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Adaptation | A Reflection on Contemporary Chinese Architecture (In four case-studies)

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Abstract

Reflecting upon a decade of engaging with, researching, writing, curating and discussing critical and contemporary Chinese architectural developments (profession and projects), the author presents 'adaptation' as a *modus operandus* for Chinese architects to bypass both rapid cultural changes as well as a volatile and demanding building construction climate. Seeking to understand the underlying concepts, methods and motives behind selected projects of four distinct contemporary practices (Amateur Architecture Studio, Atelier Chen Haoru, ZAO/standardarchitecture, Zhao Yang studio) the author discusses how these adapt to progress. Besides, the aforementioned practices encompass in China three distinct generations of architects, all practicing, to a large extent, in a similar spatial, social and economical environment. Focusing on the passage of time and the progress of the profession, rather than pointing out a figure or structure frozen in time, and through case-studies linked to the authors' exhibition 'ADAPTATION – architecture and change in China' (Venice Architecture Biennale 2014), the paper seeks to discuss how architects effectively adapt and transform their thinking, practice and design in relation to ongoing demands and insights. Relating these to professional discourse, use of local materials and knowledge, to the volatility of clients, governments and markets, these alternative practices (alternative to the dominance of design institutes, to generic solutions and to Western, modernist, theories and practice) aspire to keep control over the design process. Across the four discussed practices, similarities in approach, materiality, methodology, educational and environmental concerns are contrasted with differences in architect-client relation, public appreciation, public and personal influence, laws, academic discourse. Through the lens of understanding how architects transform their *modus operandi*, tentatively the concept of 'in(ter)dependent practices and projects' (or mutual reliance between different generations of independent architects) can be explored.

Keywords: China; regionalism; adaptation architecture; practice

1. Introduction

The paper analyses, contextualizes and compares the recent experience (2006-2016) of representatives of three generations of 'independent architects' and 'emerging architectures' (projects, methodologies and reflections) across three locales in China: in the cities of Beijing, Hangzhou and Dali. Distinct local cultures with rich and diverse building traditions, all three cities (and their surrounding regions) have been swept up in the vicissitudes of a nationwide building boom accelerating between 2006-12 and having a less frantic pace since then. This paper delves into the mind-set and networks of four Chinese architectural practices seeking to exemplify their shared approaches, ambitions and attitudes through selected projects. Sharing similar architectural dilemmas across a spatially vast and diverse territory, this paper reflects on how these architects incorporate tradition, theory and availability of local materials (broken bricks, local stone, wood, limestone, concrete mixed with Chinese ink and bamboo) in their projects. Oftentimes, their architectural discourse and arguments gravitate around the idea of re-activating and adapting local construction knowledge for the present times. As such, selected projects create a context to frame how contemporary in(ter)dependent architectural practices in China adapt to changes in progress, culture, craft,

climate, capitalism, globalism, regionalism, and tradition. The paper relies on extracts of interviews between the author and the architects, filling a gap in the existing architectural methodologies of research and knowledge about these practices, thus focusing on change over time and mutual reliance between several generation of independent Chinese architects as an important aspect of the contemporary Chinese architectural culture. Overall, this paper introduces certain common elements across the diverse Chinese contemporary architectural projects and thus contributes to a reflection on to the topic of ‘evoking a spirit of place in contemporary architecture’.

2. A Chinese context

During the past decade, the understanding of contemporary Chinese architecture has changed. Currently, maturity, confidence and experimentation replace hesitation, insecurity and condemnation. To a large extent, China’s building culture during the past two decades has oftentimes been reduced to a series of copycat architectures, the consequence of a territory of top-down decisions, a playground for foreign architects or even a country where planning mistakes from the past are unapologetically repeated. China is a vast and complex country where speed of construction, and built outcome, either appeals or appalls. But despite its oftentimes repetitive urban outlook, this continent-sized country has offered some architects the opportunity to alter its architectural appearance and ambitions. Today, a seemingly loose, and relatively small, group of Chinese architects (yet tightly connected in terms of shared education, notion of apprenticeship and occurrences of collaborative efforts) are testing alternative architectural approaches thereby focusing on the incorporation of local craftsmanship, community and architectural identity across a broad range of scales, locales and clients.

Through four case-studies - ranging from university campuses, creative clusters, inner-city areas, remote regions and rural areas - this paper contextualizes these projects’ design and discursive context while providing, through the use of interviews between the author and the architect, insights in the motives and methods of contemporary critical Chinese architectural practices.

Through studying these alternative practices (alternative to the dominance of large design institutes, to generic solutions and to Western, modernist, theories and practices), it can be understood how these architects seek to maintain (integral) control of the design process. Similarities in approach, material and environmental concerns do exist, while differences in architect-client relation, local and international appreciation, public and personal influence, academic background... further inform the parameters for this comparative study across the three generations of Chinese architects currently working in China. These practices are Amateur Architecture Studio (Hangzhou), ZAO/standardarchitecture (Beijing), Atelier Chen Haoru (Hangzhou) and Zhao Yang Architects (Dali). For the clarity of this paper, the author selected following four projects to illustrate current tendencies: the China Academy of Art, Xiangshan Campus in Hangzhou (by Amateur Architecture Studio, 2002-2007), Sun Community in Hangzhou (Atelier Chen Haoru, 2014), the Micro Hutong Library in Beijing (ZAO/standarchitecture, 2015) and Shuangzi Guesthouse in Dali (ZhaoYang Architects, 2015).

3. A Chinese surprise

Despite a plethora of projects, exhibitions and publications, it still came to many, professionals and the public at large, as a surprise when Hangzhou-based architect Wang Shu (b. 1963) / Amateur Architecture Studio received the 2012 Pritzker Prize. This high-profile, at least in architectural circles, and international recognition for Wang Shu, who works together with his wife Lu Wenyu, affirmed what was at the time already common knowledge amongst a small group of Chinese and international architects and critics: that from the few Chinese architects that, during the first decade of the twenty-first century, went against the grain of designing large-scale and rather bland architectural and urban environments, Wang Shu was the one developing a unique way of thinking and building.

Amongst others, the Ningbo Historic Museum in Ningbo and the China Academy of Art (CAA) Xiangshan Campus in Hangzhou are examples of the office's search for identity and creativity, exploring the rich legacy of China's intellectual and architectural history, absorbing contextual construction techniques (amongst others the recycling of bricks in facades and the exploration of roofs as bridges) while professing a critical approach to the architectural and urban development of present China. With few personal accounts available explaining the reasoning behind his architectural work – besides a few interviews in various international architecture magazine – the post-Pritzker Prize period saw an international proliferation of publications on, about, from Wang Shu / Amateur Architecture Studio. Most notable are the first-hand architectural accounts including “Imagining the House” (Wang, 2012) which features personal architectural sketches and introductory notes to the several projects and “Building a Different World in Accordance with Principles of Nature” (Wang, 2013) featuring a lecture the architect gave at the École de Chaillot (Paris, France) in January 2012.

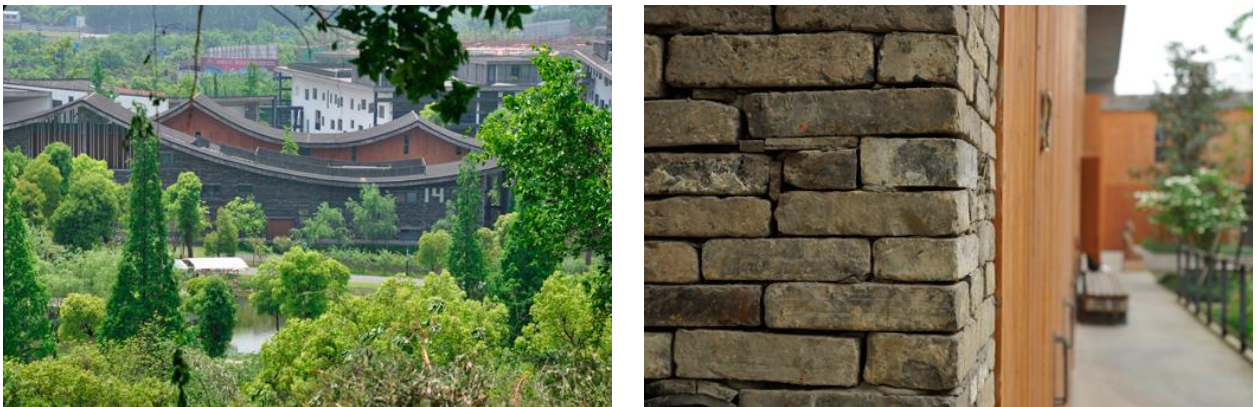


Fig. 1. China Academy of Art, Xiangshan Campus, Hangzhou (2002-07) | Amateur Architecture Studio.

The CAA campus was built in two phases (2002-04 and 2004-07) and consists out of a series of different buildings (featuring studios, classrooms and libraries) connected with bridges, lifting the architecture from the landscape thus creating a constant dialogue between the openness of the landscape and the closeness of the buildings. In 2008, I interviewed Wang Shu on site and he explained how a building can express the intention to create a new type of city: “We have lost the tradition about how to build cities, how to build an architecture that is mixed with landscape. The campus is a new model for our Chinese cities, featuring high-density architectural areas where buildings are in very close proximity to each other. The distance between them is the shortest possible, according to the Chinese laws” (Jong, Mattie, Roulet, & Muynck, 2015). The recycling and re-use of traditional materials – oftentimes bricks from demolished villages – characterizes his architecture and attitude. By preserving the memory of a regional building practice of a province prone to typhoons (which demands the local people to quickly and seasonally rebuild their houses), there is also an economic aspect to this, he explains: “This old and beautiful material is very cheap. This is how I convinced my client. Usually my budgets are very low, so it is interesting for them. In China, we face a strange situation: when you build with machines, it is very expensive, but when you build by hand it becomes cheaper” (Jong et al., 2015).

In “Building a Vibrant, Diverse World” – featured in “Imagining the House” (Wang, 2012) – the architect wrote in the preface to the sketches featuring the CAA Xiangshan Campus that “If it is true that an architectural type can’t be invented, the Chinese architectural type I design must be from my memories, similar with the writing of *À la recherche du temps perdu* by Marcel Proust. [...] I tried to build a diverse world as a resistance to the uniform world. But I also wanted to avoid the kind of singularity that comes from a design by a single architect, or even the

inevitable singularity when buildings are designed by several architects together. Anonymous diversity might be designed by time; no human being could do that. I tried anyhow.”¹

What intrigues Wang Shu most is the way of looking at tradition as an inspiration, as an intellectual and physical engagement with the creation of space. The architect has been very clear in this approach as a way to implement, not impoverish, his architectural ideas: “What attracts me the most as an architect, is Chinese tradition, and especially the philosophical debate that consists in identifying what grounds that tradition in nature. It is not just a question of tradition, but a direction to find, a critical stance with regard to China’s development. Tradition is a source of inspiration.”² In March 2014, I discussed with him this notion of tradition, as exemplified in the use of Chinese roofs and courtyards in his work, elements that I consider to derive directly (albeit adapted and reinterpreted) from traditional Chinese forms and typologies, something which he confirmed while writing about aforementioned project: “The idea for the layout of the second phase of the campus was essentially a series of small courtyards, corners, and under-eave areas, where several teachers and students would be chatting and discussing.”³ While talking about architecture and adaptation over tea, coffee and cigarettes, I asked Wang Shu to elaborate on this topic: “I’m very careful when it comes to architectural references or adaptations. For example, when I design a courtyard some people will say, ‘Oh this is so Chinese! It comes from China’s traditions.’ But usually I’m careful when designing and thinking about a courtyard. If I can’t get the real feeling, a fresh feeling, I will not do it. I know about courtyards, I talk about them, but to design a courtyard isn’t just a matter of designing a courtyard; one has to think seriously about it. I designed a house in Nanjing with a half open courtyard inside, and several teaching buildings in the Xiangshan Campus also feature courtyards. But this doesn’t mean these are real courtyards. My new project in the mountains of Ningbo is the first project where I have done a real courtyard. My courtyard references and inspirations come directly from different Chinese traditional paintings, most of them more than 1000 years old. These courtyards exist only in the paintings, not in reality. Painting has a different angle on and relation to reality. I like this painterly perspective because it allows you to have a different vision of reality.”⁴

Having had hardly any break from China’s demanding architectural culture, and especially since awarded the Pritzker Prize in 2012, I asked in the same 2014 interview when he plans to have a sabbatical. While admitting it is a difficult yet necessary thing to do, Wang Shu gently steers his answer in a different direction, revealing a glimpse of the responsibility he feels he has: ‘For me, the most important thing is what does true experience mean? What do true materials mean, what is true construction? I’m more focused on this at the moment. In modern society in China today, almost everything is fake, everything is copied and you rarely find anything that’s true. I want to talk about this, the true meaning of this situation.’⁵

4. China’s contemporary architectural approach

Despite the massive growth of the China’s cities, being an architect (or rather, an independent architect) is still considered a rather marginalized profession: one might argue that the architect is more a pragmatic facilitator translating financial constraints into a form, rather than being a master of his own craft. Issues such as time-pressure, whimsical clients, sharp deadlines, long meetings, opaque decision-making processes, postponed or accelerated construction periods, substandard execution, constant changes and adaptations, are all common characteristics of China’s construction culture.

This creates a context where intensity, exhaustion, adaptation, change and redesign become a framework to understand architectural design beyond program, size, context, organization and materiality. The outcome, if innovative distinctive and creative, are explorations of this elusive and strangely all-encompassing term - Chinese

¹ “Building a Vibrant, Diverse World” by Wang Shu. Published in “Wang Shu – Imagining the House” Lars Müller Publishers, Zürich, Switzerland, 2012

² “Wang Shu – Building a different world in accordance with principles of nature”, Éditions Cité de l’architecture & du patrimoine / École de Chaillot, Paris, France, 2013

³ “Building a Vibrant, Diverse World” by Wang Shu. Published in “Wang Shu – Imagining the House” Lars Müller Publishers, Zürich, Switzerland, 2012

⁴ Bert de Muynck interview with Wang Shu, Hangzhou, March 6 2014

⁵ Bert de Muynck interview with Wang Shu, Hangzhou, March 6 2014

architecture. Architecture is that which survives after an avalanche of adaptation. Architects find their way in these sudden eruptions of speedy changes; they react creatively and critically upon these changing conditions. Adaptation might be a too common characteristic of the Chinese construction culture, thus oftentimes goes unquestioned, yet not unnoticed. Ask any architect about it, and he or she will both confirm and question its existence. More than roofs, doors, courtyards or staircases, adaptation is fundamental for the understanding of Chinese architecture.

5. Adaptation – three Chinese case-studies

Sun Commune, Hangzhou (2014) | Atelier Chen Haoru

The Sun Commune project nearby Hangzhou was constructed by architect Chen Haoru (b. 1972) and is a rural project focusing on farming and community development in order to create a sustainable rural life. This concept of creating a sustainable rural life, is centered around what the architect describes as “Six fundamental approaches to rural re-reconstruction”: 1. Natural agricultural reform, 2. Holistic participation, 3. Sustainable self renewal, 4. In-situ locality, 5. Revived natural practice and 6. New conditions and technology. A pig barn, the centerpiece of the new Sun Commune, features several pyramid-shaped thatched roofs and a swimming pool for pigs. Before starting the project, Chen Haoru - architect and professor at the Department of Architecture at the aforementioned China Academy of Art in Hangzhou - conducted research on the subject of local building materials, such as bamboo, and shared in an 2014 interview his findings as following: “Surprisingly we found that the knowledge about bamboo construction is dying out, meaning the natural and adaptive way of living is also ending. This way of life is replaced by, and composed out of ubiquitous, industrial construction components, which face the problem of recycling, are expensive to use and unfit for the land.”⁶

While local household were involved in the weaving of the thatched structure, and bamboo pieces were selected and logged by experienced bamboo carpenters, the involvement of local community was entered around the agricultural calendars explains the architects: “In the agricultural calendar and astrological diagrams there are clear dates for construction. These dates correspond to the time before and after farming works, such as planting seeds or harvesting. In our case the gathering and building activity became a communal activity.”⁷

⁶ Bert de Muynck interview with Chen Haoru (Atelier Chen Haoru) Hangzhou, March 21, 2014

⁷ Bert de Muynck interview with Chen Haoru (Atelier Chen Haoru) Hangzhou, March 21, 2014



Fig. 2. Sun Commune, Hangzhou (2014) | Atelier Chen Haoru.

Cha'er Hutong 8, Beijing (2014) | ZAO/standardarchitecture

China's rapid urbanization not only affects the development of an appropriate architectural language engaging with the city but has also set architects to pursue work in desolate remote regions. Zhang Ke (b. 1970) and his Beijing-based ZAO/standardarchitecture office feel the need for a certain degree of detachment from the daily urban context: "Our office tries to cope with too much of attachment, engaging with too much detailed urban situation we encounter everyday. A strategy of detachment might provide alternative urban visions that extremely lacking in China."⁸ With an average of around three built projects a year, standardarchitecture works far from the operational norms of the field. "In China, the understanding of architecture as something permanent is shrinking," Zhang Ke explains, "so it is more about being fast and temporary. For me it is obvious that in contemporary architecture with availability of materials and devices one has to do visually light things. It is the kind of freedom we talk about and to break away from tradition."⁹

Since 2007, along 80-km-long arm of the Yaluzangbu River, the office – oftentimes in collaboration with other offices – designed a series of smaller structures, including projects such as Niyang River Visitor Center (2010), Yaluntzangbu Art Center (2011) and Niangou Boat Terminal (ZAO/standardarchitecture (CN) + Embaixada (PT), 2007-13). For all of these projects, construction materials were locally sourced: walls and roofs made of nearby found rock, and built by Tibetan masons in their traditional patterns while using local mineral pigments that are directly painted on the stone surfaces.

This attempt to break away from traditions is currently being tested by ZAO/standardarchitecture in their spatial and programmatic intervention in Beijing inner-city area. Just South of Tiananmen Square sits their "Cha'er Hutong 8 (Hutong of tea)"-project - the office got the chance to insert a "micro-kindergarten" of sorts. The project is part of a series of Hutong Infill strategies, of which the "Cha'er Hutong" project is described as "building experiment (...)"¹⁰ with the objective is "to search for possibilities of creating ultra-small scale social housing within the limitations of super-tight traditional hutong spaces of Beijing"¹¹ and that with the objective, in the architects' words, to "allow Beijing citizens and the government to see new and sustainable possibilities for how to put our messy additions to good use. Maybe they can be recognized as cultural relics and critical layers of recent Beijing's hutong life rather than things that should be erased entirely."¹²

Zhang Ke, explains that the projects - which amongst others includes a nine-square-metre children's library built of concrete mixed with Chinese ink inserted underneath the pitched roof of an existing building - "adapts to the place and local building traditions, but depart from contemporary perspectives."¹³ The project is delicately crafted and through its sloped roofline creates an image of clarity in what has become an inner-city amalgamation of improvised shed-like in-fills and additions to the spatial lay-out of the ancient courtyard structure. In an interview with the author, Zhang Ke stated that adaptation "is not just about the physical. It is about keeping a balance on your life and society."¹⁴ A notion that is clearly picked-up in the architects' official project description for "Cha'er Hutong 8": "In this project the architects tried to redesign, renovate and re-use the informal add-on structures instead of eliminating them. In doing so, they intend to recognize the add-on structures as an important historical layer and as a critical embodiment of Beijing's contemporary civil life in hutongs that has so often been overlooked."¹⁵

⁸ Bert de Muynck interview with Zhang Ke (ZAO/standardarchitecture) Beijing, March 27, 2014

⁹ Bert de Muynck interview with Zhang Ke (ZAO/standardarchitecture) Beijing, March 27, 2014

¹⁰ Micro-Hutong at Dashilar September 25, 2013 <http://www.standardarchitecture.cn/v2news/3897>

¹¹ Micro-Hutong at Dashilar September 25, 2013 <http://www.standardarchitecture.cn/v2news/3897>

¹² Micro Yuan'er, December 4, 2015 Beijing | <http://www.standardarchitecture.cn/v2news/7299>

¹³ Bert de Muynck interview with Zhang Ke (ZAO/standardarchitecture) Beijing, March 27, 2014

¹⁴ Bert de Muynck interview with Zhang Ke (ZAO/standardarchitecture) Beijing, March 27, 2014

¹⁵ ZAO/standardarchitecture <http://www.standardarchitecture.cn>

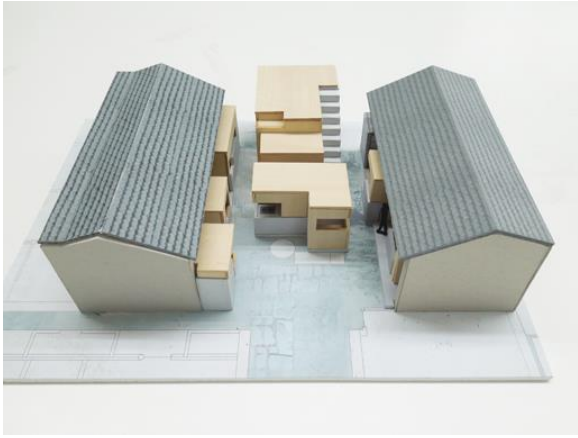


Fig. 3. Cha'er Hutong 8, Beijing (2014) | ZAO/standardarchitecture.



Fig. 4. Shuangzi Guesthouse, Dali (2015) | ZhaoYang Architects.

The Shuangzi Guesthouse project by ZhaoYang Architects is located in Dali, in the subtropical and mountainous South province of Yunnan, China. This young independent architectural office is special in terms of locale - away from China's big-city development - and its method of working, a mix of inspiring internationalism and distinct local features. In their manifesto - entitled 'ARCHITECTURE OF CIRCUMSTANCES', the architects state: "originality comes from circumstances, not ideas. Circumstance never recur. They form the river of Heraclitus."¹⁶ The Shuangzi Guest House at first, upon construction, was met with suspicion. "Originally," so says Zhao Yang (b. 1980), "the local people thoughts strangely about our design; but its construction method happens to be very familiar to them. They understand the material, the combination of limestone walls and wood structure. It is their life."¹⁷

"My thinking can have some direct manifestation in small projects, be it in the rural or urban context," said Zhao Yang in an newspaper interview (2014). The article explains how Zhao Yang in some ways got influenced by his seniors, especially Zhang Ke, from aforementioned ZAO/standardarchitecture. The newspaper summaries this influence and interdependence as following: "When Zhao set up his firm in 2007, his studio was in the office building of ZAO/standardarchitecture which calls itself "one of the leading new generation design firms in China". "When it comes to drawings and criticisms, Zhang was rigorous," says Zhao, who collaborated with Zhang on the Niyang River Visitor Center (2010) project. "When we look at each other's designs, we give really harsh comments at times. It was a good training period for me."¹⁸

¹⁶ Zhao Yang Architects <http://www.zhaoyangarchitects.com>

¹⁷ Bert de Muynck interview with Zhao Yang (ZhaoYang Architects) Dali, April 17, 2014

¹⁸ "Dali designer Zhao Yang brings contemporary architecture to China and Japan" by LEONG SIOK HUI, The Star Online <http://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/features/2014/08/13/rising-design-star/> August 13, 2014

The Shuangzi Guesthouse, located on an island inside of Dali's Erhu Lake, can be explained, described as almost an on-site project, critically adapting to the local knowledge, but also available materials, and traditional modes of transport of these materials. The architect explains how not only to provoke a spirit of place, but also how to apply the methods so to materialise its meaning through time and space: "We used wood," Zhao Yang told in an interview with the author, "because construction materials need to be brought-in by boat to this island, and local pinewood is kind of light. On-site - in order to make the land flat - parts of the [side of the cliff] rock were chopped off, so this became a building material as well. Local craftsmen always chop the island off, so this place is famous for its stonework, using the method of stone wall called 'sanchayuan'."¹⁹

6. Conclusion

A culture that has seemingly suddenly - in thirty years - spatially or typologically drastically has altered its course, creates a new understanding of architecture, the profession of architecture, humankind. It forces three different generations (born in 1960s, 70s and 80s) of Chinese architects to balance, cut, compensate, criticize or comply. It forces them to adapt; to find their position within society.

With regions, cities and villages in China losing their character, identity and memory, the need to work around the importance of cultural continuation have become of importance. This not only demands a shift in attitude towards society but equally a different approach to the architectural profession. The emergence of the small and independent Chinese practices in the past two decades lead to the construction of fragments for a possible future. Amidst territorial, cultural, urban and social turmoil and transformations, these structures evoke an architectural language and identity that evades the pitfalls of architectural reproduction, fast profit or cultural complacency. They are devoid of flat universal aspirations but the product of their own cultural, social, technical and local context. The architects behind these buildings contribute to a critical, rather than a purely commercial or industrial, understanding of the practice; they escape the norm, the standard, the regular and the usual.

These works can be found in university campuses, creative clusters, housing compounds, remote regions, suburban and inner city areas. All together, they amass to a respectable amount of square meters, but in reality only represent a tiny percentage of China's total annual building output.

Amidst the whirlwind of social, economical and cultural progress, this scattered architectural production shows that an alternative architecture is possible, that a new architectural language is necessary and can be build. But it does so without demanding a discourse to legitimate itself; the fact that is constructed is proof of both a pragmatic and poetic stance of the architect towards their surrounding environments and their professional field.

Acknowledgment

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¹⁹ Bert de Muynck interview with Zhao Yang (ZhaoYang Architects) Dali, April 17, 2014