yet sometimes certain restrictions do provide the uniqueness of a building. According to LTS's land lease, buildings must not be more than three-storeys. LTS also requested us to assign space for vegetation. That is why major buildings are small-scale and in groupings stretched over the hill whereas dormitories are along the winding mid-slope to provide quiet places for living and devotion.

While the landscape changes with seasons, campus buildings are also richly displayed according to different "scenery frames". Chinese landscape emphasizes skilful pavilion arrangement within the landscape. On this highly moldable campus site, we employed the design elements of Chinese architecture to enrich the campus, like the low walls, short paths, and moon gates etc, which help to lead people's vision to the cross. After climbing 121

steps there is a cross standing as the ultimate destination of theological learning and human spirituality.

The chapel is a place to worship our Almighty God and to proclaim God's Word. The LTS chapel is situated on the right side of the cross and at the highest point of the campus, symbolizing that the Word of God is the foundation of LTS as well as the origin of her teachings and spirituality. From the chapel down are the dining hall and an open space with pavilions where teachers and students can commune with each other. Then come the teaching area and the library. We placed partition walls to form a division.

Moving onwards, a spring of water flows from a big firm rock under the cross. The spring seems weak but is flowing powerfully into a stream, linking up the open space to the heart of the academic block. The spring also expands into a pool, nourishes the fish and gives life to the teaching hall. I'd like to emphasize that I intentionally designed a robust spring, not to spurt up very high - the symbol of perseverance in Christian life.

**Ruth:** This is the most impressive design to me. You employed the concept of a Chinese courtyard yet embedded it with the idea of living water in Christianity. The fresh spring is built in front of the cross; informing people the water of life is derived from the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross and His resurrection. You have combined the aesthetics of a Chinese courtyard and the Cross.<sup>2</sup> Next, the spring flows along a small stream into the fishpond, symbolizing that Christians have to be live water channels to let the life of Jesus Christ pass on to all people. The golden carp swimming in the pond signify our mission of being 'fishers of men'. You know, to many faculty and students this fishpond has been a good place for meditation, praying,

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2 Swiss Catholic theologian H.U. Balthasar (1905-1988) once said, "God Himself is the ultimate beauty, His sacred love is the ultimate beauty; God not only revealed His unique perfect image through incarnation but also up on the Cross His love and sacrifice for men. The Cross carries pain and suffering as well as glory and warmth out of His sacred love. The Almighty God manifested on the Cross is not only God of all creation but also King of all Kings who is worthy of praise. Therefore, the aesthetic of Christianity is the 'glorious beauty on the Cross'. The glory and light of the Cross manifest the theological aesthetic in the presence of truth, goodness and beauty." Cited from Liu Xiao Feng,, *Towards the Truth on the Cross* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 1990) in Chinese, pp.383-402.

communication, chatting about life and fish!

**Helena:** (smiling) We see that this compound, made with black roofs and white walls, skillfully displays the southern (Kiang Nan) China courtyard style. The simple rectilinear building form with winding walkway is humble and lowly so that the beauty of the surrounding green landscape comes to be the focus of the campus. As the sky, the seasons, the clouds, the wind, the mountain and the trees are the essence of beauty; our design strives to let faculty and students in all rooms and functional spaces have a view of such beautiful scenery. Screens and pavilions are specially built to provide space and coziness, presenting the fine framed view to the LTS family.

**Ruth:** What were the challenges you met while designing the blueprint of our Seminary? What were the difficulties?

**Helena:** In the beginning, there were long discussions on the choice of site. One option is No. 1-3 To Fung Shan Road. Its proximity to the main road has all the convenience and accessibility. Another one is the present location of LTS campus which is quiet and much more spacious. I remember at that time after long discussions, no conclusion could be drawn. One day Rev. Dr. Wu Ming Chieh came to our meeting, he gave his opinion and led us to pray. Then came to our decision: the top of To Fung Shan. Personally I favor this site. It's a site with a view, the wide stretch of sky around, green slopes below and Shatin town within a short distance. The serene environment is such a sacred place for meditation. The nearby Shatin town reminds LTS of her goal and responsibility: the city is yearning for the nourishment from the LTS community. Go and give them manna from God - the food of life.

This site within the town's green belt area imposed lots of technical obstacles and long delay to the construction project. The Planning Office examined everything very cautiously before approving any development within the town's green belt. Improving the old To Fung Shan Road was another challenge. It required a renovation of the lengthy winding one-lane

two-way road not only to accommodate a seminary with more than 200 inhabitants, but also to comply with the approval requirements laid down by the Planning Office. Years were spent on going through different government departments for their approval of establishing infrastructure like electricity supply, sewerage, water supply, water for fire services, etc., to cope with the increase in population. What a long, long journey it was.

**Ruth:** I remember our Former President Dr. Hsiao once mentioned that the construction fee increased many times because of the delayed construction of the new campus, imposing difficulties in raising funds for campus construction. But thanks to our Lord, His grace is sufficient for us. When Dr. Hsiao handed over his presidency to his successor, there was no debt at all.

**Helena:** That's true. During that time, the building cost index rose and the budget was getting higher and higher. Every party suffered times of great frustration. These six years of long endurance were indeed an enormous load to a small architecture firm like ours. In one meeting, Dr. Philip Bauman gave me a LTS T-shirt with the sign "Pilgrimage of Faith". I believed this was God's reminder and encouragement to me (with tears in her eyes). Yes, we, as the architect, should walk with LTS along this long, long pilgrimage of faith. Mark 7:14 gives us great cheer, "But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

**Ruth:** People normally consider Christian architectural style should be either Gothic or Roman, what do you think?

**Helena:** Our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Worship Him in spirit and in truth. The Triune God do not live in houses built by human hands. God has not set a particular format for the building of churches. The Church built by Solomon is no longer suitable for us nowadays as its function is no longer the same. We do not offer burnt offerings in which cattle are killed and burnt on the altar. Besides, architecture changes with cultural, political and economical

developments, as well as liturgical requirements. Christian life, the needs of contemporary churches, culture and arts, etc., also have certain impacts on Christian architectures which unfold Christ's revelation. Nowadays building technology, construction skills and building materials also form the nurturing elements of architecture.

**Ruth:** Do you think such a Chinese courtyard-style seminary can express our Christian spirit? And how could you do that through architecture? Could it blend with the theological aesthetic (manifesting the truth, goodness and beauty of God)?

**Helena:** Theology is an experience of the truth and life. A Christian architect should design a building area suitable for church members, teachers, seminary students and also not-yet-believers, based on his or her own respect for God, knowledge of the truth of God and His calling. An architecture which is built upon God's idea reveals naturally the style in His favor. That's a combination of theology and aesthetic! My expectation was to build an elegant and functional building for LTS so that she can develop theological education and proclaim the truth about loving God and loving others.

**Ruth:** You are a Christian and has your faith influenced your design of the new LTS campus?

**Helena:** The project is a blessing from God for the faithfulness of LTS and His servants. He is the Lord and the architect of this vision. During this project, I witnessed that in all things God works for the good. I was trained in Hong Kong, and to reinforce my knowledge in classical Chinese architecture, I bought lots of books on Jiang Nan Chinese architecture, Chinese landscaping, Chinese furniture and I even went to visit famous Chinese gardens. But at that time traditional Chinese building materials and construction methods were still new to Hong Kong contractors, added a huge challenge to this project.

As I said, our Lord always provides his children what they need. During

that period, the Hong Kong government introduced a new legislation that professionals from Mainland China may work in Hong Kong for the exchange of knowledge, but they can only work in Hong Kong for six months. God is wonderful as he sent us three experienced architects with the specific knowledge to help me finish the set of construction drawings according to my design concept.

**Ruth:** In 1992 LTS New Campus Dedication Ceremony, your design was finally displayed before all of us and it's still drawing praise. Are you moved?

**Helena:** I saw the care and provision of God while working with this project! I believe it's a blessing from God to repay the Seminary and His servants. To Him, every member of the construction project is equally important. Everything was under God's control. He led everyone to fulfill his or her role; the project manager, the draftsman, the contractor, site workers, donors and so on. It was wonderful that God called His servants from different parts of the world, from USA, Sweden, Mainland China, South-east Asia, Hong Kong and Taiwan for this seminary project. Working with one heart, they all contributed their expertise, money and prayers to answer God's calling.

**Ruth:** The Seminary is a place to train church ministers and is a spiritual location for church members. The beauty, peace, tranquility, and sublimity expressed by the overall architecture can exert a subtle influence on human minds and enhance our souls to reach serenity. Do you consider your design has such effect?

**Helena:** LTS's new campus has been of use for fifteen years. She is the best answer to this question.

**Ruth:** Recently you have accepted the project of LTS's campus expansion. Will you add some new elements? Or will you employ the same ideas in expansion?

**Helena:** We are delighted to see the growth of LTS and that the existing provisions are not adequate to accommodate her expansion. The challenge for the expansion project will be controlling the density of development since the additional built-up structures will cut away some green areas. In this respect, we may use new elements like a green roof garden, regenerative construction materials etc. We will keep the same theme and make the extension an integral part of the campus, so that the expanded seminary can better meet the present demand to glorify God.

**Ruth:** Thank you for this interview. We all can witness that this architecture possesses truth, goodness and beauty. The most precious thing is that you offer your expertise to our lord wholeheartedly and have experienced His amazing grace. May our Lord continue to bless your architect firm!

When designing a building, the architect is undertaking an historic mission since after one hundred or two hundred years people can view the cultural background of that period from the building. Some hold that an ideal Christian architect must be familiar with the Word of God. This is because when God created this universe, nothing was illogical. Therefore Christian architecture should not only satisfy our need of visual beauty but should allow people and nature, landscape and culture, building and the environment to be organically combined.<sup>3</sup> Besides, the integration of the building with the user (LTS) is the revelation of the architect's Christian spirituality which is also the aesthetic foundation of building up Christian culture and theological life.

A building is a spatial extension of human culture and life. Chinese collegiate architecture is able to create an educational atmosphere of respecting virtues and teachers. To our faculty and students, do this Christian seminary building is the spatial extension of our theological life?

Yes!

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3 The ecological theory in contemporary environmental science, the organic theory in modern architecture and the environmental theory in behavior and educational science are gaining attention. How the three theories can be organically combined is the major concern in modern architectural design. *Chinese Architectural Art Series No. 10: Collegiate Architecture*, Chinese Architectural Art Editorial Board eds., in Chinese, p.22.

Hallelujah! May Glory and Praise be to God the Creator who grants us creativity!