

Coming-of-Age:

The Emergence of 'Third Stream' Architects in Contemporary China

By Peter G. Rowe and Har Ye Kan

If the global production of modern architecture of the 21st century was to be assessed retrospectively, the first two decades would most certainly be marked by the impressive architectural construction in the People's Republic of China. Together with infrastructure, building construction in the country accounted for nearly 42 percent of the world's total.

This beehive of activity is further corroborated by the considerable presence of international architecture firms. According to a survey conducted by *Build and Design* magazine in 2009, Shanghai had the largest number of branch offices of the top hundred architecture firms with 24 offices, while Beijing tied with New York with 15 offices.

To be sure, the sheer scale and speed of construction that has been undertaken is not necessarily a proxy for buildings that would qualify as architecture, and needless to say, architecture of significance. Nonetheless, the participation of foreign architects in the designing and construction of major stadiums, museums, grand theaters, airports, train stations, and exposition buildings, particularly in the early 2000s, have heralded the country's coming-of-age in terms of architectural production of note. In essence, the first decade from 2000 to 2010 was a period of especially intense engagement with established overseas firms that bequeathed a plethora of iconic projects, such as the now-familiar National Olympic Stadium, CCTV, and the National Theater of China.

Amidst this fanfare of architectural production, China's professional practice has similarly witnessed notable shifts. In a milieu dominated

by large design institutes and international design firms, a 'Third Stream' of architects primarily operating private design firms has also come-of-age. Unlike the two principal modes of practice that have typically been commissioned to design corporate- and state-sponsored projects, this 'Third Stream' has presented an alternative philosophy and practice rooted in the search for architectural identity, authenticity, and quality.

In contrast to the monumentality and commercial tendencies characteristic of the mainstream corporate- and state-sponsored showpieces, projects by this emerging group are modest in scale and countenance, reflecting a genuine interest in the locale, materials, and methods. Their compositions are avant-garde without being over-the-top, remain true to the spirit of the place, and also work within the means of their clients, often representing local communities, institutions, and foundations. Binaries that have customarily defined the Chinese architectural discourse and practice including 'chinese-western', 'tradition-modern', 'collective-individual' no longer hold in these material meditations that are and will continue to be timeless pieces engaged with their contexts. Similar to Zhou Rong's 'Chinese neo-modernism', qualities of *xiao* (small), *qing* (clear), and *xin* (novel) often seem to apply.

Moreover, 'Third Stream' here refers to an approach with distinctive formal outcomes characterizing the values and preoccupations underpinning an intellectual and designerly approach to architecture, rather than Zhu Jianfei's 'Third Path' engaging as it does, with an increasingly pervasive condition in China that

is neither capitalist nor communist in a classical sense. In this regard, it is closer to Chang Yung-ho's 'Third Attitude', a position that is neither pure critical research nor a commercial practice, emphasizing instead autonomy as a means of questioning or even opposing blatant and rising capitalism in architectural production.

Like many new strains or movements in architecture, the 'Third Stream' has its forerunners especially among the generation of Chinese architects born in the 1950s such as Liu Jiakun, Cui Kai, and Chang Yung-ho.

However, it is among the two succeeding generations of the 1960s and 70s that work in this vein has blossomed and come to the fore, most notably recently with Wang Shu of the Amateur Architecture Studio, who received the Pritzker Prize in 2012. His Ningbo History Museum of 2008 is an imposing, almost primordial-looking collection of block-like structures constructed of rubble and concrete which, in turn, provides both a striking and moving appearance. The lines of convergence between visible rubble and off-form concrete are geared to imply various zones of building and to highlight a contrast between 'old' and 'new' together with continuity with the past. Use of local artisans and craftsmen also draws attention to the preservation of traditional techniques.

By contrast, Wang's Xiangshan Campus for the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou is a much larger facility completed in two phases in 2004 and 2007. Comprised of a library, gallery, workshop tower, small stadium, and six other academic and workshop buildings

on a hilly site, first phase enclosure brings prominence to courtyards and gardens serving multiple purposes, particularly in conjunction with adjacent buildings. These outdoor spaces also enhance micro-climatic conditions and a relaxing atmosphere. The bases of the buildings use local stone in a traditional manner of terracing and roofs are made of numerous tiles salvaged from traditional houses demolished in surrounding Zhejiang Province. Phase two follows suit again with emphasis on gardens but with an architecture featuring novel continuous external walkways providing access against a stark white background of walls, punctuated by a multitude of different-sized windows and openings.

Moving further into the work of the 60s generation, Li Xiaodong's Bridge School in Xiashi Village, Fujian Province of 2008, although

modest in size, materially and symbolically spans a creek running through a 450-year-old village made up of earthen-walled tulou circular courtyard dwellings. Apart from unifying the village, the structure provides for a school and public space in the village. Made of steel trusses resting on concrete bases, the bridge is covered and clad in fine wooden screens providing shade and visual privacy.

Among the generation of the 70s, Zhu Xiaofeng of Scenic Architecture in his Jintao Village Community Pavilion in the Jiating District of Shanghai of 2009, also provided a modest structure using traditional materials of timber, wooden screens, and tile roofs around an open interiorized space and again in a minimalist contemporary manner. Further use of prominent screened installations opening to the outside, so conspicuous in China's early

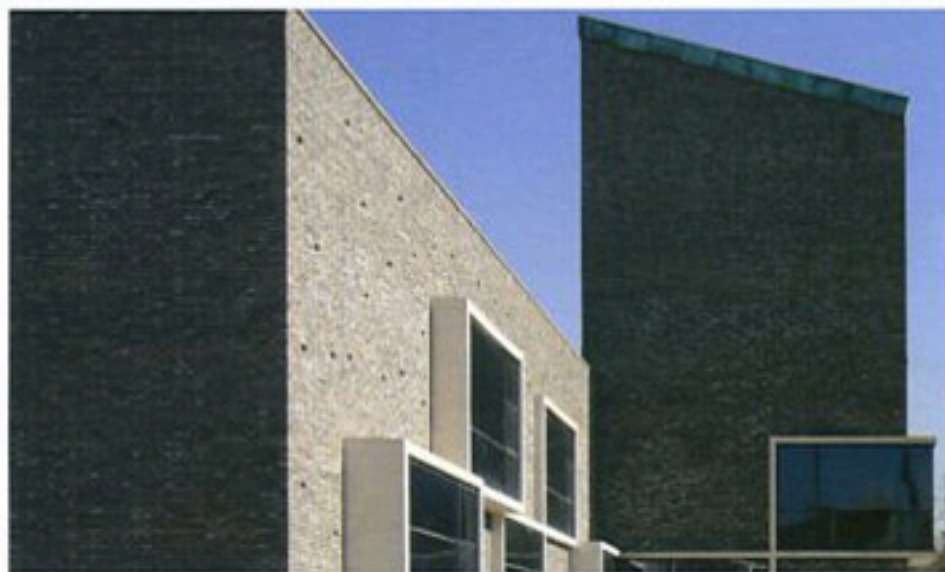
architecture, can be found in his Victory Street Community Committee Building of 2008.

Within the same generation, Hua Li of Trace Office Architects pursued a strong social commitment in his design of the Gaoligong Museum of Handcraft Paper in the lee of the mountain of the same name and a world ecological preserve in Yunnan Province of 2010. There, he created a mini-village of single- and three-storied irregularly-shaped buildings in a manner reflective of dwelling units and work spaces of the villages where the paper tradition still survives. Using bamboo, wood, and local volcanic stone, along with a conventional tenon and mortise system of timber work together with modern galvanized sheeting, local craftsmen fabricated the structure in an economical and climatically responsive manner. Then back in the 60s generation, Zhang Lei of



Gaoligong Museum of Handcraft Paper, Xizhuang Village, Yunnan by Hua Li

Photo Corbis



Atelier Zhang Lei also pursued a village-like arrangement of three brick ensembles of rooms and walls rising from one to two-stories in height in his Three Courtyard Community Center in Jiangsu Province of 2009. Surrounding gardens in an informal manner, the overall forms were derived from an examination of vernacular public structures in the area, as did the continuous pitched roof styles and red terracotta brickwork. The regular surface variegation of the brickwork and the wooden screen-like fenestration also

produce an intricate and dense pattern of shadow and sunlight.

Of the same generation, Doreen Liu of Node Architecture also pursued a use of commonplace materials, wall screens, and multiple pavilions in her Zuimotang (hall) in Chengdu of 2010. Accommodating residential and other functions of a retreat, the central courtyard among the pavilions covered by overlapping roofs, is comprised of a pool and elevated walkways and decks.



Bridge School in Xiashi Village, Fujian Province by Li Xiaodong



(Upper left and this image): Administrative Complex of Huangyuan in Qinghai Province by Wu Yue

Materially different, but otherwise sharing similar qualities and characteristics is the Spiral Gallery in Shanghai of 2010 by the 70s generation architects Liu Yichun and Chen Yifeng of Atelier Deshaus. Very small in size, this curvilinear and otherwise seamless rounded-shaped structure is entered by a stairway rising to the rooftop before descending inside the interior court into the building proper. Affording different views of its surroundings throughout this itinerary, movement, and exercise reflects that of traditional Chinese gardens, albeit abstractly.

Also using contemporary materials and an architectural vocabulary of a unified form, Zhou Kai from the 60s generation created the Feng Jicai Literature and Art Research Institute in Tianjin of 2005. Enclosure and abstract enframing of the site within a square-yard along with almost embedding the functional aspects of the building into two of its

surrounding walls evokes either a typical village or courtyard house.

The central rectangular court of water also conjures up the traditional idea of 'heaven's well', and the otherwise orthogonal, cardinal axial alignment of the ensemble has more than a passing resemblance also to China's building and courtyard tradition.

Somewhat differently, the Administrative Complex of Huangyuan in remote Qinghai Province began in 2008 by Wu Yue of Design Future Studio, comprises an impressive application of traditional materials in a contemporary fashion, along with local construction techniques being pressed into abstract poetic service. Located up towards the Tibetan foothills, layout and programming of the complex provides for an inviting civic plaza with the ground floor open to cafes, shops, and tourist outlets.

The lecture theater of the administrative school for party leaders is also open for public use, further advancing the multiple and parsimonious use of otherwise scarce accommodations in a relatively poor and undeveloped town. The landscape edging of a distinctive adjacent water body also originates in the architecture and its material and sculptural qualities.

Finally, a sparse array of materials, plain surfaces, and clean lines also appear in the B4/B5 Blocks Courtyard Housing and Work Space, at the Shanghai Culture and Communication Industrial Park of 2010 by the 70s generation office of Zhuang Shen, Ren Hao, and Atelier Archmixing. Essentially a village-like mat building of open courtyards and screened-in overhanging balconies, the work-live space recalls the nearby river villages and courtyard buildings of the Lower Changjiang Delta. Two to four-stories in

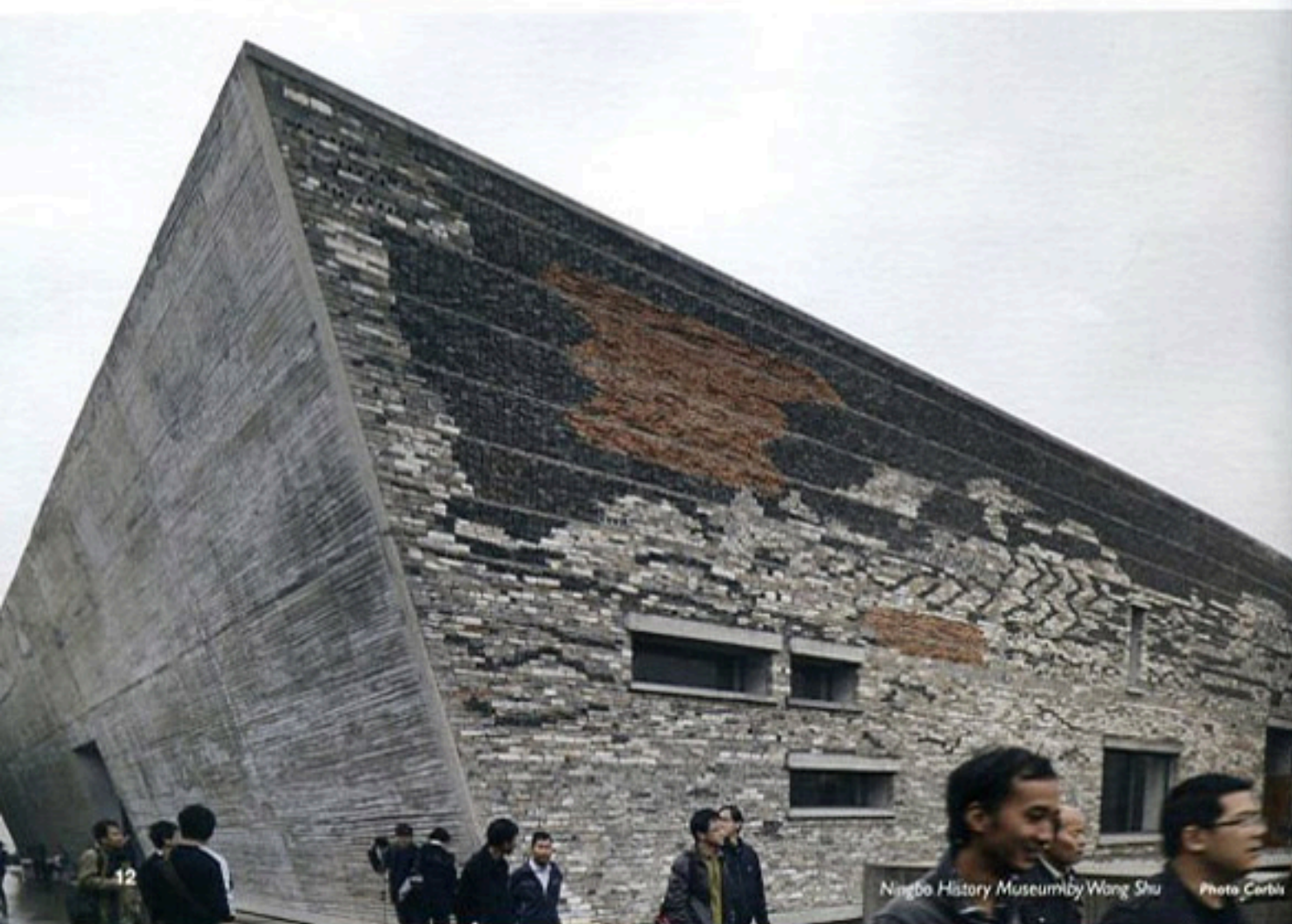


More Center Complex, Hangzhou by Wu Yue

height, the volumes of building and courtyards are sufficient to support a three-dimensional open-space and pedestrian system throughout the complex.

Of course others might also have been mentioned in this vein of architecture. For instance, among the generation of the 60s there is Dong Yugan and his Qinghui Clan Hall and Tong Ming with his Suquan Gardens Teahouse. Also in certain respects, particular projects by Ma Qingyun and even Zhuang Weimin would fit the 'Third Stream's' categorical criteria.

In summary then, the past ten years or even less has witnessed the coming-of-age in contemporary architectural production, particularly with the growing strength of this 'Third Stream', and a concomitant raising of standards in practice and production. Generally, this has been part of a period of architectural maturation and improvement of architectural education. At least in the first professional degrees, most if not all of these architects were



Ningbo History Museum by Wang Shu Photo Carbis



B4/B5 Blocks of Shanghai Culture & Communication Industrial Park, Shanghai by Zhuang Shen & Ren Hao / Atelier Archmixing

educated at home in China. Moreover, while foreign architectural firms played an important role during the late twentieth century and the turn into the present millennium, the tide in terms of real architectural interest appears to be turning, with local, indigenous architects receiving greater recognition for their work, especially among an expanding clientele outside of strictly big corporate and state interests.

Furthermore, at least among this 'Third Stream', there appears to be an unspoken yet implicit consensus on issues of identity at the moment in China's development. In the age-old alignment of *ti* (essence) and *yong* (form), an equilibrium seems to have been reached which is Chinese, without being overly historicist and heavy-handed, and formally as well as materially compelling without over-reaching extravagantly.

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Buildings to Look Out for in China

1. More Center Complex, Hangzhou, Zhejiang by Wu Yue
2. Gaoligong Museum of Handcraft Paper, Xinzhuang Village, Tengchong, Yunnan by Hua Li
3. Zhongshan Road Restoration, Hangzhou by Wang Shu
4. Xi'an Horticulture Exposition Boutique Hotel, Xi'an, Shaanxi by Ma Qingyun/ MADA s.p.a.m.
5. Zhujiajiao Museum of Humanities & Arts, Shanghai by Zhu Xiaofeng / Scenic Architecture Office
6. B4/B5 Blocks of Shanghai Culture & Communication Industrial Park, Shanghai by Zhuang Shen & Ren Hao/ Atelier Archmixing