

ULTRA

Positions and Polarities Beyond Crisis

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Alan Gilbert and Sarah Lo in Reform Era China and Hong Kong: A NSW Architect in Asia

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Keywords

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Abstract

This paper is based on archival research done for a larger project looking at the impact of emergent transnational networks in Asia on the work of New South Wales architects. During the period of the Cultural Revolution in China (1966–1976), the neighbouring territories of Macau and Hong Kong served as centres of resistance, where an expatriate population interested in traditional Asian arts and culture would find growing support and patronage amongst the elite intellectual class. This brought influential international actors in the fields of journalism, filmmaking, art and architecture to the region, including a number of Australian architects.

This paper traces the history of one such Australian émigré, Alan Gilbert, who arrived in Macau in 1963 just before the Cultural Revolution and continued to work as a professional filmmaker and photojournalist documenting the revolution. In 1967 he joined the influential design practice of Dale and Patricia Keller (DKA) in Hong Kong, where he met his future wife Sarah Lo. By the mid 1970s both Alan Gilbert and Sarah Lo had left to start their own design practice under Alan Gilbert and Associates (AGA) and Innerspace Design. The paper particularly explores their engagement with 'reform-era' China in the late 1970s and early 1980s when they secured one of the first and largest commissions awarded to a foreign design firm by the Chinese government to redesign a series of nine state-run hotels, two of which, the Minzu and Xiyuan Hotels in Beijing, are discussed here.

In January 1980, Hong Kong newspapers announced that a local firm had been awarded the contract to 'modernise' several Chinese state-run hotels to the highest international standards of design. This was one of the first and largest commissions awarded to a foreign design firm by the Chinese government as part of proposed work on a series of nine state-run hotels. Remarkably, not only was this Chinese contract awarded to foreigners, but to a company of two designers – Alan Gilbert and Sarah Lo – that was only five years old, established in 1975. Exploring the reasons behind this bold and unusual decision allows us a window into a story not only of China's architecture of reopening, but of transnational exchange of ideas and people into and around Asia, the burgeoning luxury hotel design market based in Hong Kong from the 1960s, and Hong Kong as a drawcard site for a mobile, internationally networked creative elite emerging from Australia.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 17, 1980

SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST

Local firm wins \$250m Peking hotels deal

By DAVE HADFIELD

The expertise of a Hongkong firm is set to change the face of hotels in Peking.

China, often criticised for not having hotels up to the highest international standard, has embarked on a programme which will involve modernising two hotels, and building two new ones, in Peking.

The contract for revamping the 670-room Minzong Hotel, and designing the interior of the new 700-room Xiyuen Hotel, has gone to the Hongkong design firm, Alan Gilbert and Associates.

The total value of the work at the two hotels will be around \$250 million, with a consortium of Hongkong firms getting the biggest slice.

For Alan Gilbert, it's the most exciting contract to come his way since the start of his practice in 1973.

"When the hotels are finished, they will be the best in Peking," he said.

"The Peking Hotel is the best at the moment, but these will be better."

The company's terms of reference for the Minzong Hotel — built in 1959, "but it looks 40 years older," he says — includes redesigning everything, right down to the box of matches in the hotel room.

In October, Mr Gilbert and his staff built a detail-perfect mock-up of their designs in Peking.

They set up a bedroom, a bathroom and a stretch of corridor, all of which impressed the Chinese very favourably.

"The only criticism they had was that the table was three inches too big," Mr Gilbert said.

Working with the Chinese has been an unusual experience.

"There would usually be between 50 and 100 of them at the meetings that we held with them."

"I think the record was 128."

Mr Gilbert believes that influential people in China have become aware of the need to improve their hotels.

"Twenty of their top men came to Hongkong last year and saw all the major hotels."

"That made an impression on them."

The Chinese had to bring in outside expertise, Mr Gilbert says "because they're out of touch with what's been happening in hotel design over the last 15 years."

What he has come up with for Peking is a blend of European, traditional Chinese, and modern elements.

The mood in China is more receptive to using the styles of the past than it was a few years ago, says Mr Gilbert, who experienced the upheavals of the cultural revolution at first hand, as a freelance photographer and film cameraman in China.

His designs also include bold splashes of colour based on the predominant art of modern day China — socialist realism.

"You can regard it as a sort of pop art," he says.

The Chinese are opening their doors to all sorts of unlikely allies in their drive to improve the standard of their hotels.

Staff at the new hotels will be trained by the Hyatt International group, which will send its experts to Peking in a programme lasting several years.

It is also probable that much of the material for the interior decoration of the hotels will come from abroad.

The plans have been made in such a way as to allow China to produce everything that is needed, but it is unlikely that it will choose to do so.

"Most of their factories have their work schedules full up for years ahead, mainly for the export trade, which

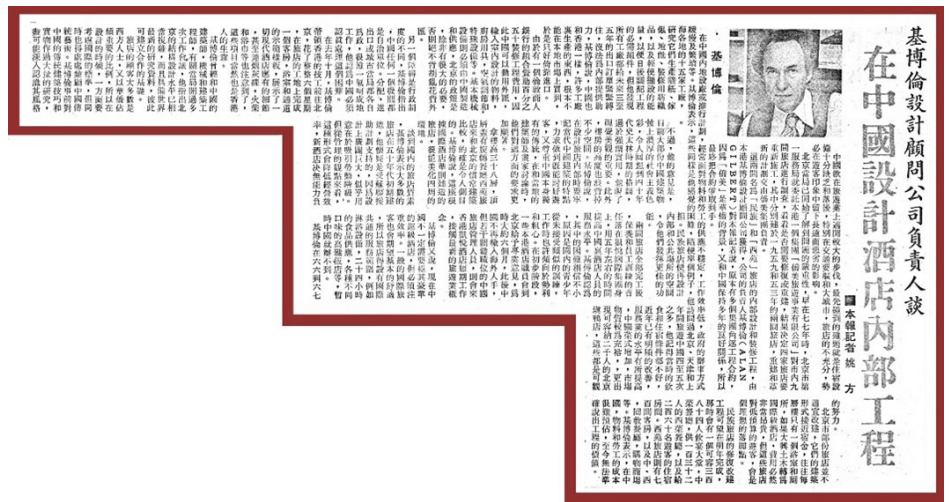


Mr Gilbert

has priority over domestic requirements."

That should mean plenty of orders for Hongkong, especially for the numerous wooden and metal bits and pieces that will refurbish the Peking hotels.

Mr Gilbert's company has two other major projects in hand at the moment: the interior design of the Regent Hotel in Bali, and the residents' club for the Discovery Bay complex on Lantau Island.



Newspaper reports from Chinese-newspapers announcing the award of a China hotel design contract to Alan Gilbert and wife Sarah Lo (Source: Newspaper clippings, Alan Gilbert archive)

1. Dave Hadfield, "Local firm wins \$250m Peking hotels deal," *South China Morning Post*, January 17, 1980.

2. Noel Parrott, "Couple wins top China hotel design contract," 1980. (Newspaper clipping Alan Gilbert Archives).

3. See Cole Roskam "Envisioning Reform: The International Hotel in Postrevolutionary China, 1974-1990." Grey Room 58, (2015); and forthcoming *Designing Reform: Architecture in the People's Republic of China, 1970-1992* (Yale University Press, 2021).

The initial project, as outlined in the news article "Local firm wins \$250m Peking hotels deal," was to renovate and extend two Beijing hotels – the 670 room Minzu Hotel, and the 700 room Xiyuan Hotel.¹ This was a major commission in a time of rapid ideological change in Deng Xiaoping's Reform Era China. China's 'economic reform and opening up' had only been fully initiated a year earlier when in December 1979 Deng announced the 'Open Door Policy'. In this process of opening up the country to foreign business and investment, the design of international luxury hotels would play an important role. Accordingly, as noted in another news article by Noel Parrott, this was "work that virtually every top designer throughout the world would dearly love to have."²

As recent publications have highlighted, international luxury hotels in Reform Era China are an essential microcosm to understand the contradictions that arose from the process of economic liberalisation.³ Cole Roskam further identifies this burgeoning typology of the international hotel in cities such as Beijing as a space of 'political quarantine', an in-between space, highly controlled, functioning somewhat as a stage set for early, tentative East-West business encounters. As a central part of the new 'Open Door Policy' that would allow for foreign business and investment to enter China, the international luxury hotel thus acted as a symbolic gateway and was closely watched over by Deng Xiaoping's Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the First Services Bureau (FSB). But in addition to recognising the role played by architecture in the Chinese quest for economic liberalisation, the current paper also brings forward the question of how such an important project came to be acquired by an Australian architect, Alan Gilbert, and his Hong Kong raised business partner and wife, Sarah Lo.

This paper is part of a larger study that aims to investigate the participation of Australian architects, particularly from New South Wales, in the transnational networks of art and design professionals that emerged in Asia in the mid-late twentieth century. The broader project will outline an intellectual history based on personal archives to offer greater recognition of the contribution of these NSW architects

4. Ellen Badone. "Crossing Boundaries: Exploring the Borderlands of Ethnography, Tourism, and Pilgrimage." In *Intersecting Journeys: the anthropology of pilgrimage and tourism*, ed. Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman (Urbana Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

to the ongoing cultural relationship between Australia and Asia. The current paper engages the personal archives of Alan Gilbert and Sarah Lo to introduce them as an illustration of this broader process. In addition, to explore the specific agency of Alan Gilbert, this paper will employ anthropologist Ellen Badone's discussion on modes of regional engagement ranging from tourism and ethnography to pilgrimage.⁴ It will argue that what began as a pilgrimage soon shifted towards ethnography (or 'ethno-technological research' as will be later described) and eventually resulted in an established design research method.

Australians and Asia in the Post-war Decades

5. Dan Halvorson. "From Cold War Solidarity to Transactional Engagement: Reinterpreting Australia's Relations with East Asia, 1950–1974." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 18, no. 2 (2016), 136.

By the 1950s, the memories of World War II and the Japanese threat to Australian sovereignty had begun to fade, giving rise to new anxieties triggered by geopolitical shifts taking place throughout Asia. Following the Chinese Communist Revolution of 1949 and the launch of the Korean War in 1950, it was often considered only a matter of time before other Asian countries would begin to fall like dominoes, ultimately bringing communism to Australia's doorstep.⁵ Fears over communism's creep produced political and cultural narratives designed to increase the conceptual distance between Australians and Asia. New Cold War-era strategic security alliances, in particular the 1951 ANZUS treaty, aimed to redefine a Pacific power structure capable of curtailing any aggression from the Asian front. This effectively positioned Asia as a potentially hostile neighbour in need of containment through so-called Western democratic values.

6. Hannah Lewi and Philip Goad, *Australia Modern: Architecture, Landscape & Design 1925–1975* (Thames and Hudson, 2019).

The fear of Asia, and a growing alliance with America, further registered in the changing domains of art and architecture, with an appreciation for the doctrines of universal modernism permeating the Sydney architectural community.⁶ Modernism in 1950s Sydney, as practiced by leading architects of the time Sydney Ancher and Harry Seidler, tended to deny cultural specificity and difference in favour of universality. However, a few Sydney born architects bucked the trend of American or European influences, choosing instead to travel to nearby Asia for inspiration and study.

7. Agnieszka Sobocinska, *Visiting the Neighbours: Australians in Asia* (Sydney: New South Publishing, 2014).

In her book *Visiting the Neighbours: Australians in Asia*, author Agnieszka Sobocinska characterises the travels of Australians to Asia in various ways – as imperialists, fortune hunters, humanitarians, warriors, seekers, adventurers and tourists.⁷ On the other hand, instead of defining the nature of travel through the characteristic of the traveller, anthropologist Ellen Badone focuses on the place of departure and the place of arrival. She notes that each mode of travel into an unfamiliar culture is marked by a pattern of movement into spaces that have been noted as significant for having something to offer the traveller – knowledge, transformation, or recreation,⁸ and that the traveller can switch between these modes as each offers possibilities for self-transformation. Seen from this perspective of self-transformation, the movement of Australian architects into and throughout Asia can be considered as much a result of the perceived lack at the point of departure as the allure and possibilities of the destination.

8. Badone, "Crossing boundaries," 182.

9. Alison Broinowski, "Australia, Asia and the arts," *Review – Asian Studies Association of Australia*. No. 1 (1988), 19-21.

10. Alison Broinowski, *The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Asia*, 2nd ed., (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996), 7.

11. Peter Scriver, "Edge of Empire or edge of Asia?: 'Placing' Australia in the expanding mid-twentieth century discourse on modern Architecture" in *Proceedings of the 26th Annual Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand (SAHANZ)*, held in Auckland New Zealand, 2-5 July 2009, 15.

Australian former diplomat and academic of Asian Studies, Alison Broinowski, describes the growing tendency for artists and intellectuals to venture to Asia in the post WWII era as driven by the desire to leave the parochialism and conservatism of Australian culture at the time.⁹ Broinowski's narrative of Australians in Asia emphasises a cultural shift from historical to geographic references – the desire to cast off the historic shackles of the British empire and recognise instead the physical realities of Australia's place in the world under the broader understanding of Australasia.¹⁰ From an architectural disciplinary perspective, Peter Scriver emphasises this geographic push towards a notion of Australasia in his 2009 paper '*Edge of empire or edge of Asia?*' noting that early proponents of architectural regionalism such as Milo Dunphy and William Hardy Wilson were arguing for geography as a shared ground of understanding where significant cultural differences between Asia and Australia still existed.¹¹

In Asia, the desire for independence from colonialism was complicated by the struggle between communism and capitalism—an ideological polarization that tore communities and countries apart. Following the early 1960s divergence between the Soviet Union and China, this conflict of political ideologies became entangled with ethnic rivalries and led to a wider backlash against the Chinese communities in the region. For instance, in Indonesia, a campaign against suspected communist sympathizers and ethnic Chinese residents killed an estimated 1-2 million people between 1965 and 1966.

12. Felix Wemheuer, *A Social History of Maoist China: Conflict and Change, 1949-1976* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

In 1966, Chairman Mao Zedong launched the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in an effort to concentrate power and initiate a more radical break from China's imperial-era traditions.¹² This idea of 'reformation' directly blamed old cultural values and customs, public intellectuals, and elite educational institutions as obstacles to the growth and progress of communism in China. Countless ancient buildings, artefacts, antiques, books, and paintings were destroyed. For those in neighbouring regions that stood in opposition, interest in preserving traditional values enshrined in Asian arts and culture increased. The colonial outposts of Macau and Hong Kong emerged as centres of such interest, where the expatriate population found growing support from the elite intellectual class. The mass mobilization in China, along with the escalating Vietnam War (1955-1975), also brought other influential international figures in the fields of journalism, filmmaking, art, and architecture, to the region. This movement of transnational actors in and out of Asia produced numerous interpersonal and institutional networks that redefined Asia's relationship with other parts of the world.

It is against this setting of cultural and political flux that Australian architects like Alan Gilbert arrived in Asia. For Gilbert, what was first intended as a four-year study and work tour, became a decades-long entanglement with a transnational network of art and architecture professionals based out of Hong Kong.

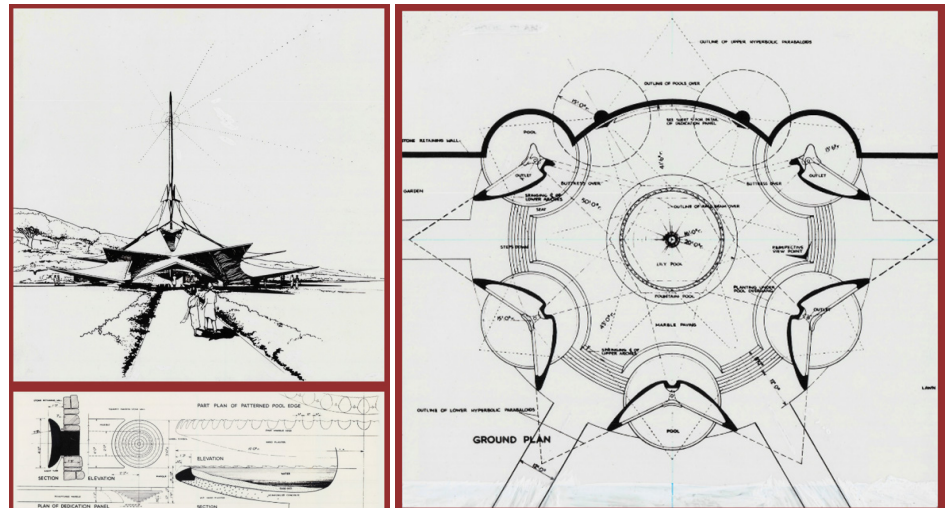
Alan Gilbert and Sarah Lo in Hong Kong

Alan Gilbert first left Australia in 1963 when he was headed to Ceylon to spend time with another expatriate Sydney architect and a dear friend,

13. Alan Gilbert, 'An Australian Business in Asia', *Specifier*, 68.

14. Architectural Drawing for Competition Entry, "Monument for 2500 years of Buddha's Paramnirvana in Delhi," Alan Gilbert Archives, Sydney.

Adrian Snodgrass. Reflecting on his experiences later in life Gilbert described his sentiment towards Asia at that time as 'rapture'.¹³ This rapture, he explained, developed in Sydney in the 1950s through his architectural studies at Sydney Technical College where he met Adrian Snodgrass and Bert Read, and through this developing friendship group was exposed to the wonders of perennial philosophy. In 1956 he had also participated in an international architectural competition to design a monument in Delhi, India, to commemorate the 2500th anniversary of Gautama Buddha's *Paramnirvana*.¹⁴



Designs for a monument to commemorate the 2500th anniversary of Gautama Buddha's Paramnirvana, Alan Gilbert, 1956. Source: Alan Gilbert archive.

15. Drawings, Illustrations and Photographs of project, "Hospital for Drug Addicts, Taipa Island, Macau," Alan Gilbert Archives, Sydney.

But Gilbert never made it to Ceylon, and having stopped in Hong Kong on his way decided to stay there for a while. Open to doing small jobs to supplement his income, he was soon offered an architectural commission for a hospital for drug addicts on Taipa Island, Macau, which was commissioned by Bill McCoy, UN Commissioner for Refugees (Australian) for the colonial Portuguese government, and completed in 1964.¹⁵ The time he spent on Taipa island, Macau, is credited by Gilbert as having sparked his interest in photodocumentary and cultural research. After the hospital project, he took a temporary hiatus from architectural design and worked as a professional filmmaker and photojournalist with Austrian-Canadian photographer, Harry Redl. Between 1965 and 1967 he made five trips to China, and was one the first foreigners to document the Chinese Cultural Revolution in 1966 – his photograph 'Red Guards in Canton' appearing on the cover of Life magazine, 20 January 1967, under the headline 'China – Crisis in Mao's purge'.



Alan Gilbert's photographs capturing local life in Macau (c. 1964) and his photo 'Red guards in Canton' on LIFE magazine cover, 20 January 1967. (Source: Alan Gilbert archives)

16. Peter Scriver and Amit Srivastava, "Cultivating Bali Style: A Story of Asian Becoming in the Late Twentieth Century." In *Southeast Asia's Modern Architecture: Questions of Translation, Epistemology and Power*, ed. Chang, Jiat-hwee, and Imran bin Tajudeen (Singapore: NUS Press, 2019), 100.

Soon after, in 1967 Gilbert joined the design practice of Dale and Patricia Keller in Hong Kong. The Kellers were American designers who had travelled to Japan and eventually arrived in Hong Kong in 1961 to work on the new Hong Kong Hilton. With the emergent luxury hotel market in Asia and the subsequent establishment of new Asian-owned brands like Peninsula, Marco Polo, Furama and Shangri-La, they decided to establish their firm Dale Keller and Associates (DKA) in Hong Kong. Supported by a growing team of expatriate designers like Alan Gilbert (and Adrian Snodgrass), DKA developed a practice of collecting and cataloguing local artefacts and cultural imagery as a means to develop a thematic concept for the interior, which was successfully applied right across Asia.¹⁶

17. Kirin Raja, "Designing Pleasure Palaces," *Eve's Weekly*, Nov. 30-Dec 6, 1985, 48.

18. Scriver and Srivastava, "Cultivating Bali Style," 101.

Having been promoted to Chief Designer in 1970, Gilbert started working on major international projects that were defined by his particular approach to the design process. In 1971, he took on the design for the Taj Mahal hotel in Bombay (now Mumbai) and in 1973 he was involved with the Bali Hyatt project in Indonesia. With these projects he started experimenting with a mode of design research that involved investigating traditional arts and crafts of the region and using these motifs as references in development of the design. For instance, at the Taj Coromandel Hotel in Madras, India (1974) Gilbert took the form of a traditional Indian lamp seen at the Delhi Museum and converted it into a sculptural chandelier.¹⁷ As Scriver and Srivastava note, this process allowed the designer to counter the "modernist certainties of the contemporary international-style architectural exteriors typical of such hotels," and allow for the "textures and tectonic riches of local and regional building culture" to enter the building "in an environmentally benign yet experientially immersive manner."¹⁸



Traditional oil lamp as reference for the design of a chandelier element at the Taj Coromandel Hotel, Madras, India, 1974. (Source: Alan Gilbert Archive)

19. Badone, "Crossing boundaries," 182.

Here we can already witness a transition emerging in Gilbert's evolving relationship with Asia. To understand this, we return to Badone's discussion of the notions of pilgrimage, tourism and ethnography. For Badone, the boundaries between these (often loaded) definitions are usually blurred.¹⁹ Accordingly for Gilbert his initial fascination with perennial philosophy and a desire for raptured pilgrimage to Ceylon, is replaced by the touristic gaze as he travels through Hong Kong, Macau and China as a photojournalist. This touristic self-awareness further transitions into a design-based ethnography (or ethno-technology as will be discussed later) where he takes on a more creative role, working with transformed cultural references of cities in which he was located. As Badone notes, travel to unfamiliar cultures is often driven by a desire for self-transcendence, and both pilgrims and ethnographers go through processes of self-transformation.

20. Personal Documents, Sarah Lo Archives, Melbourne.

Meanwhile, Sarah Lo, who was born in Canton, China and raised in Hong Kong, had travelled to the United Kingdom to complete her high school in Bournemouth and study interior design at the Southern Polytechnic in London. After having worked with Henry Serventi in London between 1969 and 1970, she returned to Hong Kong to join Dale Keller and Associates in 1970.²⁰ Gilbert and Lo worked together at DKA for the next few years before Sarah left to establish her own practice, Innerspace Design Ltd, in 1973. In 1975, Alan Gilbert left DKA, joined Sarah to form a partnership, and the resulting practice was rebranded as Alan Gilbert and Associates (AGA).

Designing Hotels in Reform Era China

In 1980, when Alan Gilbert and Sarah Lo were awarded the hotel contract for China, their practice was only five years old. But the reason for their selection had as much to do with their experience in design of hotels as their approach to design as part of cultural research. As the news article identified, one of the "secrets" to their success was that they "discover traditional elements of life - through native crafts, designs,

21. Parrott, "Couple wins top China hotel design contract."

materials, fabrics - and incorporate them into their own plan."²¹ What the article failed to highlight is the work that Gilbert and Lo had already done in China to establish this process of "authoritative design research."

22. Film Recordings, "China Trip 1972," Alan Gilbert Archives, Sydney.

Following on from his travels in China as a photojournalist between 1965 and 1967, Gilbert had also travelled to China with Dale and Patricia Keller in 1972 to visit numerous sites and assess the quality and production capabilities of the factories in the region.²² Over several subsequent trips Alan Gilbert surveyed more than sixteen factories in greater Beijing and Guangzhou looking at all aspects of production for carpets, wall coverings, textiles, light fittings, and furniture, and prepared a recommendation report for the Government. Accordingly in 1978, the newly established Alan Gilbert and Associates (AGA) was invited by the First Services Bureau (FSB) of the City of Beijing to advise on the future development of nine existing hotels in the city.

23. Roskam "Envisioning Reform," 85-86.

24. Roskam "Envisioning Reform," 99.

25. Roskam "Envisioning Reform," 100-101.

As a central part of the new 'Open Door Policy' that would allow for foreign business and investment to enter China, the international luxury hotel acted as a symbolic gateway and was closely watched over by Deng Xiaoping's CCP and the FSB. As Roskam notes, the hotels offered the CCP a way to "convey a highly visible sense of progress and improvement without actually lessening the party's overall position of power."²³ But this was not an easy choice and the CCP and the FSB could not simply account for this through absorbing western architectural and design standards. Here Gilbert and Lo's unique approach that not only brought international design standards into China but also proposed to engage and develop local industry offered a good alternative. According to Roskam, the concern was that "one foreign substance could not be absorbed without the other, necessitating the search for some new architectural language that could better compartmentalize these value conflicts."²⁴ Gilbert and Lo's alternative typifies a design method described by Roskam as "negotiat[ing] between two vastly different political economic systems while camouflaging the cynical intertwining of capitalist and communist sensibilities taking place within the building."²⁵

26. Alan Gilbert, "International Hotel Interior Design." *Asian Architect and Builder – Supplement*. November 1979, 24.

27. "Interior Design for Beijing Hotels," *Ta Kung Pa*, 1980, 2.

The first projects involved the design of two Beijing hotels – the 670 room Minzu Hotel, and the 700 room Xiyuan Hotel. Though much of the renovation and upgrade work on these hotels concerned introducing climatic control to the standards required for international business guests, great care was taken in the refurbishment of guest rooms and public spaces to interweave local design elements with international influences. AGA surveyed sixteen factories in Beijing, Tientsin and Shanghai, in an attempt to obtain local production of the required textiles, furniture and fittings (local work schedules prohibited complete use of local manufacture and many components had to be imported). Gilbert defined his aesthetic goal on the project as an interpretation of Chinese motifs without descending into 'Chinoiserie'²⁶ – though he simultaneously claimed to want to 'avoid westernisation'.²⁷ In the Minzu Hotel, where a complete prototype room was constructed for the benefit of local construction staff to observe, local timbers and traditional Chinese textile patterns were used.



Minzu hotel design for cocktail lounge (L) and Xiyuan hotel colour board (R)
Prospectus for Alan Gilbert and Associates, c. 1988 (Source: Alan Gilbert Archive)

28. "Beijing's Xiyuan Hotel: First class all the way." *Building Journal Hong Kong*. December 1984, 67.

29. "Beijing's Xiyuan Hotel: First class all the way," 67.

30. "Alan Gilbert, 'A hotel designer's experience in China'." *Building Journal Hong Kong*. February 1983, 35.

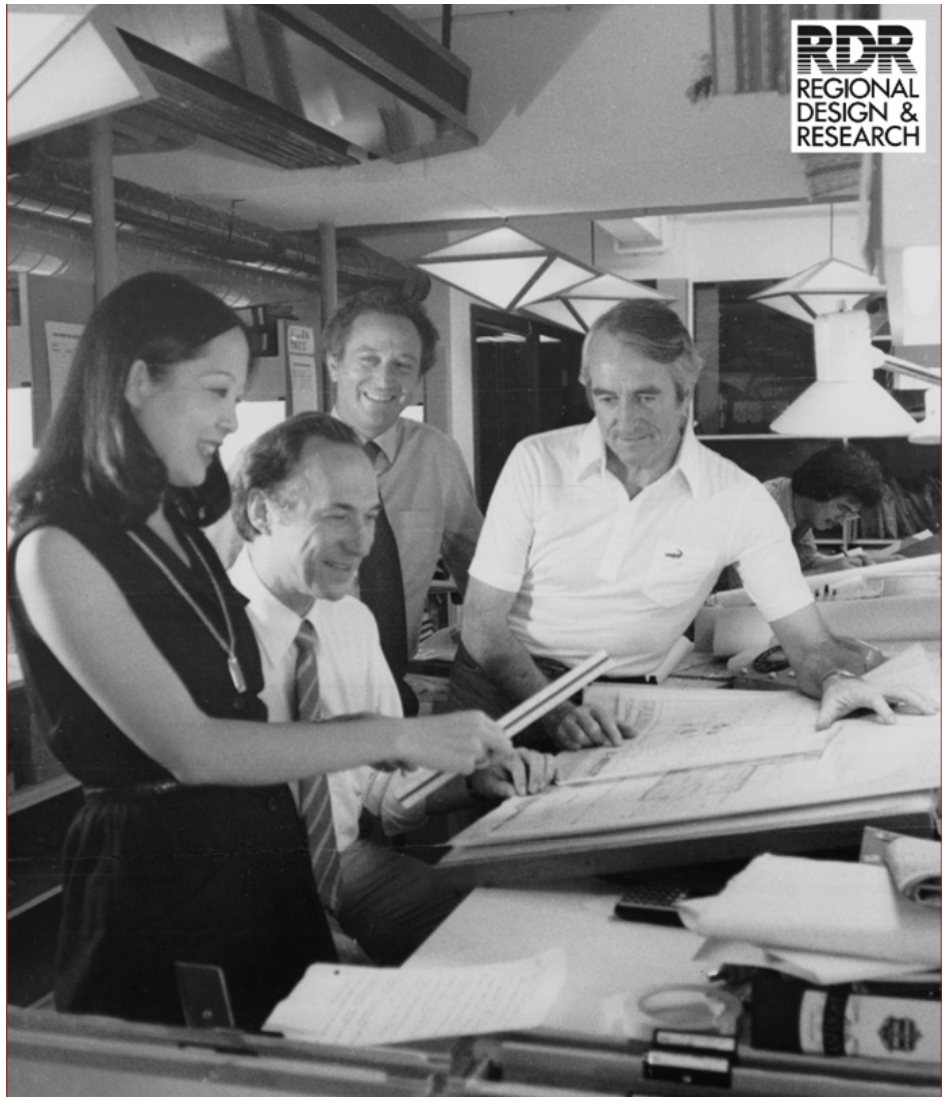
This integration of traditional and modern elements is best illustrated through the foyer of the Xiyuan Hotel, for which Gilbert commissioned Sydney-based sculptor Michel Santry to install a dominating ceiling sculpture consisting of square aluminium tubes clustered in tetrahedral groups, anodised in various shimmering hues.²⁸ This glittering, reflective structure, similar to that commissioned from Santry by the Arts Centre Melbourne for the foyer of its concert hall in 1981 ('Arcturus'), mirrored a geometrically patterned floor, consisting of Chinese marble arranged according to the "Five Colour Map Theory," a Chinese mathematical theory showing that using a maximum of five colours, each tile can be placed so that no adjacent tiles are the same colour.²⁹ Elements of Chinese 'geomancy', a philosophy of relating a building to the natural and supernatural world, were incorporated at the suggestion of the First Services Bureau and other local contributing professionals. Gilbert describes the unique working environment on the project, where decisions were made democratically at meetings of up to between 43 and 151, including hotel staff – succinct comments were offered by Gilbert's driver.³⁰



Lobby, Xiyuan Hotel, Beijing, completed 1984, interiors by AGA with sculpture by Michel Santry (Source: Alan Gilbert archive)

31. Alan Gilbert, "A Hotel designer's experience in China," 42.

Gilbert credits the receptiveness of the First Services Bureau staff to events on his research trip of 1979, where he was shown murals recently installed in meeting rooms and public areas of the new Beijing International Airport. The dialogue over these murals had led Gilbert and First Services Bureau staff to openly discuss the purely aesthetic aspects of the hotel fit-out project, clearing the path for the inclusion of the Santry work in the Xiyuan foyer.³¹



Sarah Lo, Alan Gilbert, Chris Carlisle and Peter Muller, c. 1970s.
(Source: Alan Gilbert archive)

The work that Gilbert and Lo went on to complete on the two hotels in Beijing aimed to create a sense of opulence, cultural specificity and international comfort required to achieve the complex aims of reform era China – that of the aesthetics of progress and economic openness to the west, without rescinding control. But the ethnographic research and design method modelled by AGA in the production of the Minzu and Xiyuan hotel interiors emerged from the unique experiences of being an expatriate and a part of the emerging transnational network of intellectuals and designers in Asia.

This ethnographic approach to design was clearly defined through the 1978 establishment of a unique consultancy – Regional Design and Research (RDR) – which included Adrian Snodgrass (research), Peter Muller (architecture) Alan Gilbert (interior design), and Chris Carlisle (management). Building on each individual's deep travels and studies across Asia, the group was established to offer services based around the "ethno-technological" survey of design as a cultural practice and product. In addition to research-based architectural and interior design work, RDR also produced reports on indigenous building techniques and crafts, to explore how such technology could be sustained and

32. Adrian Snodgrass worked for Dale and Patricia Keller of Hong Kong preparing Government reports on the arts and handcrafts of Ceylon and Bali, as well as researching the remote cultures of Indonesia, alongside his wife Judith, for a documentary by photographer and filmmaker Brian Brake.

managed.³² Participating in the emerging intra-Asian flow of capital, ideas and cultural references, RDR offered a new approach to regional integration fuelled by the fluid notions of pilgrimage, self-understanding and knowledge production. In setting up RDR, those involved were shifting their focus away from Asia as a site of pilgrimage, integrating themselves within the regional culture as cultural experts and advisors, and creating a framework for cross-cultural exchange.

Conclusion

As part of a broader research project focused on the history of architects from New South Wales travelling to Asia in the mid-20th century, this case study of Alan Gilbert has opened the doors for further investigation of Asia's influence on the personal networks and architectural discourse of this period. Research on this paper has also provided an opportunity to access, catalogue and analyse the private archives of both Alan Gilbert and Sarah Lo, as well as others in their network. But more specifically the narrative constructed above has established a framework that will continue to define the larger study.

By tracing the story of Alan Gilbert's travels, where disillusionment with the stultifying post-WWII architectural atmosphere of Sydney met the 'rapture' of an awakening awareness of nearby Asia, to the establishment of AGA in Hong Kong in 1975 and the transnational RDR Group in 1978 applying an ethnographic approach to design, we have created a new framework to understand the multifaceted nature of the journeys taken by these Australian architects. Here Badone's description of pilgrimage, tourism and ethnography, and the blurred boundaries between these categories will continue to be a useful tool to better understand the implications of these experiences for the individuals and their intellectual networks, in Asia and back home in Australia. Further work will explore the desire of 'self-transcendence' described by Badone and how this was achieved through these architects' studies, work and travel throughout Asia and the development of personal and intellectual networks. In addition, building on Roskam's work on the specific anxieties and desires of Reform Era China's hotel projects through the two specific examples, we are able to better situate and understand the potentials of the ethnographic design method formulated and refined by Gilbert and Lo through their intraregional interiors work throughout Asia from the 1960s to 1980s.

Further research in this area will help intersect the story of Alan Gilbert with Australian architects like Adrian Snodgrass, Bert Read, Peter Muller and others who also travelled to Asia at the same time and were part of a broader network of individuals from NSW. The intellectual history that will emerge will not only help us understand Australia's ongoing cultural relationship with Asia, but also provide a framework to understand the evolution of Australia's own material culture. Here we believe that the 'ethno-technological' method of design research proposed by RDR and close analysis of the role and modes of travel will prove to be valuable anchors for our understanding of these particular histories and their enduring legacy.