

Olympian Architecture

Beyond the trophy buildings erected for the Games, Beijing has emerged as a leading city for design

BY SHAI OSTER

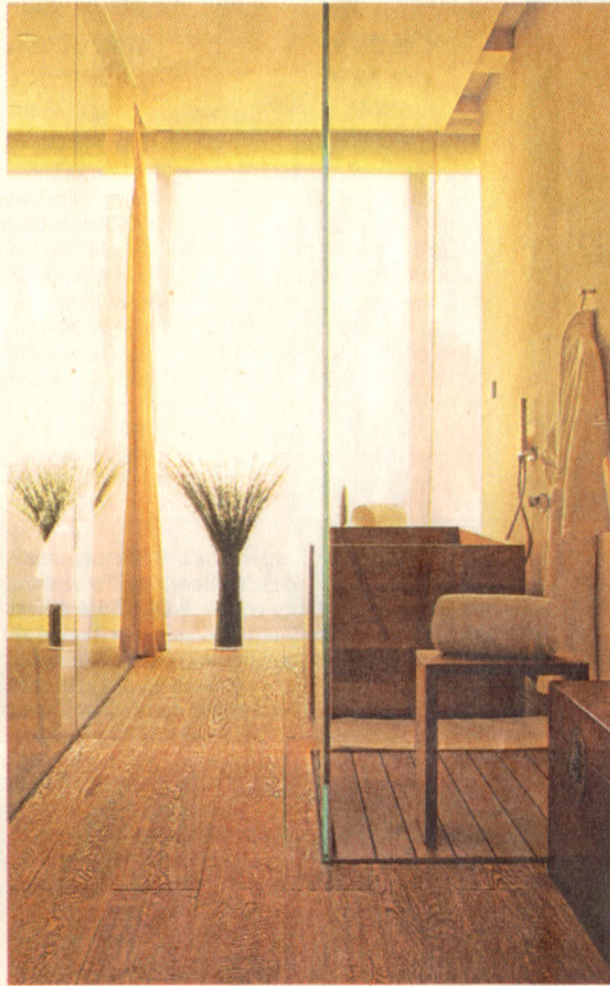
Beijing

WITH ITS HERCULEAN pre-Olympics construction push, Beijing has in just a few years transformed itself from a city of drab concrete superstructures to a magnet for innovative and ambitious architecture. Visitors to the Games will, like tourists on safari, want to bag the city's Big Five—high-profile buildings that already are considered icons of China's new architecture. There is the National Stadium, aka "the Bird's Nest," whose design is meant to evoke the cracked glaze on ancient porcelain, and the Water Cube, the ocean-blue Olympic aquatics center with a surface of plastic cushions, like a sheet of bubbles. The CCTV Tower, with its twisted-doughnut profile, has redefined the word "skyscraper." The National Center for Performing Arts is like a titanium-clad flying saucer, and there's the vast sweep of Beijing Airport's new Terminal Three.

But several lower-profile works add to Beijing's new aesthetic, including a giant video installation on the side of a restaurant and a hotel clad in metal lattice. Beijing also is constructing, in Chaoyang Park, the world's biggest Ferris wheel.

For centuries, the golden roof and red walls of the emperor's palace and the narrow gray "hutong" alleyways between courtyard homes defined Beijing. Starting in the 1950s, China's communist rulers remade the downtown, with massive, Stalinist edifices like the Great Hall of the People and acres of prefabricated concrete apartment blocks. Economic opening in the 1980s brought a new building boom, but not much in the way of new taste. Beijing's architects, determined to maintain a Chinese touch, capped new towers with traditional-looking structures that seemed blown there by a tornado.

Since 2001, when Beijing's Olympic bid prevailed, international and local designers have been arriving as if



tel overlooking the Forbidden City. "New money tends to be a bit louder." Here is a guide to the new must-sees, plus some lesser-known architectural treasures.

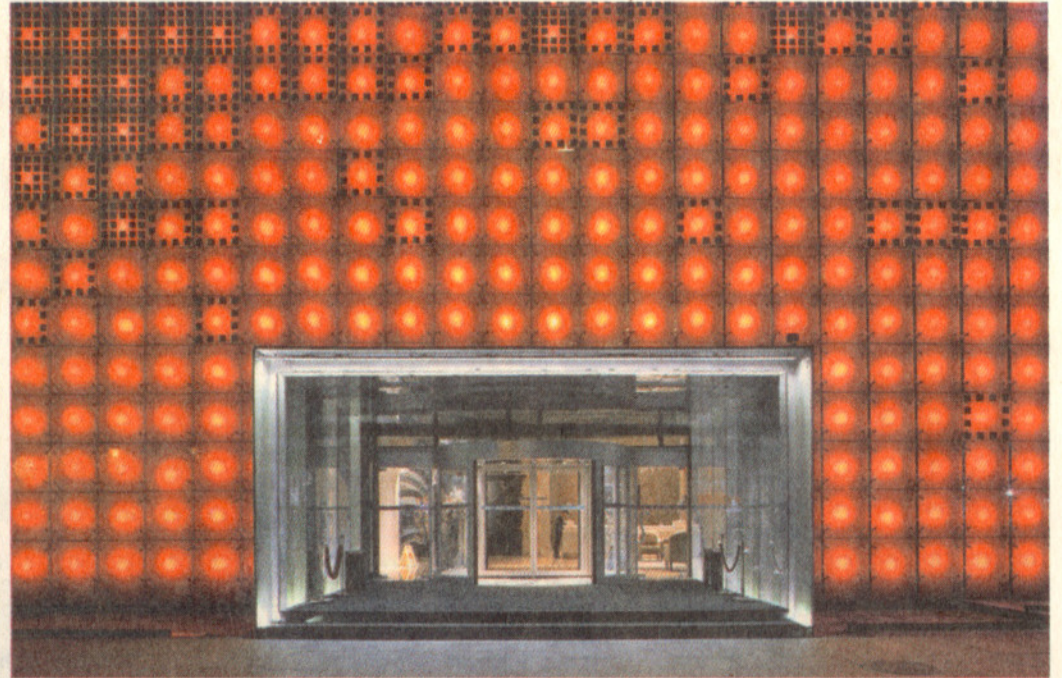
NATIONAL CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

The vast, low-lying space-age oval designed by France's Paul Andreu is covered in titanium and surrounded by a pool of water. The building was met with extraordinary controversy, starting with the entryway. Visitors

CCTV TOWER

The giant state broadcaster's new "tower" actually is a twisty glass-and-steel doughnut, designed by Rem Koolhaas and his Dutch design firm, in collaboration with the Arup engineers. The facade is set to be completed by the start of the Games; the interior is likely to take many more months.

Two leaning towers rise 540 feet above the ground, then make a sharp turn to meet in a wide overhang—creating the dizzying sensation that they are defying the usual laws of physics. To



Top: National Center for Performing Arts. **Clockwise from above:** GreenPix video installation; National Stadium, aka "the Bird's Nest"; Opposite House hotel. **Below left:** Terminal Three at Beijing's airport.

na's Tsinghua University. "The Bird's Nest is a triumph of thinking."

TERMINAL THREE

The giant arching sweep of the new terminal at Beijing Capital International Airport, designed by Britain's Norman Foster, is the first thing that will greet most Olympic arrivals. T3 is one of the world's largest enclosed spaces, designed to handle an estimated 50 million visitors a year: It is just over two miles long, with 101 gates, 31 miles of baggage conveyers, 68 moving walkways, 168 escalators,

draped with metal mesh and a wall covered in clear plastic cubbyholes—a modern take on a Chinese medicine chest. Basement restaurants, nearing completion, overlook a stainless-steel swimming pool. Nearby is a converted factory called 1949—The Hidden City, now a quiet courtyard oasis.

HOTEL KAPOK

This hotel, near the Forbidden City's western gate, is a modest work from Mr. Zhu, the architect better known for his Digital Beijing building. Hotel Kapok is a refurbished office