



# CHINESE ART & ARCHITECTURE TODAY

Palazzo Bembo  
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## YING TIANQI

*The work of Ying Tianqi (1949, Anhui, China) addresses human history.*

I would like to see the world through China's issue and to see China via the world's issue. To see art from the perspective of architecture and architecture from art. To see the modern from historical relics and see the historical relics through the modern. To produce new concepts in a process of making a thorough inquiry and discovery to raise questions.

China has embraced rapid economic development in the shortest time frame. And has quickly become the world's second largest

economic body, the rapid progress has drawn the world's attention. But too fast a pace can create problems, and cause recklessness and unrefinement. Like when someone is walking too quickly one may trip and fall. The problem is the same.

China as an ancient civilization of thousands of years, in the process of rapid economic development and urbanization, it is difficult to preserve historical memory in the city's remains. The historical relics of China's city have become dilapidated from last century's cultural revolution destruction in the 60s and today's rapid economic development. The rapid growth in the city population has resulted in the massive urban construction. The city's architecture has been replaced by a faceless and repetitive high-rise jungle. It has become a regrettable reality.

In today's China, you can't find a city like Paris or Venice with a well-preserved center and complete architectural memory. China's history, culture and remains have become interrupted here. This destruction has exceeded China's last century's cultural revolution's destructive impact.

Of course the world faces the same issue. Pompeii's gladiator house has collapsed under inadequate care. Precious artefacts in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo have been destroyed in the political unrest, and many similar issues occur in other parts of the world, including destruction of human historical civilization by natural calamities and man-made disasters. Under these circumstances, China's problem is most serious. Humanity not only has to face the destruction of the ecological environment, but also the loss of human civilization and historical remains.

Perhaps the artist thinks more about history and civilization. Of course, the change in the natural ecology threatens the existence of humanity, but this may be salvaged by the scientists. For example, Germany's Rhine river has been polluted by the emptying of industrial waste from its banks during the post-WWII economic development. The Rhine river has recovered its beauty and through the scientist's treatment. The uncontrolled and unprotected destruction of remains, historical artifacts, architectural remains cannot be recovered. As the thousands of years of information imbedded in them cannot be replicated through scientific matters.

Historical civilization and remains are the common foundations of contemporary society development like the material and spiritual and should be confronted and valued.

# YING TIANQI

By Valeria Iacovelli

Valeria Iacovelli (1979, Conegliano, Italy) is an independent curator. In 2012 she was co-curator of the 13<sup>th</sup> Venice Architecture Biennale exhibition *Traces of Centuries and Future Steps*.

Italy features a large portion of the world's cultural heritage and although there is a consensus over the need to preserve it, in practice this is a challenging issue which is proving expensive and difficult to carry out efficiently.

At the same time, in China, the architectural landscape is undergoing a drastic makeover, reflecting the country's new position as an economic superpower and as an increasingly globalized territory. As a consequence, a large amount of traditional architecture is being demolished and quickly replaced by the same forms that dominate other global cities in the world (such forms typically including buildings with intricate shapes and an abundant use of glass and steel). Like everywhere else, all major centres are becoming more and more alike—and so are their inhabitants' ways of life.

The instinct to preserve what is familiar to us is a very human one. Psychologically it gives us a sense of security, unlike change. But preservation is also primarily a means to keep alive a people's collective memory and its sense of cultural identity. At a time when rapid transformations are taking place, it seems important to stop for a second and ask what it means to demolish something and to build something else in its place. Roughly speaking, when a building is demolished and something else is built in its place, it is almost as if the first one never existed—it survives only in photographs and memories. Conversely, we seem to think that every new construction is destined to last forever because we tend to perceive architecture as something “permanent” in spite of the fact that globalization promotes the cyclic replacement of the old with the new.

To answer the question about whether we could, or even should, attempt to stop globalization, I believe the answer is no: we cannot and should not. But this is not to say that there is no room for intervention. The latter is needed on many levels: artistic, personal, political. So for instance in the 1960s and 1970s, a time of the radical change in the appearance of the U.S. cities (Manhattan in particular), some American artists turned their attention to architecture, questioning our notion of “permanent” and “temporary”, the notion of

monument, and our relationship to space: Gordon Matta-Clark operated a series of thorough-and-thorough vertical cuts in some buildings scheduled for demolition; Robert Smithson devised a tour of some deserted industrial relics in the Passaic Valley in New Jersey, which he called the “monuments of the the Passaic” and also, more famously, he re-arranged the land of a site on the Great Salt Lake, in Utah, creating the *Spiral Jetty*, an earthwork sculpture within the landscape and away from the city (where attractions and monuments typically are), or even an anti-monument, as it is sometimes defined.

In response to the changes happening in today's China, artist Ying Tianqi (\*1949, Anhui, China), whose work is prominently featured in the exhibition *Traces of Centuries and Future Steps*, gathers old objects and debris from demolition sites and re-uses them as material for new works reflecting on globalization and on the need for preservation. The large-scale installation *Brick Soul* (2012), for instance, is a three-metre high and three-metre long copy of a single brick (about 20 times enlarged) saved from a demolished temple located in Xidi Village, in the Eastern Chinese province of Anhui. The piece is built out of a mixture obtained from other pulverized fragments of the demolished temple. Something on the verge of being destroyed is turned into something which can hardly be ignored, almost like a new monument.

In the installation *Imprisoned* (2012), instead, the artist highlights one of the paradoxes of a globalized way of life. The installation consists of a tall structure made of several metal cages, containing TV screens and personal objects, like toys, and various pieces of traditional furniture, mostly broken. By recreating a sense of physical and spiritual imprisonment, the artist emphasizes the contradiction of living in extreme proximity with our neighbours, divided only by thin walls and ceilings—while at the same time entertaining friendly relations with people on the other side of the planet through internet and the social media.

In earlier works the artist dealt specifically with the theme of his cultural heritage and with the notion of change. In the celebrated *Xidi Village Series*, realized between 1986 and 1994, Ying Tianqi takes inspiration from the many examples of century-old houses, temples and monuments that still exist in Xidi, in spite of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, which led to the destruction of many traditional landmarks in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Taking the views of Xidi as his starting point, he produced a series of watercolour woodblock prints, in which some elements of the original landscape (e.g. the ground, the sky, the streets,





etc.) are replaced with black hard-edged shapes. The black is the “non-readable” part of the image, where perspective, volume and colour, which normally guide our understanding of depicted space, are annulled. Just like Xidi Village could have been erased by the Cultural Revolution or by other destructive forces or events, so each print in the series could have been totally black. Instead, Xidi continues to exist and in 1994 a museum was opened to permanently host Ying Tianqi’s Xidi Village Series. In 2000, largely as a result of the Ying Tianqi’s works, Xidi was officially recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

In the performance suite *Zero Hours: Breaking the Black* (1999–2001) and in the ensuing series of prints *Broken Black* (1999–2001), also featured in this Biennale, Ying Tianqi considered the notion of change. For the

performance, the artist proceeded to break several pieces of blackened glass with a hammer: in his studio on New Year’s Eve in 1999, then in 2000, and once publicly in 2001. According to the artist, blackness is “expressive of the last century in China as well as for the entire world”. The act of smashing the black is therefore an act of liberation, an “exorcism” of the dark times. The fragments obtained from this rupture form the basis for re-elaboration in painting and printing, new logical unities that Ying Tianqi re-arranges in the prints *Broken Black* and which, ultimately, represent the potential for reconstruction and renovation.

The risk of losing the country’s sense of identity and the potential for improvement are the two faces of the coin of change. As I stated earlier, I believe it is not useful or feasible to oppose globalization, if



this means attempting to revert to any previous moment in the political and economic history of China, or of the world. Like for other countries that have been dealing with the globalization process for a longer time, it is now China’s turn to face the many challenges of introducing it into its own social and economic structures. Change does not necessarily entail the destruction of what is known and familiar. Quite the opposite, long-term and sustainable change should include strategies that allow to preserve the memory of China’s rich yet troubled history and identity. While on one side Ying Tianqi’s works express criticism and concern towards today’s Chinese politics and society, at the same time they strongly advocate the need to move forward without leaving behind the country’s collective memory and

cultural identity. The straightforward application of the prevailing foreign models (in culture, in politics, in education, etc.) to the Chinese context, as globalization prescribes, eliminates diversity and weakens the country’s self-identity. It has been suggested that this has been the case, for instance, of the development plans carried out in Beijing and Shanghai in preparation for the 2008 Summer Olympics. On the contrary, imagining a Chinese renaissance capable of addressing the unique characteristics of the Chinese context means to take China’s past and present specifically into account. Given the current state of things, how should artists respond in order to increase awareness of the current situation and, most importantly, what role can they really play in order to stimulate a critical Chinese response to globalization.



## WANG LIN

*Wang Lin (1959, Xian, China) is professor at the Sichuan Fine Art Institute, the Xi'an Fine Art Institute, and chief expert of National Contemporary Art Research Center of Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China.*

A few days ago, I went to the island of Sicily, the expressway from Palermo to Agrigento is one of the main Sicilian transportation routes. According to the driver, this road was built on the ancient Rome horse route. There are many road turnings, but few that passes through the mountains and periodically surviving or abandoned castles appearing

on the hilltop. This is the road the roman army, the Spanish army, Napoleon's army and General Patton's army have all walked passed. The road carries the geographical history and human history.

This makes me think about China, whether it is our expressway or our high-speed rail, they all head straight to a destination and do not have consideration if the route connecting the two places has any geographical history or historical geography.

The same issue also takes place in the architectural arena. The massive urban demolition changes not only the architectural form, but more importantly the road structure, which is also human geography's historical context. Both Chinese and foreign architects strive to use singular architecture design to preserve



the cultural essence of traditional Chinese architecture. This is admirable. But I would like to say: "This is not enough". When the relationship between the city's road structure and residential is completely destroyed, to the inhabitants of the city, it has become an unfamiliar city. The homeland no longer exists with no spiritual belonging. I think that Yin Tianqi's work you see here expresses the pain in the heart of Chinese people today.

What is it that I would like to examine? Exactly what the Taiwan Pavilion curator Mr. Ke-Fung Liou has mentioned in *Architect/Geographer – Le Foyer de Taiwan*. But what is behind geographical enlightenment is cultural issue. Mainland China from 1949 onwards, one-party politics has penetrated every corner of every town and countryside. The

ordinary people have lost their spontaneous and autonomous cultural rights. In the "all power belongs to Soviet" state system, China's culture, including architecture culture, would not have a chance of a real renaissance in the process of modernization. That is to say, when China's architecture school, architecture organization and architects are completely under government control, the issue of architecture is no longer just the issue of architecture, but an issue of institution.

One of the key issues in how to rebuild a civil society and cultural freedom and cultural autonomy among the people, the significance is, art in a kind of cultural politics, whether an architect or artist should use one's own creation to promote progress China's modern culture renaissance.

# ARATA ISOZAKI

By Karlyn De Jongh, Sarah Gold & Valeria Romagnini

*The architecture of Arata Isozaki (1931, Oita City, Japan) is influenced by the Metabolism school. His building structures show a mannerism, borrowing from a spectrum of architectural influences. Isozaki’s architecture mainly stresses collaboration and cooperation.*

*Sarah Gold: In an interview many years ago, you have stated that in Japan you are probably not seen as a typical architect but as an ‘art oriented type of architect’. Looking at your oeuvre it seems you have been always an artist and architect in one; collaborating with other artists and creating not only architecture but also artworks (in the classical sense). How would you describe yourself?*

Arata Isozaki: I personally define myself as an “Artist-Architect”. As an Architect, I was close to the Metabolism Group movement. As an Artist, I was associated with various writers and art critics of the art industry in such movements as Neo-Dadaism, which evolved into concepts such as “color” and “environment”, and eventually came into fruition in the form of *Omatsuri Hiroba* (Festival Square) at the World Expo in 1970. Since I was conceptualizing architecture and cities in the context of art, it only made sense to complement architecture with art.

In *Incubation Process* (*Fuka katei*) (1962) I stated that “the future city is a ruin.” I juxtaposed a series of images of future cities called *Joint Core System* with the ruins of ancient Greek cities. The inspiration to depict a city as an image of unintentional discontinuation came from art works such as Jackson Pollock’s *action painting* and John Cage’s *Chance Operation*. A problem I was tackling at the time was uncertainty and undecidability.

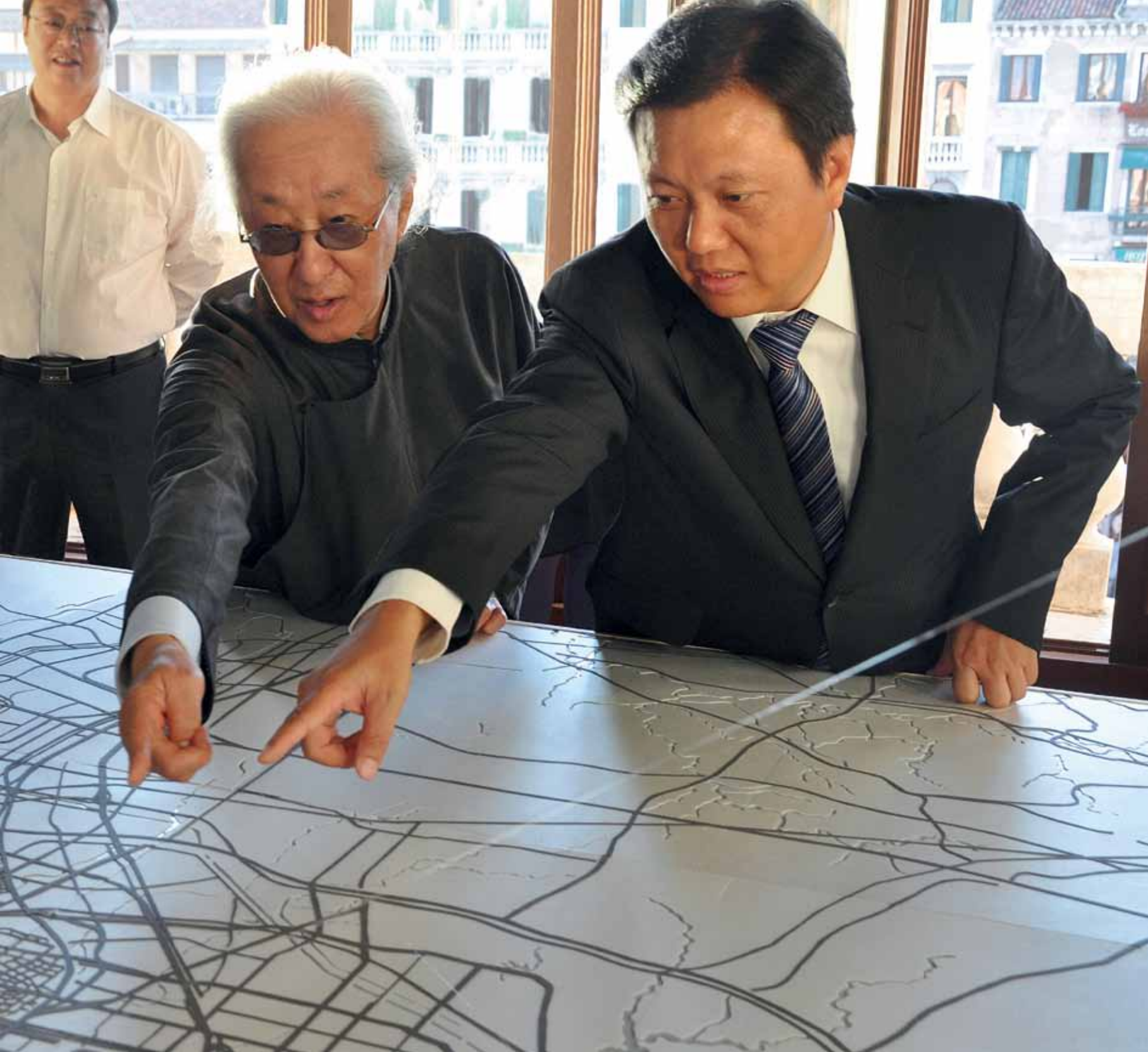
*“Process Planning” theory* (1963) is a text that I added to the first blueprint of the former Oita Prefectural Library (now Oita Arts Plaza). It is about solidifying an image of a building that stretches and shrinks like a carbon-based life form. In other words, it was an attempt to find a solution to resolving undecidability, in a situation where a decision must be made despite the lack of a goal (Telos). After surveying the worldwide eruption of radicalism in the late 60s in *Dismantling Architecture*, I further realized the importance of eradicating a goal (Telos) when I later was working on the *Mirage City* project (1994).

*Valeria Romagnini: With the urban planning for the Central Business District sub-center for the Zhengdong New District, China, you made a design*

*in order to create a city which works as a closed urban space, independent from its surroundings, and then you compared it to Venice. Can you explain how it is possible to conceive a city which can be independent from its surrounding? What do you mean by the concept of the autonomy of the city?*

During the second half of the 60s, I was predominantly engaged with concepts of “color” within architecture, namely the effects of timeless light, whereas in. In the 70s, I took a metaphysical position towards everything I approached, just like Atsushi Miyagawa who critiqued critiques, for example, the *Projective Transformation of √2* is one method to this approach. This is a method that I have incorporated over the years, where the artist himself, is not allowed to actually touch anything. The problem is designed in a way to enable the form itself to self-develop, without an artist having to actually do anything. In that sense, it relies on participation from the audience, or in this case, the local residents. Instead of a top-down structure, the form is developed through an indefinable network. This is a method that has been attempted by many people since, but at the time in the 70s, I was attempting to give a solid formula to the indefinability of a self-creating art form. One places a piece of technology with an inherit system embedded, and without involving an artist, you leave the site. Eventually, a form is generated automatically over time. I experimented with this concept at the *Omatsuri Hiroba* (Festival Plaza) during the Japan World Exposition in 1970.

The question of whether design is expression or control rose during this time period. “Control” could nowadays possibly be defined as “governing”. In the case of a city, how would one govern a city? This issue is closely related to events such as: the campaign against the Japan-US security treaty in the 60s, naked Neo-Dada dancing, various “happenings” on the streets, Hi-Red Center, the “Thousand-Yen Bill Incident”, red and black tents in Shinjuku, and the occupation of Yasuda Auditorium at Tokyo University. All of these incidents happened in the 60s, especially during the first 2-3 years of that decade. The relationship between architecture and control is especially salient in the “anti-war folk guerrilla incident” that occurred at Shinjuku West-Exit Square in 1969. The gathering of the “Folk Guerilla” collided with riot police, in which the legality of the occupation was overruled by application of Road Traffic Law that interpreted the gathering as an illegal occupation. This incident is also well known as it leads to the renaming of *West-Exit Square* to *West-Exit Passageway* overnight.

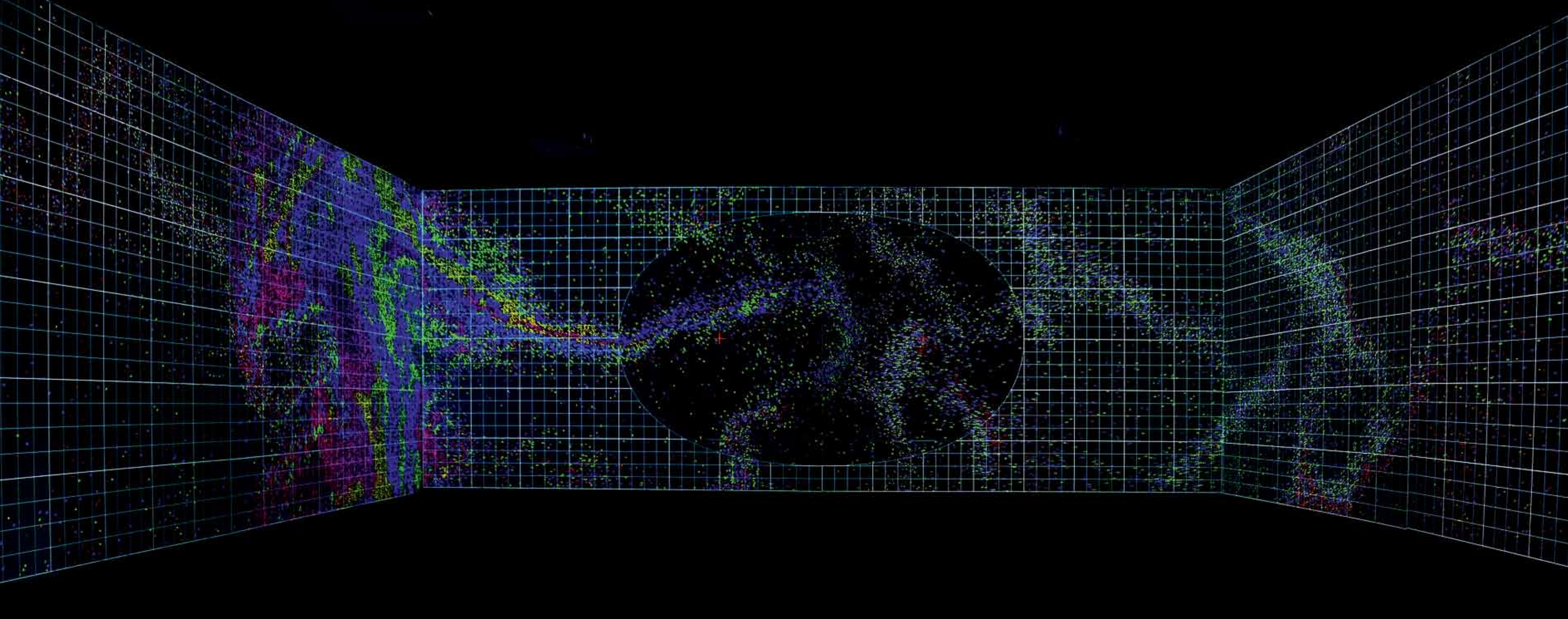


It is undeniable that Expo ’70 was the starting point of crowd control developed in Japan. Up until then, I had had experience in city design, but the 300-hectare area involved absolutely all aspects of design. The infrastructure included multiple mechanical contraptions that were potentially dangerous, ranging from the multipurpose underground utility conduits to moving walkways. The magnitude was nothing short of planning an entire city. At the same time, I was constantly thinking about how to break the various boundaries that occur when a city is planned. In that sense, I commend Dada Kan who ran through the Expo naked. What balls he had, literally. The security (i.e.: boundaries) was extremely high. That makes his actions admirable. There was also someone who managed to climb up the Tower of the Sun (Taiyo no Tou). Most people would criticize the

design of the tower for enabling this. Regardless, it is incredible that this person slipped through the barriers and climbed the tower. It is about breaking the law. That is in itself, a performance.

*VR: We could say that the city is a living organism and as you mentioned a city is a process of change. Many big decisions have been taken and many different influences through architecture have contributed to build the world as we know it. Living in Venice, I am every day confronted with the history of buildings, houses that were built over 500 years ago. What does Time mean for you in relation to the space you create?*

The finalized notion of space in *Spaces Within Dark* (Yamino Kuukan), in Japan for example, begins first with an existence of bright spaces. Then the spaces are forcefully connected together, and eventually become



dark. In architectural space, the contrast does not simply consist of light and dark, but all is encompassed and eventually disappears as if it were mist. It gradates into an ultimate form of darkness. The words Signifier (French: *Signifiant*) and Signified (French: *Signifié*) defined by Saussure, which were not used at the time, dictate the issue of “what signifies” and “what is signified”, in which the Signifier separates itself, and the Signified becomes “darkness”. The Signifier dissipates into “nothingness”. The parallel is “Darkness” and “Nothingness”. In the middle exists the “real” world. In other words, it is not a conflict between “nothingness” and the “real”. “Nothingness” is “Virtuality”, and “Real” is “Reality”. Subsequently, “Darkness” is interpreted as so-called “actuality”.

Basically, this implies that space is not a tangible form existing in front of us, but rather something that occurs to us when we enter a space and notice its existence. In that sense, I question as to whether we have misinterpreted a very basic principle in this modern era by attempting to define time and space by giving it form and weight. This is something that I have contemplated over the years. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this notion has gradually

become refined—referred to as hermeneutics or anthropology—and eventually was philosophically understood as representation and meaning (such as is Signifier and Signified). However, at the time, this differentiation did not exist. Franz Kafka’s *The Castle* and Junichiro Tanizaki’s *In Praise of Shadows* (In’ei Raisan) are familiar literary references that embody this form of experiencing space.

Backtracking in time, I personally hope that my text *Coordinates, Twilight and Hallucinations* (Zahyo hakumei to genkaku) (1965) would be revisited and reevaluated. In 1963 I visited New York City. I wrote about the difference I perceived in the space compared to any other city I had visited before. Despite the lack of color, the city itself dissipates into the light via the glass—a space that dissipates in its entirety like mist. In that sense, *Coordinates, Twilight and Hallucinations* ties itself to *The Castle* and *In Praise of Shadows*.

Karlynn De Jongh: *The Greek philosopher Protagoras once said: “Man is the measure of all things.” In your architecture, you deal with people from all over the world, who are physically but also culturally very different. In a global world, can you still take ‘man’ as the measure?*

AI: When a new city space grows into a metropolitan space, especially the type of spatiotemporal city development that is seen on the coastal regions in North America, it is not possible to grasp what is happening with the modern day notions in which time maintains its continuation on a straight axis. Space spreads homogeneously and light spreads properly. Within the city space, various symbols scatter without weight or size. By recognizing this fact, a person is able to move around in a city. It is simple semiology, which is a question about the signs seen in current cities, or a question of cognition. This kind of change has made obsolete the existing notions of “Time” and “Space” that began with Bauhaus, which had been referred to in modern architecture and modern design. These two words can no longer be used. Furthermore, one cannot go in the direction of weight or gravity. Despite that fact, a structure emerges equipped with its own system. This has emerged as the role of the Architect and Artist, in which a question is presented as to how a city can be built without the previously prevalent notion of time and space, which is as if a city itself is such a hypothesis.

That being said, zapping through the remote control of a television is like looking at a building. Say we have a preconceived image of a piece of architecture, but what we see changes drastically when we move where we stand. It is as if it is a continuous switch of perception, and continuation of image does not exist. It is a form of “monad” where all become particles and time is instantly irrelevant. In order to explain this image, I discovered that comparing it to “zapping the remote control of a television” is relatively easier to use as a metaphor.

KDJ: *Already in 1962 you spoke about decay. Lee Ufan told me: “Man is always trying to ensure that human-made things exist, or ‘live on’ forever. But, nature always works to break them down and return them to their original elements. Thus we could say nature and humans are fighting.” This “disappearing of things” seems to be connected to the understanding of ‘infinity’ in Japan. In your work, you probably deal with nature all the time. How do you see this relation between man-made objects and nature? Do you strive for infinity? If so, how do you understand infinity?*

AI: My impression of the year 1968, is that of being involved in social disturbance—being pushed around by waves not knowing what we



were drifting towards. However in the 70s, I had the impression that color was being lost, or decolorized all of a sudden. At that moment, everything fantastical disappeared once again. In the 60s, anything technical or high tech was still considered partially fantastical. At that time there was the psychedelic and drug culture, and a movement to connect everything toward illusions. That suddenly all disappeared in the 70s. Drug culture was reduced to merely one dropping out of society or a movement of returning to nature. Hippies became nothing more than the way they dressed. Architecture was no exception, and all expression became bleak. Even fine arts became predominantly overridden by minimalism and conceptualism. Briefly during the early 70s in Japan, the Mono ha emerged. Various works and artists such as Arte Povera in Italy, "Support/Sur-

face" in France, Joseph Beuys in Germany, and Richard Serra in the U.S., all had roots in the rejection of illusionism, and embraced ideas which were supported by various notions such as the laws of nature, and the presence of matter or space correspondence. They shared common ground regarding the rejection of illusionism.

Personally, I believe that the Mono ha movement, to an extent, was driven by a rebound effect. Saying "no more" to art forms that utilized technology. For example, calling for people to "plough soil"—that was the result, which would be fine if it were merely a primitive form of expression. But I believe it is more of a rebound effect.

In 1985, I was involved in designing *The Palladium*. This was an old opera house built in 1926 that was being converted into a disco. At

the time I mainly designed cultural facilities such as art galleries and libraries, so people wondered why I decided to work on something that was so commercial. I didn't particularly understand why myself, but I gave it a thought and this was the conclusion:

When I was contacted about working on this project, the first thing that caught my interest was when they explained to me that this was not like a typical disco club or cabaret club you would find in Japan, but that the objective was to create a disco that enables the audience to have an altered-space experience. Instead of an altered-space experience induced by the effects of marijuana or cocaine, the theme was more literal. With lights flashing simultaneously with the music, the challenge was to test the extent to which the image of the

vintage space could be altered with technology and modern media. Architecture is inherently limited to creating a static contour. However, the essence lies in the various contraptions that are installed within that contour. When it is time for the contraptions to be installed, light and sound designers work together with the sole focus of figuring out how to most effectively shower the human five senses with a combination of images, lights and sounds.

However, when I began thinking about experiences in such settings, I encountered some problems. It was already clear that nature was disappearing from cities. The same could be said about mountains, rivers and forests. Furthermore, religious facilities traditionally served as a sanctuary to the people. For



example, it had always been tradition to go to a church to be in touch with God, but that custom was being lost.

Because of such shifts, it has become more and more difficult to encounter another person or a thing, or even ideally something divine, when living the every day city life. I am very certain about this fact. That was when I thought I may be able to create a space that provides a simulated experience of that something divine, regardless to how artificial or fake that actually may be. That, I thought, was what a disco could be.

*VR: Visiting you in Tokyo last January, impressed me very much. I am now 26 and I'm trying to understand as much as possible about concepts like Time Space and Existence. Once you were 26 and must have been discovering the same topics. You are now 82, what should I learn about Existence?*

AI: After the burst of the economic bubble in Japan in 1990, I noticed that Post-Modernism as a topic was mentioned less and less. Today, you seldom hear about it. The same thing happened 25 years ago. Modernism was under full-scale attack, and after the cultural revolution in 1968, it was never mentioned by anyone. The fact that the generation who studied architecture during the oddly quite years of the early 70s produced a large number of architectural historians, may be further proof of the rebound effect that affected that time period.

To place these events in the context of different eras, one can refer to two events that happened in Japan in 1995: The Great Hanshin Earthquake and the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway. This was

exactly 50 years after the end of the Second World War. In place of Post-Modernism, Information Technology and Globalization were the hot topics. These were followed by the Superflat movement. Post-Modernism did not only reverse time, but shuffled it in its entirety, and saved it all in a database by utilizing information technology. In short, time was broken into pieces, saved in a non-chronological manner, and readily available to be summoned at will. During this era, space also became subject to shuffling. The world which consisted of boundaries, where the waning of racially homogeneous nations, disappearance of national borders, extending boundaries, and complex systems were separate entities co-existing in a space with its own order, was converted into code and saved on a database. In other words, the time and space that the year 1995 consisted

of has been separated from the system that it belonged to, shuffled, and converted into an intangible form of digital code.

Therefore, a large shift in the entity seems to occur every 25 years. Would one call this a law, or simply repetition? In reality, it is simply an unexpected change. The truth is, the ages that we live in are subject to shifting. It is a phase shifting out of place, and by transitioning smoothly into a new phase it results in a sort of a catastrophe. In that sense, I believe that the current era is very likely to shift once again. The manner in which this shift occurs is not logical, and happens without you noticing it. The only time you realize it has happened is when you start to notice that people around you are talking about different things.

# DEGANG WANG

*The architecture of Degang Wang (1963, Shanghai, China) is oriented towards an “active process”, a conceptual congregation of surrounding elements including religion, culture, and climate. This ‘process’ seeks to distill a sensual touch from life and society, to discover the essences of human history which have transcended and fused cultural and colloquial characteristics through the progression of time. Degang Wang lives and works in Nanjing, China*

## Essential Architecture

I have been an architect in China for over twenty years, experiencing the astonishing boom in the country’s construction industry which occurred over approximately the same period. My understanding of architecture is that the architect must resolve two fundamental problems in the creative process: the Who + the How.

Architecture design does not begin with some of the overarching themes we often associate with architecture, such as culture, national identity, or history. The basis of architectural design is to study the Who: the people who will use the building, and then the How: how it would be done. It is difficult to set a standard for architecture, but the beauty of architecture lies precisely in this lack of standardization.

When we acquire a project, it is imperative to first consider the needs of the people in this project, how they will use the building, and what they require of it. Then, we should consider how to construct a building with an environment that provides the greatest level of satisfaction and respect for its occupants. We cannot imagine a building out of the blue, and then teach people how to use it. Instead, we believe that since people are the most fundamental and important existence in this world, the concept of architecture must be formed and provided in service to the people.

Let me tell you about my experiences studying the course *International Studies in World Vernacular Architecture* with Dr. Paul Oliver in the United Kingdom. Our course was based upon research and learning of the architectural fundamentals in different areas, societies, and environments, to study those that traversed and withstood the test of time rather than those that are intentionally created and manipulated by an architect: its essence is its

existence. This too is my understanding of the concept of Essential Architecture. The reason for the beauty in various architectural styles around the world and in different regions is that it is born to cater man’s needs, and their beauty exists only in its respective contexts and surroundings. Architecture is not purely the creation of an architect, but rather the non-architect’s natural response to the needs of man as well as his respect for the environment.

Having resolved the problem of the Who, we must approach the How: the architectural design process. My understanding is that architectural design is a behavioural rather than deliberate process. Artistic expression of human behaviour requires the fusion of many elements of society, such as religion and the environment, in addition to one’s own artistic techniques and interpretations. On the other hand, expression through deliberate design is based fundamentally on one person’s understanding and perception of his surroundings. Architectural design should draw more ideas from our daily lives, because daily life represents the condensation of history. The lifestyle of a certain people brings with it a history of culture and regionalism. This design process is not an entirely rational or entirely emotional process, but rather a process of creation that is based on a study of people and towards different specific environments. Only through such a process can one create architecture with temporal and spatial awareness, and more importantly, a sense of existence. The building’s sense of existence is based on its acceptance by people, by the environment, by society, and by the economy.

If we do not do the above in our design process, but rather try to present architecture from grandiose schemes such as culture or nationality, then the resulting product is likely to have difficulties being accepted by people and society. This would be a wasteful process to resources and the environment.

In China, rapid development has led to rapid urbanization. The development of cities, a process that in normal circumstances should have taken decades, has been compressed into a few years. Subsequently, there has not been time for people to study it in detail. Expansion of urban areas took over villages, and farmers who lost their lands walked into the cities. I call this type of development “Concentrated Development,” and the manifestation of Concentrated Development in the realm of architecture and urban development is



the indiscriminate replication of architectural styles and forms from all over the world into China. Inappropriate to China's native environments, the consequences of wasteful practice is already evident. A design process which is not based on the people is a waste of environments and resources, and should be rejected.

The "Essential Architecture" I want to discuss is an architecture that is formed from the formula of "Who + How," and one that is forever transient. Man is a life-form that is highly in unison, but at the same time complex and full of change. The form of man is therefore composed of the duality of uniformity and contradiction. The architectural process, which focuses on understanding the needs of man and respect for the environment, is hence also composed of uniformity and contradiction. I enjoy this design process, and it is essential to the beauty of Chinese architecture as I understand it. I never know what my next design would be, and the creativity and lack of standardization that comes with this approach is infinitely attractive and enticing to me.

I like to use a simple, single unit, and discover from its unity and contradictions the corresponding needs of man and changes in the environment. For example, the square is a very simple shape, appropriate for the basic requirements of an architectural building and the basic shape requirements for human activity.

The *POD* project I designed for software incubator companies in XuZhuang Software Park near Zijin Hill in Nanjing, China, is built on a newly planned empty space. This project has two major design requirements: first, that since they are for incubator companies, the size of the buildings need not be too large, and in order to develop the business the buildings cannot be completely separated; second, even though the land is long and narrow, each company wants to have an outdoor section to their property in order to take advantage of Zijin Hill's scenery value. My strategy is to use the concept of a peapod, whereby the individualism of the peas are unified under the concept of the pod, so that the design remains suitable for incubator companies at different periods of their development. The square is used as the basic unit shape in this project. All the structures are being arranged on the perimeter of the long, narrow site divided into eastern and western parts. The middle part will be landscaped as public lawn. Individual volumes are expressed through the shape of the building units, most of the ground floor of which is designed as "grey zone". This design would ensure the concentration of outdoors activity areas while maintaining the uniformity of individual units, satisfying a variety of usage requirements from the incubator companies while attaining scenic views of Zijin Hill from different perspectives. The *POD* project has been completed and under use for three years. Our approach was very successful in achieving the initial design goals, and allowed the investors to attain a healthy profit.

People are weak against time: we can change or create space, but we cannot change time. When choosing materials in architecture, I like to select materials that reflect the wear of time: the passage of time leaves its unique marks on the facet of a building, and makes the building's appearance increasingly vivid. In the *POD* project, I selected natural pebbles, stainless steel, timber bricks,

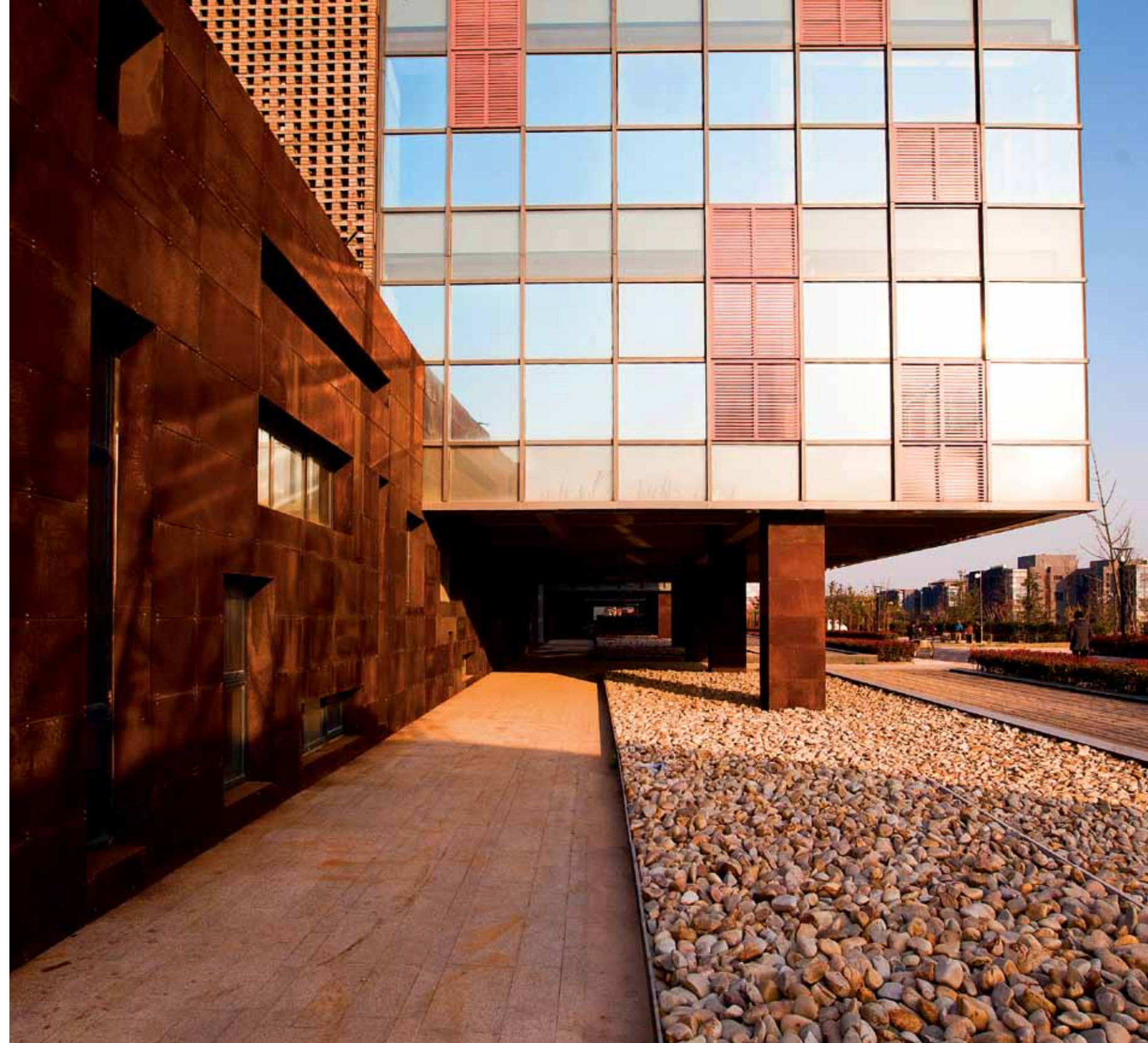
and stucco, because these materials become increasingly stunning with the passage of time.

My other project is located in a scenic area in Ninghai town, Ningbo city, Zhejiang province. Taking on this project was a major challenge for me. The owner's original idea is to develop a large-scale real-estate project on this valuable property surrounded by both water and mountains, which by normal standards means a project combination of a hotel with individual houses. However, after over a year of research regarding the needs of people in this sort of environment, as well as field research and analysis of the location, we arrived at a different conclusion: the original plan, which is the standard course of action for similar development projects in China, would unlikely cater to the current market in China. In order to achieve a profit, we must construct a large amount of buildings, but the high density that would result would be detrimental to the existing environment while undermining the scenic views that the buildings would have.

After investigating the mountain structure as well as the patterns and scale of the natural water system, we concluded that the main attraction this area brings to people is the possibility to enjoy great natural scenery without overwhelming costs. People will come to the establishment to enjoy a moment of natural beauty and tranquility away from city life. Therefore, in the planning process we decided to do all that we could to maintain natural scenery, and concentrate the buildings in a specific area, increasing its height rather than its area in order to maximize its development intensity. This is what we call the *dashu dami* (pairing great sparseness with great concentration) plan. While allowing the user of the building to enjoy wide scenic views from different angles within the building, this plan also leaves large empty spaces in the district so people can walk into nature and enjoy the serenity that the environment brings them. In order to maximize conservation of the current natural surroundings, we used short-distance tunnels to transport people into the buildings, avoiding the distractions that above-ground roads would cause to the environment.

After setting up this system, the question of how to allow large-sized architectural structures fit into the environment became a great challenge. This is also something that architecture design faces in dealing with uniformity and contradiction. I chose the simple "egg" as my basic unit shape, with the objective of obtaining maximum architectural area while taking up minimum ground space. The shape of the *Egg* achieves this purpose, meanwhile its natural and unobtrusive shape overcomes contradiction and comes in unison with the surrounding mountains, making the building part of nature. Adoption of the "egg" shape allowed a large-sized architectural structure to combine naturally with the environment.

Normally, architecture should avoid and retreat into its natural surroundings. However, this method is only suitable at a very low density of construction. In today's China that is lacking in land resources, continued use of this method for high-density construction would inevitably damage the original environment and users would not accept the architecture. The market is cruel, and if we construct under this method, it will lead to a waste of resources.

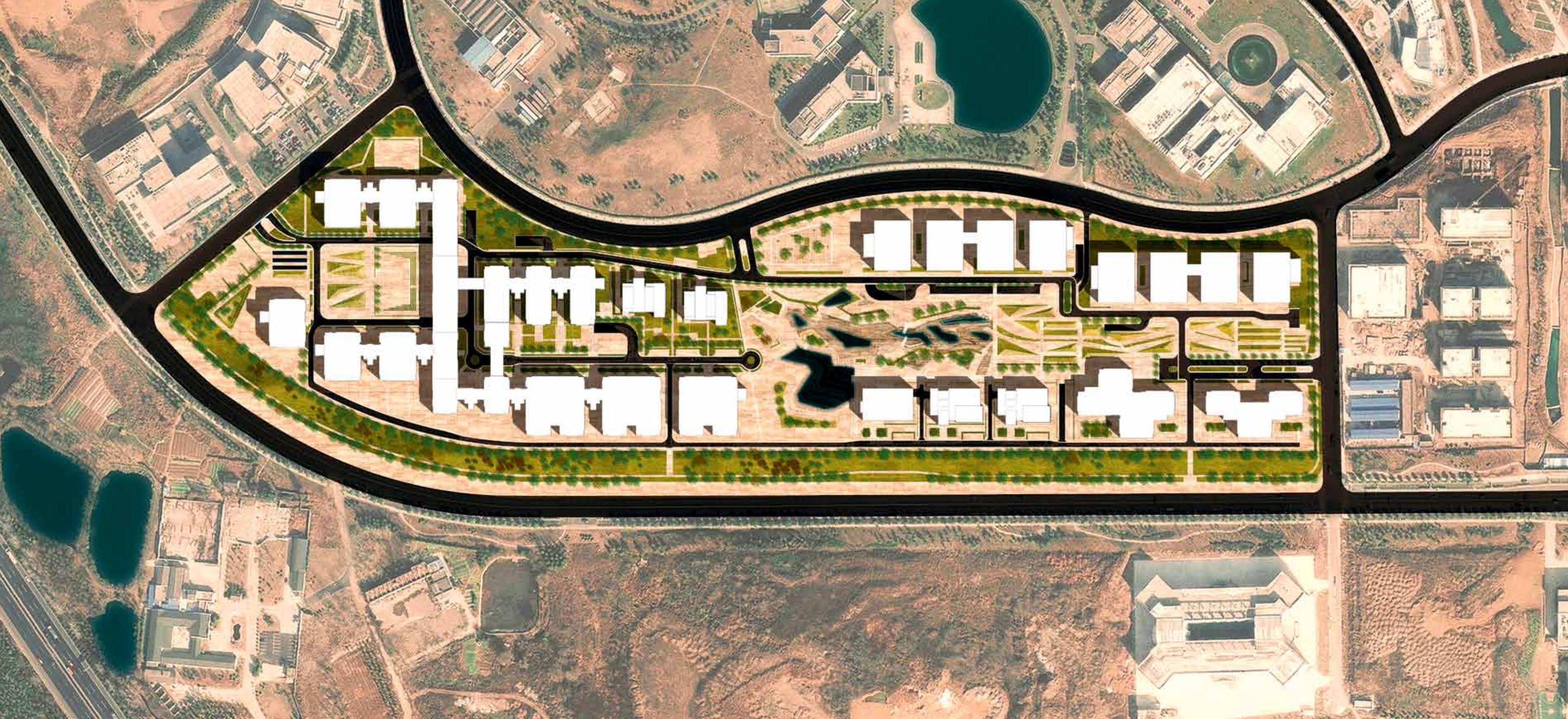


The four egg shaped towers, on the mountains, emulate the notion of nature and mountainous terrain as an alternative to human habitation. To be built specifically as a hotel and residential tower, it is expected to deliver supreme living pleasure and comfort amidst natural surroundings. Geometrically, the tower profile starts from a simple rounded square and travels upwards to be transformed into a circular geometry. This gradual deformation and eventual transformation of profile creates a visual voyage, encumbered with ambiguity yet uniformity.

The tower also conserves building energy levels and ensures the highest comfort level for its end users for each season of the year. The mechanism of protection from the outside is achieved by the subdivision of the tower's external skin into two strictly demarcated

zones, the north and the south façades. Acting contrary to ideal concepts, external protection has been rendered by trying to invite more of nature into the building. While the north is more relaxed in terms of sun exposure and diffuses light along with providing a scintillating view of the artificial lake right in front of the towers, it has been allowed to cantilever hanging balconies throughout the face. This zone also boasts the inclusion of a highly reflective mirror-like surface set in a specific angle to not only reflect nature back on to the tower from outside, but also allow the resident to view the reflection of the mesmerizing lake from inside the room.

The more delicate end of the tower is definitively the southern façade which directly faces the sun throughout the year. This part is allowed to



build a trombe wall on its surface for intricate heat storage and dissipation inside during winter nights, which drastically curtails the heating load. Also, regular louvers and adequate floor slab projection outside protects it from high summer sun glare and heat. The hanging balconies on the northern part of the tower contain small planter box projections, which make the building go green in its true essence. The building highlights and celebrates the nature by bringing it right inside up to its core, creating a centrally designed atrium space 200m in depth. An operable skylight and vent system on top of the tower ensures that the building lives and breathes by ventilating fresh air in and out.

I chose materials that resemble the wear of time for this building cluster, including the wide use of wet concrete, wood, and stucco both

indoors and outdoors. We use these materials with the hope that with the natural passing of time, these buildings would take on traces of the climate, and integrate more naturally and lively into the environment.

While talking about essential architecture, I also want to talk about cross-discipline designs between architects and artists, something I discussed in my presentation at the symposium in the Venice 2012 Architectural Biennale. This process of cross-disciplinary design has a long tradition. In my understanding, I like to view architecture, art, science etc. as upside down pyramids, whereby the basics of each discipline begin at the narrow bottom. As one advances through each discipline, its pyramid expands toward the top. Eventually, each of the pyramids meet and converge, at which point the different

disciplines become one. For architects and artists, this is finding uniformity in contradiction. In other words, when developed to an advanced level, the work of architects and artists will inevitably intersect and interact with each other. The line of division between architects and artists are blurred, and the so called cross-discipline design is in fact design within the same larger discipline.

In my design process, there is a lot of collaborative creation with artists and those from other disciplines. My design team includes artists and social scientists, and creating things together allows us to better investigate the needs of people in each project, to consider how our architectural design can satisfy those needs, and to pay respect to the environment.

Without an investigation into and understanding of “man”, we cannot find an answer to the design of a building or a project, or even to decide what is a good design. I like to approach my design process under the auspices of contradiction and uniformity. Whether in urban, rural, historical, or natural settings, our architectural designs add value to the existing buildings in the surroundings, and add to the historical and environmental values in the area: this is a good answer.

# FANG ZHENNING

*Fang Zhenning (1955, Nanjing, China) is a critic and was curator of the Chinese Pavilion at the 13<sup>th</sup> Venice Architecture Biennale.*

If we discuss the problems of Chinese cities here in Venice, I wonder who is going to hear us except those present today? The whole world is concerned about China, but one of the main reasons for that is because China provides other places around the world with employment opportunities. For example, the current Venice Biennale [Biennale architettura 2012] has not involved a great deal of Chinese input. Although there are the Chinese, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese pavilions, the curator David Chipperfield does not seem to have invited Chinese architects to attend any events. As such, it is my feeling that the Venice Biennale is mainly an extravagance for Westerners.

What I am stressing here is that the space made available at the Venice Biennale for the discussion of China-related issues is very small and pretty much limited to today's symposium. As such, I would like the wider world to hear about the issues we are discussing at this symposium. I like would to say that the Global Art Affairs Foundation has done an excellent job as to the discussion of China related issues here at the Venice Biennale, events such as this symposium are certain to attract the attention of the Chinese media.

The first thing I would like to say is that I hope that news of the issues we discuss today will be disseminated around the world. Secondly, one of the times I attended the 10<sup>th</sup> International Architecture Biennale in Venice, a Danish project (Co-Evolution) received the prestigious Golden Lion Award. That project involved a survey of Chongqing and was a joint venture between Danish Arts Foundation, China's Tsinghua University and other universities. The award was not announced until near the end of the biennale. However, I wrote a commentary on it when the event started, long before I knew it would win anything. The conclusion I reached in that article was that China's problems are the world's problems and that as such China's problems are far more serious than anyone realizes. Although the exhibition I curated at the China pavilion this year is titled *Originaire* and involves installation pieces that are artistic and architectural, the choice of title was intended to call attention to, rather than critique, two issues that relate specifically to China.

First, why has China razed such a large number of buildings with historical memory, including the flattening of whole cities? The second is that China is simultaneously constructing new buildings, but most are ugly. There are two reasons for this: first, they have no interest in historical memory; second, they have zero understanding or feeling for aesthetics. That is why they can raze overnight things that are of great beauty to us, whether bricks or walls, with absolutely no regrets. That is exactly why I chose *Originaire* as the title of my exhibition, as a call for us to return to the beginning and rethink for a moment what beauty is. What are the most beautiful things we remember? Although the exhibition I curated is about contemporary art and architecture, I also see myself playing another role and that involves using web blogs and *Weibo* [China's equivalent of *Twitter*] to mercilessly attack the savage actions of those involved in the destruction of old cities.

Urban development is unstoppable because it is a product of human desire and capital combined. We have no comment on these powerful business groups because we are unable to stop what is happening. However, from an architect's point of view, I agree with what Mr. Wang Lin said, namely that certain architects have participated in this destruction and I am therefore inclined to oppose some of the projects on display at the foundation exhibition, even though to say so runs the risk of being considered impolite. For example, I have to ask if a survey was conducted for Arata Isozaki's project on the development of Zhengzhou? What is the significance of the project? A large number of projects have been developed in Zhengzhou in Henan Province, that are a complete waste of money because it is an empty city, making such projects useless.

As a critic, it is my job to criticize to the full when I see things that are wrong. For example, there are architects who do not have very good projects in their own countries and whose projects are not really serious, but in China there are some particularly stupid leaders who still accept these new projects with open arms. I consider that to be a huge waste of urban resources and capital. Allow me to offer another example of Chinese architects participating in such destructive behaviour: The Beijing Royal Archives. The Royal Archives is where the national archives were kept during the Qing Dynasty and it is part of the Imperial Palace, making it a location where absolutely no new buildings should be built. Three years ago I was completely ignorant



of this development, but because I was choosing projects in China for overseas exhibitions I presented it to the director of the Museum of Asian Art in Berlin (*Staatliche Museen zu Berlin*). On reviewing my proposal he expressed shock. He informed me that the project would completely destroy a cultural treasure and asked me how I could possibly recommend it for overseas display. What was particularly disappointing was that the former director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, Thomas Krens, seemed to support the architects on the project. However, when the project became common knowledge and people started to protest, the Chinese public blamed it on the architect's lack of culture and expressed the hope that the cultured Guggenheim would stop the project. Little did they know that behind the scenes the Guggenheim had given its full backing to the project as a springboard to better sell its brand in China. At one point a female journalist asked the former director: "Don't you think it's wrong to design such a building for this location?" And he replied: "The most important thing is not the design, but whether we successfully sell the Guggenheim name to the Beijing Royal Archives."

This project was tied to politics and in effect a business deal. So, if you want the world to hear what we are saying at this symposium then let it be known that a Chinese critic in Venice said: "We do not want the US to be involved in the destruction of culture in China." When it comes to architects like Zhu Pei, I have to say that he has been responsible for some excellent works in Shenzhen, such as the OCT display space. So, how did he come up with such a design for this project? Whether it was for fame or money I don't know, if that

would be true, that would make this a very complex issue. Another example is Herzog & de Meuron, who designed the Beijing National Stadium (*Bird's Nest*). When they were competing for the tender to design the stadium they did everything they could to ingratiate themselves with Chinese culture, but once they were awarded the project and received payment, as soon as voices were raised in the West about them doing business with an autocratic government, they did a complete U-turn and said the project had nothing whatsoever to do with Chinese culture. For me this is an issue that touches on the morals of architects.

My point here is not that the Chinese government is autocratic, but rather to ask why the architects were at that time working with China? I have looked at this project and it was most definitely inspired by ancient Chinese culture, which was why it secured the tender. However, when the company was interviewed by the media in Japan it denied any such link. As a result, I wrote a critical article which I couldn't get published in China or later in Italy. However, there are also good architects such as China Architecture Design and Research Group deputy director Cui Kai. At that time they wanted him to work on renovating a building near the Drum Tower, but he said: "I cannot be involved in the project because it is in a protected area and no new buildings are permitted." Cui refused to be involved and that was a good thing.

I have spoken for too long, so I will end here by saying that any discussion of problems in China needs to be serious and impassioned, involve experts, be broad ranging and be heard by as many people as possible, because only then can it have real meaning.