Every title of AD brings with it new discoveries and revelations. However, never has a single issue shifted my worldview and perceptions so much. China’s geography and demographics alone require a different mindset. China may have a slightly smaller landmass than the US (3.7 million to its 3.8 million square miles), but the US’s population is diminutive when compared to that of China: China has over a third more people. For those of us who have lived most of our lives on an overcrowded northern European island, the scale of China is difficult to grasp. It is, however, the rate and intensity of urban change in China over the last three decades that make it truly unprecedented. At a time when a 15-hectare (38-acre) site, like that at Battersea Power Station, has proved a stumbling block for developers in London, 95 per cent of Beijing’s buildings have been razed and replaced. Speed and size of construction alone are awe-inspiring, bringing with them unique opportunities to build. These are not just the much-publicised flagship icons by foreign architects such as Herzog & de Meuron’s ‘Bird’s Nest’ Olympic Stadium and Rem Koolhaas’ CCTV Tower in Beijing, or the great swathes of standardised mega-city housing blocks that are being constructed across the country; there is a new talented generation of indigenous architects emerging who, having been educated at top institutions overseas, are now determined to build innovatively at home (see pp 82–93). Such unprecedented urban expansion inevitably guzzles resources and it is this that makes extensive construction a global concern, with China buying up natural minerals, building materials and fuels around the world. It also presents a challenge to the international status quo, and anticipates a future with China having a far greater influence on the world politically and economically, whether it is the mode in which cities and buildings are produced or the source of their investment.

The velocity of change in China is such that, as this issue closes, it is very apparent that recent events could well shift the pattern and momentum of urban development. Construction has been matched by devastation: the May 2008 earthquake in Sichuan Province left thousands dead and homeless and has required the government to focus on the building of new infrastructure and housing in affected areas. More than anything, though, the continuing rate of urbanisation in China rests on a burgeoning economy. With the onset of the credit crunch in the US, and widespread talk of recession in the West, is China’s exponential growth sustainable? Is it not conceivable that the factory of the world will be affected by the economic downturn elsewhere? I put this question to Joe Studwell, author and ex-Editor of China Economic Quarterly. His belief is that to some extent China will be supported by its extensive internal market: ‘China’s net exports can fall quite a lot without a major impact on overall growth,’ but that demographics and labour supply will be key to longer-term growth.
Jin and Shan Li, writing in *The Wall Street Journal Asia*, have also emphasised that ‘China’s core competence lies not in its technological or managerial superiority, but rather in its abundant and cheap labor’, the threat to its competitive advantage lying ostensibly in a ‘rapid appreciation of the yuan’ combined ‘with a weak U.S. economy’. Increases in pay could lead to the failure of labour-intensive businesses, significantly disrupting ‘the ongoing process of urbanization and industrialization of the Chinese economy’.³ At present, economic forecasts for China issued by the likes of the Economist Intelligence Unit remain broadly positive: ‘Real GDP growth is forecast to slow but will remain impressive, easing from 11.9% in 2007 to 8.6% in 2012.’⁴ There is no doubt forthcoming vicissitudes in the economic climate could have a significant impact on the speed and rate of construction. However, what this title – so effectively guest-edited by Laurence Liauw – allows you to do is to realise the full magnitude of urban change in the last three decades, and its transformative effects on both China and the rest of the world. ☺

Notes
2. Joe Studwell, email to Helen Castle 17 June 2008.