

Proposing a development framework for sustainable architecture, engineering, and construction industry in China: Challenges, best practice, and future directions

Peixian LI^{a,b}, Yujie LU^{c,d*}, Xuwen XIAO^{c,e}

^a College of Architecture and Urban Planning, Tongji University, Shanghai 200092, China

^b Key Laboratory of Ecology and Energy Saving Study of Dense Habitat (Tongji University), Ministry of Education, Shanghai 200092, China

^c College of Civil Engineering, Tongji University, Shanghai 200092, China

^d Key Laboratory of Performance Evolution and Control for Engineering Structures of Ministry of Education, Tongji University, Shanghai 200092, China

^e China State Construction Engineering Corporation, Beijing 100029, China

*Corresponding author. E-mail: Lu6@tongji.edu.cn

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ABSTRACT China's architecture, engineering, and construction (AEC) industry needs a clear and sustainable development roadmap. Drawing inspiration from speeches delivered at a seminar hosted by the Chinese Academy of Engineering and extensive literature research on Chinese policies, this article presents a summary of the current trends in the AEC industry in four dimensions: industrialization as the foundation, intelligence as the enabler, lean management as the strategy, and green development as the goal. These four dimensions are intricately interconnected and rooted in multiple disciplines. The article provides a detailed review of the current practices, challenges, and future directions associated with each dimension. Additionally, ten grand challenges were proposed to stimulate discussions on the future of the AEC industry. This article offers an overarching understanding of the AEC industry and presents a four-dimension framework for sustainable development, which can be valuable for AEC practitioners.

KEYWORDS green building, lean construction, prefabrication, smart construction, sustainable development

1 Introduction

On October 21, 2020, the Chinese Academy of Engineering convened a prestigious International Conference on Structure and Civil Engineering in Shanghai, China. The conference aimed to explore the latest issues at the intersection of architecture, engineering, and construction (AEC) with green ecological technology, and to examine the current status, challenges, and frontier technologies in this field. Organized by Nanqi Ren and Xuwen Xiao, both Academicians of the Chinese Academy of Engineering, the conference was themed “Green–Ecology–Livability–Smart”. Distinguished experts from academia and industry participated in this seminar, and their names

can be found in the Appendix. Drawing on the insights shared during the seminar, we have proposed a four-dimension framework for a sustainable AEC industry to provide valuable references for policy formulation and future development of the AEC industry in China.

2 Four dimensions of the architecture, engineering, and construction industry

Through a comprehensive analysis of the presentations delivered at the seminar and a thorough examination of Chinese policies, we have identified four dimensions that underpin China's AEC industry in the new era, as illustrated in Fig. 1. These dimensions are industrialization, intelligence, lean management, and green

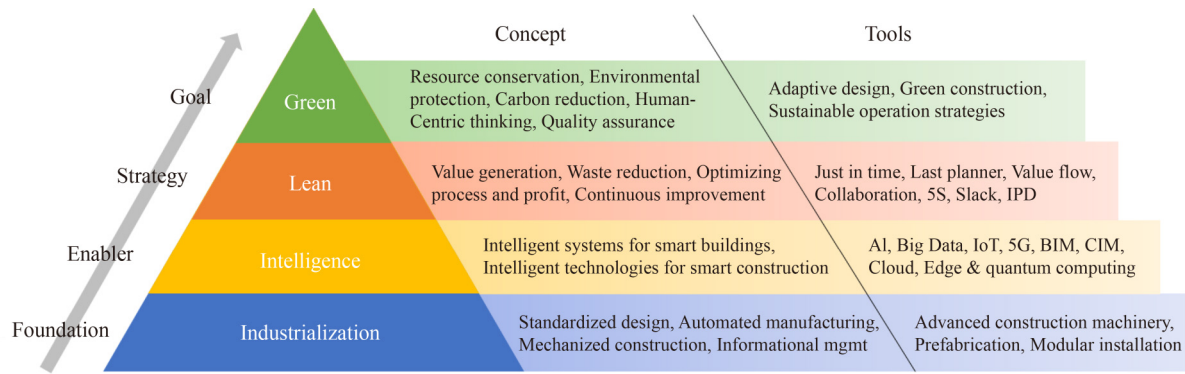


Fig. 1 The proposed four dimensions of the sustainable AEC industry.

development. These dimensions are applicable across the entire life cycle of projects, including the design, production, construction, operation, demolition, and recycling, and are relevant to projects of varying scales, ranging from materials and structural components to facilities, buildings, and entire cities.

Industrialization is the foundation of the AEC industry. The industrialization of building materials and machinery holds the potential to enhance construction efficiency and quality by incorporating prefabricated components manufactured in factories and assembled on-site. This emerging trend is fueled by advancements in information technology, facilitating standardized building design, automated manufacturing, mechanized construction techniques, and efficient project management through data-driven approaches.

Intelligence is the enabler to achieve a green AEC industry. Intelligence in the AEC industry comprises multiple smart technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI) models, the Internet of Things (IoT), cloud and edge computing, building information modeling (BIM), and robots, applied across the design, construction, and operation phases. Additionally, intelligence manifests as smart “products”, such as smart construction and smart buildings, transforming the AEC industry in terms of product development, business models, production methods, management strategies, and regulatory frameworks. Ultimately, the aim is to provide human-centric engineering products and services that align with the evolving needs of society.

Lean management is the strategy to achieve a qualitative leap in the building sector. Lean construction is the application of lean principles in the AEC industry, aiming to streamline processes, improve productivity, and optimize profits [1–4]. Lean construction focuses on value flow, waste elimination, and maximizing output while minimizing input. Its core principles include optimizing the entire process, continuous improvement, waste reduction, value generation, and emphasis on process efficiency and flow. By addressing various forms of waste, such as construction defects, repetitive processes, unnecessary material transportation, idle time,

inefficient operations, and excess inventory, lean construction seeks to enhance efficiency and eliminate inefficiencies.

Green development is the ultimate goal of the AEC industry. Green construction is a tangible expression of ecological civilization and sustainable development in the AEC industry, incorporating environmentally responsible practices throughout project planning, design, and construction. The five core objectives of green construction include resource conservation, environmental protection, carbon reduction, human-centric design, and quality assurance. When applied to the operational phase, green construction also aims to create a healthy and livable environment, mitigate indoor and outdoor pollutants, enhance building climate adaptability, and foster sustainable development of the built environment.

With the support from a diverse range of disciplines as depicted in Fig. 2, the interdependence and synergy among the four dimensions are evident, as they mutually reinforce each other. The pursuit of green goals has the potential to redefine industrialization’s values, shifting toward sustainable development rather than purely economic growth. Conversely, advancements in industrialization, such as prefabrication, can support green development. This process fosters engineering breakthroughs and human-machine collaborative workflows, leading to intelligent applications. Intelligent decision-making enhances industrial production efficiency. Green development provides practical cases for intelligent applications, focusing on environmental sustainability and human-centricity. Simultaneously, intelligent control of buildings and facilities contributes to achieving green goals, including energy conservation and carbon emission reduction. Lean management theory aligns with the principles of industrialization, forming a solid foundation for co-development [5]. Integrating lean construction with BIM and prefabrication [6] emerges as a strategy to achieve green goals, enhancing construction efficiency and reducing costs and carbon emissions [7]. Wu et al. [8] proposed a green construction management approach based on lean construction and further substantiated the synergistic relationship between lean construction and green development.



Fig. 2 The interdisciplinary support for the four-dimension AEC.

3 State-of-the-practice of four dimensions

Drawing from the wealth of knowledge shared during the speeches, this section presents a comprehensive overview of the current best practices in the domains of industrialization, intelligence, lean management, and green development (Fig. 3). These insights aim to provide guidance for practitioners and stakeholders in the AEC industry seeking to achieve excellence in the four dimensions.

In promoting prefabricated and modular construction, China has made progress in factory industrialization, on-site industrialization, and installation industrialization, but the mechanization and automation level varies.

1) Under the “Made in China 2025” initiative, most factories that produce building components have been mechanized. Advanced examples include the highly automated steel structure manufacturing plants. These plants have implemented steel-structure intelligent production lines, which incorporate automatic edge finding, offline programming, and welding seam tracking [9].

2) On-site industrialization, also known as prefabricated construction, has experienced significant growth, yet it remains a developing field. The proportion of prefabricated floor areas in newly constructed floor areas

has risen from 2.7% in 2015 to 20.5% in 2020 [10,11]. Advanced construction machinery includes aerial building machines, residential building machines, steel frame welding and forming production equipment, portable steel bar tying machines, etc. [12].

3) Installation industrialization, although promising, is still in its nascent phase and has only been implemented in a limited number of projects. This approach encompasses the modularization and prefabrication of electromechanical equipment, curtain walls, interior walls, and bathrooms.

The intelligence within the AEC industry is undergoing rapid development in China, encompassing various aspects such as smart design, smart production, smart construction, and smart operation. However, the intelligence level is relatively higher in the production and operation stages compared to the design and construction phases.

1) BIM has provided a strong basis for digital design, while the emergence of AI-generated design has occurred more recently. According to a survey, the adoption rates of BIM in small, medium, and large projects are 42.66%, 61.99%, and 70.97%, respectively, demonstrating its increasing prevalence within the industry [13]. Since 2023, advanced AI models like Transformer have facilitated the development of AI-generated content



Fig. 3 Current practices of the four dimensions.

(AIGC), resulting in the emergence of new design tools. While some tools are capable of generating preliminary architectural designs, there is currently a lack of tools for smart structural design and optimization.

2) Smart factories, enabled by the integration of intelligence and industrialization, have revolutionized building component production. A prominent effort made by Chinese researchers is the FUROBOT software, which enhances the automation level of component production by seamlessly connecting the design and production stages [14].

3) Smart construction has been extensively promoted in China [9], showcasing a range of construction robots as exemplars of “smart” technology. These include plastering robots, portable pipeline welding robots, concrete floor drilling robots, rubber-plastic insulation board cutting robots, flange automatic positioning welding robots, walking building three-dimensional (3D) printing robots, etc. Additionally, smart construction management utilizes IoT and big data, such as the Construction Engineering Big Data Service Platform. This platform integrates vital project indicators and elements, extracting

valuable insights and rules to support decision-making processes [12].

4) Smart operation in the AEC industry encompasses buildings, cities, and companies. Public buildings constructed recently are often equipped with building automation systems to facilitate intelligent facility management. In China, many cities have taken initiatives to develop city information models (CIM) to enhance urban planning and management. Guangzhou established smart city industry alliances to foster innovation and technological adoption within the AEC sector [15,16]. Additionally, digital transformation is emerging as businesses seek to leverage technological advancements to enhance their operations and overall competitiveness.

Lean construction principles have been implemented successfully in several cases in China, where they have resulted in reduced idle time, increased productivity, and improved quality [17]. Lean management methods such as the last planner system [18], the 5S method [19], the slack concept [20], and integrated project delivery (IPD) [21] can be implemented in design and technology management. Specific practices include design optimization, construction technology advancement, and schedule management.

1) Design optimization aims to cut down unnecessary construction processes, reduce quality defects, and reduce waste, requiring collaboration between architecture, structural engineering, and mechanical engineering. Meticulous blueprints of mechanical rooms, meticulous layout planning of mechanical and electrical pipelines, and provision of openings for mechanical engineering are instances of design optimization.

2) Construction technology advancement can lead to improved first-time success rates and overall productivity. For instance, the use of prefabricated foundations for fans, accurate embedding of electric boxes and aluminum mold pipelines, and proper treatment of temporary openings and floor water-breaks can greatly enhance construction efficiency and quality.

3) Schedule management can improve the efficiency of construction projects by identifying the critical processes and carefully planning construction procedures for different parts, including basement, above-ground interior, roof and facade, and exterior works. Lean tools such as risk analysis matrix, stochastic planning, pull planning, and work structuring can be employed to optimize scheduling and resource allocation.

The integration of green practices in the AEC industry encompasses various aspects, including the use of green materials, adoption of green construction techniques, and the implementation of sustainable operation practices.

1) Green materials encompass enhanced concrete and steel [22], as well as novel low-carbon materials like lightweight and high-strength carbon fiber materials, offering advantages such as rapid construction and

recyclability [23]. An exemplification of sustainable construction is the zero-carbon resort in China, which utilizes carbon fiber and glass fiber-reinforced plastics as primary building materials, demonstrating their potential in sustainable construction applications [24].

2) Green construction has gained significant acceptance, with numerous cities in China enforcing a considerable proportion of green construction floor area relative to the total completed floor area, often surpassing 70% [25–27]. Prefabricated construction serves as a viable solution to reduce material waste and labor [28]. During the construction of the National Speed Skating Stadium, the implementation of prefabricated steel structures resulted in substantially lower labor requirements, with approximately 1000 workers involved, in contrast to the cast-in-place concrete stands which necessitated around 7000 workers [29].

3) In line with the “Carbon Peak and Carbon Neutrality” objectives, the AEC industry in China has dedicated substantial efforts toward green operations. A noteworthy contribution to enhancing the climate adaptability of public buildings was made by Cui and his team [30], who conducted an analysis of the interrelation between physical space and climate parameters and developed tools for evaluating climate adaptability. These initiatives underscore the increasing focus on sustainable operational practices to ensure the long-term environmental performance of built environments.

4 Challenges and future directions for four dimensions

Despite notable advancements in recent years, industrialization in the AEC industry encounters various challenges (Fig. 4), including the conflict between standardization and customization, the immaturity of prefabrication, and a fragmented supply chain. In the production phase, there is a discrepancy between industrialized mass production and the increasingly diverse demand for buildings [14]. In the construction phase, current prefabricated construction still faces issues such as inefficient structural nodes, difficult quality assurance, water seepage problems, and limited automation and intelligence in construction equipment [12]. Additionally, persistent information and technical barriers across life-cycle phases impede the development of standardized solutions necessary for industrialization [12]. To address these challenges, the future progression of industrialization in the AEC industry is likely to focus on the following directions.

1) Design for mechanical assembly (DFMA). By considering ease of handling, accessibility for maintenance, and compatibility with automated assembly processes, DFMA facilitates smoother coordination and

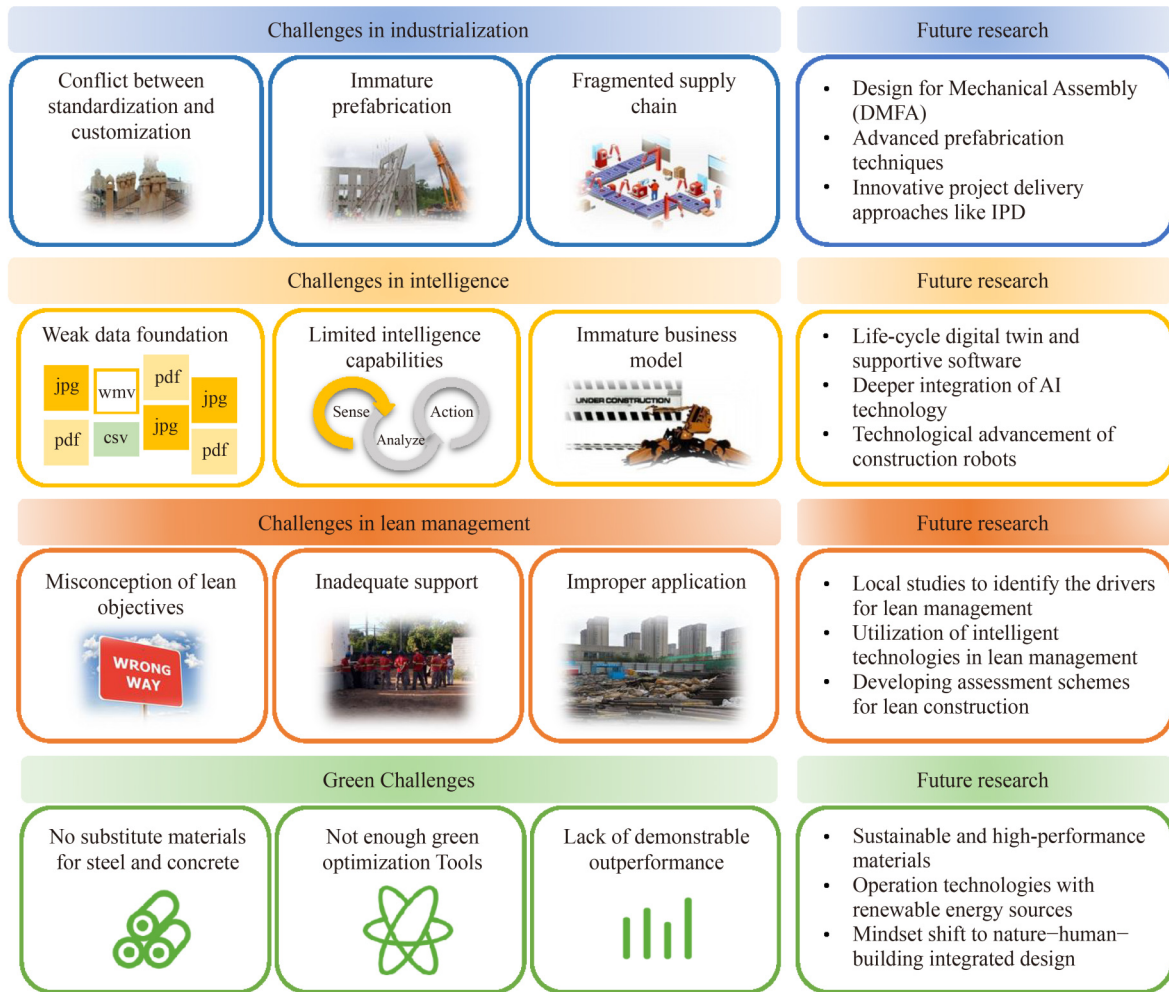


Fig. 4 Challenges and future of the four dimensions.

integration among stakeholders in the supply chain, enhancing overall efficiency and effectiveness in the manufacturing process.

2) Advanced prefabrication techniques. 3D printing, robotic assembly, and modular construction systems should be further developed to enhance the efficiency, precision, and quality of prefabricated components.

3) Innovative project delivery approaches. For instance, IPD can facilitate integrated workflows, interdisciplinary coordination, seamless information exchange, and real-time collaboration. Early and ongoing communication among stakeholders is essential to strike a balance between evolving needs and the efficiency of industrialized construction.

The AEC industry has seen numerous intelligent practices, but it continues to face significant challenges (Fig. 4), including a weak data foundation, limited intelligence capabilities, and an immature business model. First, despite the availability of vast amounts of data, the heterogeneous unstructured data can hardly be used. Secondly, intelligent applications primarily focus on sensing, while intelligent analysis, decision-making,

and execution are still in their early stages. Lastly, the lack of a profitable model for construction robots hinders their widespread adoption in the industry. To overcome these challenges, future development of intelligence in the AEC industry should prioritize the following aspects.

1) Life-cycle digital twin and supportive software. These are crucial to facilitate structured data collection, achieving a unified digital model from design to operation.

2) Deeper integration of AI technology, such as AI-generated design, AI-enabled structural analysis, and AI-assisted operations for urban planning, construction, and management [31,32].

3) Technological advancement of construction robots, to reduce their costs for increased adoption and profitability.

The promotion of lean construction in China faces several key challenges (Fig. 4), including misconceptions, inadequate support, and improper application. First, some practitioners mistakenly associate lean management with prioritizing fast construction over quality. They may view design optimization as an excuse for change orders and

have concerns about the impact of early professional entry on cash flow. These misconceptions often result in insufficient support from stakeholders, such as delayed acceptance from the government, uncooperative suppliers, and delayed involvement of subcontractors. Consequently, improper application of lean principles leads to suboptimal outcomes due to a lack of coordination among different specialties. Future research in lean construction may concentrate on the following areas.

1) Local studies to identify the drivers for lean management, such as those related to human psychology, organizational evolution, social capital, and social networks. These would contribute to the development of educational promotion campaigns and customized lean construction regulations for different stakeholders.

2) The utilization of intelligent technologies in lean management. For instance, digital twin technology allows for enhanced visualization and identification of clashes and conflicts. AI-powered algorithms can optimize construction schedules by considering factors such as resource availability and weather conditions, resulting in improved project timelines.

3) Developing assessment schemes for lean construction, including project-level performance evaluation and organization-level capability assessment [33], to clarify practitioners' expectations and facilitate efficient lean management.

The AEC industry in China faces significant green challenges as the building sector contributes to half of the national energy consumption and carbon emissions [34], and construction waste accounts for 40% of total municipal solid waste. These challenges encompass both technological and social aspects (Fig. 4). Technologically, there is a lack of green materials that can replace traditional building materials such as steel and concrete, and the current software systems have limitations in incorporating green requirements into optimal spatial design for public buildings [35]. Socially, green buildings often lack demonstrable outperformance, resulting in delayed acceptance among the general public [31]. Future research on green development can focus on several key aspects.

1) Sustainable and high-performance materials, such as bio-based materials and recyclable, low-carbon alternatives, to enhance the environmental performance of buildings.

2) Green building operation modes that align with renewable energy sources. Key technologies to consider include distributed photovoltaic systems, distributed energy storage, low-voltage DC distribution networks, and flexible load control.

3) Shifting the mindset from accumulating end-use technologies to embracing nature-human-building integrated design. This approach can encompass adaptive

design, post-occupancy evaluation [36], structural health monitoring, and other related efforts.

In addition to the specific challenges discussed in the four dimensions of AEC industry modernization, practitioners must also consider the broader challenges from a holistic perspective. We put forth ten thought-provoking questions for contemplation, noting that the numbering does not necessarily denote their respective significance.

1) Is it feasible to solely achieve green development through intelligent means? How can conflicts between green and intelligence be resolved?

2) How can the path and pace of development in the four dimensions be effectively controlled? Which dimension takes precedence when conflicts arise?

3) What are the fundamental drivers of green development? Can commercial values of green be identified and leveraged to promote green initiatives?

4) How can the advantages of industrialization be harnessed to achieve green development? Specifically, what improvements are needed to fully capitalize on prefabrication techniques?

5) How should we promote intelligence and industrialization in the AEC industry, considering the potential impact on profit models of construction companies? How can a smooth transition be achieved, and what factors determine the pace of this transition?

6) How can the AEC industry be revitalized to address the declining interest from young students and practitioners? Can the interdisciplinary nature of the four dimensions create new research opportunities and enhance the appeal of the AEC discipline?

7) How can human rights and interests, such as the well-being, privacy, safety, and employment opportunities of individuals, be protected in the face of rapid advancements in the industry?

8) What paradigm shifts are essential for the four-dimension development in the AEC industry? For example, mindset changes such as “repair instead of build” and “body conditioning instead of space conditioning” can contribute to green development.

9) How can a Chinese model of lean construction be developed, taking into consideration the unique cultural challenges that may arise?

10) How can lean management be effectively integrated with the other three dimensions in both research theory and practical implementation?

5 Conclusions

This article presents the concept of four dimensions for China's AEC industry: industrialization, intelligence, lean management, and green development. The integration of multiple disciplines forms the foundation for the synergy

among these dimensions, with complex interrelationships among them. The article discusses the current best practices, challenges, and future directions associated with these four dimensions. Additionally, it proposes ten grand challenges from a general perspective, aimed at stimulating critical thinking among AEC practitioners on how to effectively and rapidly develop these dimensions. However, it should be noted that the practices discussed in the article are primarily based on the “Green–Ecology–Livability–Smart” seminar organized by the Chinese Academy of Engineering and may not be exhaustive. The ten grand challenges are raised as prompts for further discussion and do not have definitive answers at this stage. The intent is to inspire constructive discourse to guide the future development of China’s AEC industry.

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Competing interests The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Appendix

Table A Attendees of the “Green–Ecology–Livability–Smart” seminar

Role	Name	Affiliation
Convener	Nanqi Ren	Harbin Institute of Technology
Convener	Xuwen Xiao	Tongji University
Keynote Speaker	Hao Wang	China Institute of Water Resources and Hydropower Research
Keynote Speaker	Zhiqiang Wu	Tongji University
Keynote Speaker	Kai Cui	China Architecture Design and Research Group
Keynote Speaker	Ai-Jie Wang	Harbin Institute of Technology
Keynote Speaker	Kun Zhang	China Construction Third Engineering Bureau Group Co., Ltd.
Expert	Yi Cai	Tongji University
Expert	Hongxiang Chai	College of Environment and Ecology, Chongqing University
Expert	Hao Chen	Hunan Construction Engineering Group Co., Ltd.
Expert	Qiuwen Chen	Nanjing Hydraulic Research Institute
Expert	Shuo Chen	Shanghai Zero-Carbon Pavilion
Expert	Yinguang Chen	Tongji University
Expert	Wen Cheng	Xi’an University of Technology
Expert	Jie Ge	China Construction Eighth Engineering Division Co., Ltd.
Expert	Jianxiang Guo	Arcplus Group PLC
Expert	Rui He	Tongji University
Expert	Chen-Guang Huang	China Construction Fourth Engineering Division Co., Ltd.
Expert	Pengkang Jin	Xi’an University of Architecture and Technology
Expert	Rui Jin	Zhejiang Construction Engineering Group Co., Ltd.
Expert	Guojian Li	Zhongyifeng Construction Group Co., Ltd.
Expert	Jiulin Li	Beijing Urban Construction Group Co., Ltd.
Expert	Junqi Li	Beijing University of Civil Engineering and Architecture

(Continued)

Role	Name	Affiliation
Expert	Heng Liang	Harbin Institute of Technology
Expert	Chao Liu	Tongji University
Expert	Jiahong Liu	China Institute of Water Resources and Hydropower Research
Expert	Xiaochang Liu	Tongji University
Expert	Yujie Lu	Tongji University
Expert	Chao Mei	China Institute of Water Resources and Hydropower Research
Expert	Ligang Qi	China Construction Eighth Engineering Division Co., Ltd
Expert	Yisheng Shao	China Academy of Urban Planning and Design
Expert	Xuejun Tan	Shanghai Municipal Engineering Design Institute (Group) Co., Ltd.
Expert	Yu Tao	Harbin Institute of Technology, Shenzhen
Expert	Chao Wang	China Institute of Water Resources and Hydropower Research
Expert	Hui Wang	China Construction Second Engineering Bureau Ltd.
Expert	Kaiqing Wang	China Construction Third Engineering Bureau Group Co., Ltd.
Expert	Yayi Wang	Tongji University
Expert	Yi Wang	Xi'an University of Architecture and Technology
Expert	Shengji Xia	Tongji University
Expert	Yang Xiao	Hohai University
Expert	Tiefu Xu	Heilongjiang University
Expert	Gang Xue	Donghua University
Expert	Haowen Ye	China State Construction Engineering Corporation
Expert	Shuili Yu	Tongji University
Expert	Feng Yuan	Tongji University
Expert	Nan Zhang	Shanghai Zhongsen Construction and Engineering Design Consulting Co., Ltd.
Expert	Ming Zhang	Tongji University
Expert	Chen Zhao	Nanjing University
Expert	Jianshi Zhao	Tsinghua University
Expert	Xuefei Zhou	Tongji University

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