

# A LETTERS FROM BEIJING

*Kevin McCullagh* sees bling taking a back seat as the Chinese capital becomes more comfortable with its growing wealth. But in the back streets, **bandit phone makers** are forging ahead with design

'Beijing is so tidy and organised,' gasps my Shanghaiese interpreter, as we are whisked from the immense Capital Airport to our hotel, a block away from OMA's forlorn-looking CCTV tower. As well as the adjacent Television Cultural Centre burning down during a firework display, the building has become the butt of much derision from the locals. In addition to being accident-prone, its expense and easiness on the eye have been called into question – by more than the local cab drivers.

As I would glean over the coming days, Beijingers have moved on from bathing in the reflected glory of Western starchitects. The success of the 2008 Olympics delivered national pride – in spades – and the 'made in the West' financial meltdown only further underlined the need for China to rethink what remains of its inferiority complex.

There's a new cultural assuredness in the air. Beijing has always tended to shun the go-go flamboyance of southern cities like Shanghai and Hong Kong in the name of higher cultural and social concerns. As the seat of power, it tends to frown upon bravado, especially now that 'bling' is associated with rich miners in the countryside.

Yanling Duan, a design magazine

**WHAT PARTICULARLY IRKS BIG BRAND MANUFACTURERS IS THAT THE SHANZHAI VERSIONS OFTEN BEAT THEM TO THE MARKET**

editor and TV show presenter, confirms that Chinese tastes are maturing and shifting towards a simpler aesthetic. However, she emphasises that, historically, they have tended towards softer French designs, rather than harder German modernism.

While the CCTV tower was commissioned in a more attention-seeking era, the elite now looks to impress with understatement such as the recently completed 'The Opposite House'. Kengo Kuma's hotel sets a new benchmark in minimalux space and finishing, in a country that one jaded architect claims never finishes its buildings: 'They never get much more than 90 per cent complete.'

That Kuma was commissioned at all reflects not just an assured shift to minimalism, but also a more subtle dynamic. Despite the resurgence of cultural nationalism

and an architectural debate around the development of a contemporary Chinese vernacular, when push comes to shove the real aspiration is to have the best the world has to offer whether that be a Japanese architect, a German car or a Finnish phone.

German cars however can hold unexpected meanings. Audi, the epitome of restrained good taste, in the West, exudes power and status in China. The black Audi A6L is the politicians' car. The 'L' stands for extended leg room, as big cheeses sit in back seats in this part of the world. This brand legacy dates back to the early nineties, when government officials were obliged to buy cars made in China; at the time, Audis were the best of the bunch.

While I fail to find an emergent Chinese aesthetic being forged by the design elite, I do find one in the back streets. At the bottom end of the market, Shanzhai (bandit) mobile phones are a distinctly Chinese phenomenon. These pirate phones began as simple knock-offs of popular handsets, with brand names such as Nckia, Sumsung and HiPhone, often selling for as little as \$20 a piece. While features and interfaces are inferior to mainstream models, in visual terms they are doppelgängers of the real thing. What particularly irks the big brand manufacturers is

that the Shanzhai versions often beat them to market.

These makers of small phones, often run by just a handful of well-connected staff in or around Shenzhen, have now started to add innovations. As well as reducing their size to fit local hands, new features like dual SIM-card slots that allow the phone to respond to two phone numbers are added. A personal favourite was the phone cum electric razor (pictured), a true Bodie and Doyle phone if ever The Professionals were to be resurrected as a 21st-century crime series.

This might prove to be a short-lived burst of local design innovation, since recent reports suggest that sales have started to dip. Among Chinese consumers, who will research a purchase for weeks, word has got around that the fakes are hard to use and break too easily.

I notice a less welcome innovation on the way across town for dinner. Our cab driver has strapped a video player over his rear view mirror and is taking in a movie, while ducking and weaving through rush hour traffic. As we pass the outsized portrait of Mao at the top of Tiananmen Square, my interpreter laughs: 'This is the only place in China that reminds me that I live in a communist country.'



*'I'm in the bathroom...'  
A combination phone and shaver typifies Shanzhai design gimmickry*