

China's New Architecture

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Returning to the Context

**Birkhäuser
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Christian Schittich

China's Current Architecture: On the Rediscovery of Context and the Yearning for Special Places

Along with spectacular prestige projects and skyscrapers rising ever higher into the skies above urban centers, many European observers associate contemporary building in China above all with the rapidly and uncaringly erected residential and office blocks that are shaping the current image of entire cities.

Since the then state president Deng Xiaoping introduced his fundamental economic reforms almost four decades ago, the country has been undergoing a process of urbanization unprecedented throughout the world. For a long time architectural development was unable to keep pace with the tremendous building boom that this process has produced. The need for building space has seen entire cities and old towns flattened within a few years, only to be replaced by faceless, uniform structures designed for the most part by gigantic state planning departments. These design conglomerates, which often comprise more than 1,000 employees, are still typical of contemporary China. However, over the past few years, a new generation of architects has been increasingly stepping into the spotlight. Its members have often been educated in the West before returning to their homeland in order to run private firms, something which has been permitted for only the last quarter century.

This new and adventuresome generation is notable for its individual designs and solutions. However, its representatives are above all decisively focused on combining the distinctive qualities of their country with a contemporary architectural vernacular. They reference local traditions on a range of very different levels without falling back on

**Opposite: The South Yard, Sanjia, 2016, Mu Wei and Zhou Chao
Below: Cityscapes in Dalian and Shanghai**

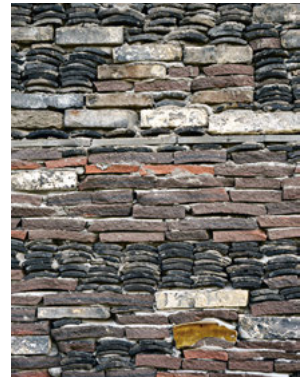




traditional forms. It is precisely this approach that often leads to particularly vibrant and expressive buildings, which are appearing ever more frequently in international publications.

In 2012 Wang Shu, one of the most important representatives of the new, independently operating architectural community, was awarded the prestigious Pritzker Prize. Even if this recognition of such an obvious maverick remains controversial among his Chinese colleagues, it shows them that an independent Chinese architecture is capable of achieving the highest of international honors. This has provided enormous impetus for the entire profession in China. And it has also drawn the attention of architectural colleagues in the West. Not only at a national but also an international level, Wang Shu, with his office Amateur Architecture Studio, is unquestionably one of the most fascinating designers working today. His idiosyncratic architecture is conspicuously inspired by the culture of his homeland and features what are sometimes monumental but always vital forms and a rough materiality, which often results from the recycled stones and tiles he likes to use. Over a million are said to have been used on the Ningbo History Museum (2009), which towers into the sky like a massive fortress, and on the Xiangshan Campus of the China Academy of Art in nearby Hangzhou. This diversely designed complex comprising a total of twenty-one individual buildings, hardly any two of which resemble one another, was inspired by Chinese landscape painting from the eleventh century. Here, the architect was far less interested in creating a finished image than in generating a setting which can be filled with life and which changes with the seasons and over the course of time.

Architects from MAD also drew on classical landscape images and depictions of mountains in ancient ink drawings when designing Chaoyang Park Plaza in Beijing, a structure made up of a "mountain"



Top: History Museum, Ningbo, 2009
Above: Wall detail, Xiangshan Campus, Hangzhou, 2007, Amateur Architecture Studio

formed by two connected office towers and several smaller residential and commercial “hills.” Although conspicuously modern with its dark glazing, this reference is immediately evident in the building’s organic form. Inspired by nature, this shape, according to the architects, was designed to extend the adjacent park into the city.

Ma Yansong, the founder of MAD, proudly identifies himself as China’s first architect to win a significant international competition, which he did in 2006 with the Absolute World towers in Mississauga, Canada. Before establishing his own practice in 2004, Ma worked for several years with Zaha Hadid, whose formal vocabulary and design methods he is now endeavoring to adapt to the particularities of his homeland. Even though in the case of Chaoyang Park Plaza he has drawn on similar motifs to those inspiring Wang Shu, the types of architecture produced by MAD and Amateur Architecture Studio could hardly be more different, and the two studios can be seen as representing what are probably the two most extreme positions in the current generation of Chinese architects.

Projects with Added Social Value

Not only their divergent architectural idioms but also the size of some of the buildings designed by Wang Shu and MAD can be described as extreme. By contrast, almost all the examples presented in the project section of this book (apart from the conversion in Shanghai) are on a significantly smaller scale. Some are located in the countryside, and quite a few of them exhibit a focus on added social value. Three of them are the result of rebuilding measures in the wake of natural catastrophes, while others are designed to improve the infrastructure in poor rural areas. Such buildings are repeatedly built in China on the initiative of and due to the high level of personal engagement of their architects. This is also true of the internationally renowned Bridge School located in a remote Hakka village in Fujian, whose designer, Li Xiaodong, himself took responsibility for finding financial backers for the project. With a small yet visually striking bridge, the



Above: Bridge School, Pinghe, 2009, Li Xiaodong
Below: Chaoyang Park Plaza (left: office towers, right: view of the residential complex), Beijing 2017, MAD Architects





architect not only created the space required by the school but also linked two *tulou* previously separated by a creek. These two traditional residential complexes are now connected by a central, social space and thus a new communal meeting point.

Following the unprecedented wave of urbanization referred to above, which swept hundreds of millions of former villagers into hastily erected cities – with all their attendant problems – there is now an increasing focus on the countryside in China. Many interventions are consciously aimed at revitalizing rural space and improving the quality of life there in order to counter the exodus from the land.

Another example in this context, one that is as unusual as it is impressive, can be found in the county of Songyang in Zhejiang, where the local administration has launched a variety of projects designed to stimulate the economy, promote social cohesion, and strengthen cultural identity by upgrading existing building stock. However, what is really special here is the fact that authorities have focused exclusively on well-designed and contemporary architecture. For example, over the last four years Xu Tiantian, with her Beijing office DnA, has designed more than twenty projects for Songyang and realized them with the help of local architects. All her projects have been built with the collaboration of the respective village communities and local tradespeople. They include the Brown Sugar Factory in Xing, which has improved processing conditions for local sugarcane farming and consequently increased income while also providing a community building which has a range of social functions (p. 97). Other projects



Bridge renovation, Shimen, 2017, DnA_Design and Architecture

include the renovation and upgrading of the bridge in Shimen, which has been given a clearly structured wooden roof that recalls local traditions and has become a social meeting point, and the restoration of old rammed earth houses in the small mountain village of Pingtian. The last two examples are indicative of a quite new tendency in China: the rediscovery of existing building stock.

The Rediscovery of Existing Building Stock

Until a few years ago the old peasant houses made of rammed earth or air-dried bricks found throughout China had little chance of survival. Everywhere they were being ruthlessly torn down and replaced by faceless new buildings made of reinforced concrete because the latter promised greater comfort than traditional structures requiring intensive maintenance. Now it is often local administrations that are providing the impetus and sometimes also financial incentives for the restoration of older buildings, often with the promotion of soft tourism in mind. Once villagers realize that visitors are prepared to travel significant distances to admire their old buildings, they begin to place greater store in their own culture. Above all people from the rapidly growing middle class living amid the noise and poor-quality air of China's major cities are increasingly seeking a break from city life in the hinterland. One result of this has been the addition of guest rooms when refurbishing peasant houses, in order to provide villagers with a source of income other than agriculture and handicraft products. Since a change in the law a few years ago that allows the commercial use of private houses, such homestays have been shooting up everywhere.

At the same time an increasing number of traditional buildings are being converted into comfortable design hotels, one example being the Skywells Hotel in Wuyuan. In this case a couple who had formerly worked in the Shanghai financial world bought an old wooden mansion and, with a great deal of their own energy, local craftsmen, and the architects from anySCALE in Beijing, restored it and converted it into a guest house.



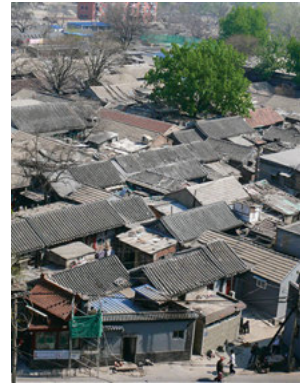
Above: Village renovation, Pingtian, 2015, DnA_Design and Architecture
Below: Skywells Hotel, Wuyuan, 2017, anySCALE



It is not only in the countryside but also in the cities that existing building stock is being increasingly prized. This is evident not least in the case of the classical hutongs in Beijing. As late as the 1990s, these alleys formed by lines of traditional courtyard residences, like many other old city structures in China, were being demolished, only to be partly rebuilt in an altered form for the Olympic Games in 2008. However, the original stock of hutongs was so large that they survived in various areas and are now being filled with new life.

In order to illustrate the potential offered by this form of building and to ensure the survival of the old houses without converting them only into souvenir shops and restaurants, the architect Zhang Ke with his firm ZAO/standardarchitecture has been initiating a series of hutong projects. One example is his so-called Micro-Hutong conversion involving the integration into a particularly narrow courtyard of a sculptural cement structure comprising spaces that can serve as a hostel for students or as temporary living and working space for an artist. In the Micro Yuan'er project he created a meeting point for children in the area by installing a small library and a space for creative activities (p. 67), and his Co-living Courtyard project aimed to convert an existing courtyard residence into a communal living complex by combining communal spaces with tiny apartments. However, no client for the project could be found and the restored courtyard residence now houses a private school.

Another important architectural focus in many Chinese cities is the conversion of obsolete and disused industrial facilities. Such projects



Above: Traditional hutong in Beijing

Below: Micro-Hutong, Beijing, 2013, ZAO/standardarchitecture





in Shanghai are in many places focusing on art and culture as new locational factors. The West Bund Cultural Corridor project initiated by the city, for instance, envisages the revitalization of a 7-square-kilometer former harbor and industrial area with a particular focus on cultural facilities.

In this context, Zhang Ming and Zhang Zi from Original Design Studio at Tongji University converted a former power station dating from 1985 into the Shanghai Power Station of Art (2012) – China's first state museum for contemporary art – which features 10,000 square meters of exhibition area. The architects made a feature not only out of the enormous old building with its industrial relics but also the fantastic view it offers of the nearby river. At least equally as impressive – both in terms of their dimensions and their location – are the new exhibition spaces installed by Atelier Deshaus in the huge 80,000-ton silo warehouse on Minsheng Wharf (p. 123).



Above: Shanghai Power Station of Art, 2012, Original Design Studio

Apart from financing such cultural centers itself, the state is also endeavoring to encourage private investors to build museums by offering tax incentives and low-priced leases on land. One very positive addition to contemporary Chinese architecture built as a result of such incentives – and also designed by Atelier Deshaus – is the much lauded Long Museum located on the former site of a coal hopper. Along with its skillful integration of the remnants of the old industrial facility, the museum is notable for its intriguingly designed exhibition spaces, precise details, and what is for China extraordinarily high-quality workmanship.