

P40. CHINA INDEPENDENT

by Alessandro Villa, Francesco Scullica

A NEW AND RECOGNIZABLE ‘*CHINESE WAY OF ARCHITECTURE*’ IS EMERGING IN PROJECTS MADE IN THAT COUNTRY BY THE *LATEST GENERATIONS* OF LOCAL PROFESSIONALS, MIXING UNUSUAL ELEMENTS WITH REFERENCES TO TRADITIONAL CULTURE, WHILE AVOIDING THE PITFALLS OF HISTORICAL CARICATURE

Shanghai, Long Museum West Bund

project by **STUDIO DESHAUS**

Shanghai, Huaxian Business center

project by **STUDIO SCENIC ARCHITECTURE**

Shanghai, headquarters of the studio and Songjiang Art campus

projects by **STUDIO ARCHI-UNION**

The vast size and variety of the territory make any interpretation of Chinese contemporary architecture as a whole rather approximate. Nevertheless, it is clear that the unbridled growth of Chinese cities is mostly modeled on the forms of western commercial construction in an “export version,” i.e. occasionally embellished with outlandish ornamental features. In these works, it is hard to find a specificity and a national Chinese character, even roughly speaking, also because in many cases the projects are done by the local offices of major international studios that have found room to grow in China, due to the size of the projects and the rapid influx of commissions. In the big cities this model of growth has led to depletion of the historical fabric of old areas and the resulting shift of the population towards the immense suburbs, packed into anonymous high-rise apartment complexes. This panorama offers a backdrop for the originality of the independent work of **Wang Shu**, winner of the Pritzker Prize for Architecture in 2012. At first glance he might seem like an exception, but he actually represents the front line of a new wave, the forerunner of a myriad of projects in expanding cities. The phenomenon has a range of different explanations. First of all, we can observe the arrival on the scene of a new generation of designers trained in Chinese universities, such as the well-known Tsinghua University of Beijing and the no less prestigious

“school of Shanghai” that gravitates around Tongji University, where Wang Shu is a teacher. For some years now it seems that the future of Chinese architecture will depend on the training offered by schools that are now demonstrating great openness to international influences, also through intense exchange of visiting professors and agreements with western universities, including the Milan Polytechnic. At the same time, the architecture schools have also become a place of reflection and discussion on the future of cities, in a fertile debate, due to the fact that most of the professors split their time between teaching and professional practice. In China the importance of the universities also relates to their role as a symbol of belonging to a community on the part of the latest generations of architects. So it should come as no surprise to see an outburst of projects with an independent approach, mixing unusual elements with references to traditional culture while avoiding the pitfalls of historical caricature. It is quite clear that the objective of these designers is not to prompt a return to “pagoda roofs,” but the knowledge and interpretation of traditional typologies and techniques in a contemporary way, without neglecting the needs of a changing society. One decisive factor, for example, is the need to give new suburban districts their own community services, schools, daycare facilities, administrative offices and places for art, the kind of commissions that are ideal to experiment with the characteristics of a national architecture that does not only represent the flourishing economy, but above all the needs of the community and the relationships with the context on the large and micro scales. To measure and predict the range of this phenomenon in terms of architectural quality is still hard. Much of it will depend on politics and the sensitivity of administrations to understand opportunities, as in the case of the suburban region of Shanghai, especially the area of Qingpu and Jiading, where Sun Jiwei – governor of the district, with a background in architecture – has commissioned the **studio Deshaus** to make many works that have shed light on the potential of the territory and the talent of the architects. In Shanghai the Long Museum West Bund designed by this studio is a work that marks a leap of scale and has established the international reputation of the studio’s founders, Liu Yichun and Chen Yifeng, also alumni of Tongji University. The building stands on the riverfront, and from the outside the sober volume offers no glimpse of the power of the interiors. The plan is shifted, starting with a very clear geometric scheme, with the assembly and opposition of reinforced concrete partitions with an “umbrella” section, continuing into the roof. The openings created between the partitions allow light to enter, softening the exposed concrete surfaces. The vaults, eight meters high, form an impressive, primordial and contemporary space, an ideal place to display a vast permanent collection of Chinese art. In particular, the rugged surfaces trigger an effective contrast with the bright tones of the fine section of works connected with the painting of the New Realism, a current that represents the contradictions of the changing society of the last few decades. Outside, the building embraces and wraps the “ruins” of an industrial structure from the 1950s, a bridge for unloading of coal, conserved as a vestige of the recent industrial past of the area and as a pivot of the architectural composition. Marked sensitivity to the characteristics of the site can also be seen in the project for the Huaxian Business Center of Shanghai by the **studio Scenic Architecture**, approached in a very different way. In this case the existing trees in the construction area dictate the arrangement of the building, almost a stilt house of glass and reflecting steel immersed in nature. In this project the materials are not what establishes the relationship with the context, but the compositional choices. The branches of the trees intersect with the metal fringes of the facade and take part in the beauty of the internal space, open towards the top and closed on the sides, in keeping with a typical Chinese tradition. The spatial layout avoids traditional typologies, and originates in the insertion inside the construction of six large camphor trees. The contextual sensibility is a clear characteristic of the new architecture made in China, but it is not mimetic, because the constructive logic of the building is never concealed, but displayed as a distinctive trait. The architecture maintains its simple, rugged character, and is very different from the imitative solutions of the commercial districts of the cities. The texture of the construction materials is not concealed by glass and uniform curtain walls, but used to form the design of the facades. This is also the particular feature of the projects of the **studio Archi-Union**, founded and directed by Philip F. Yuan, a professor at Tongji University engaged in the application of digital processes for the construction of architecture. Again in the case, the work avoids a decorative approach and stems from the suggestions and constraints of the place, translated into three-dimensional geometric configurations, some of which are hard to represent in terms of plan. This difficulty is also reflected in the identification of manual construction techniques that can comply as faithfully as possible with the complex ideas of the design. For Philip F. Yuan the challenge is to interpret Chinese traditional architecture through the combination of digital design tools, low-tech production meth-

ods and local materials. So an algorithm can transform the rigid pattern of a wall of prefabricated brick into the iridescent texture of silk, simply by rotating the angle at which the bricks are laid. The affinities in the work of Chinese architects are hard to identify in linguistic and typological terms, where experimentation prevails, but are instead evident in constructive and materic choices. The architecture of the “Shanghai school” alternates compact surfaces, often in fair-face reinforced concrete, with textures of bricks, wood and metal, chosen in close relation to the light that bathes and crosses them. The decisive tone of many of the solutions clearly prevails over attention to detail, in a reminder of the speed of design and construction. To indicate similarities of language in the work of these studios runs the risk of being a rather uninteresting exercise, it is better to underline the independence and autonomy of choices, that share their starting conditions and the goal of giving rise to a new, recognizable Chinese architecture. In the vast Chinese territory, Shanghai has traditionally been one of the most cosmopolitan cities, open to foreign influences. Much more than Beijing, also due to the presence of foreign communities, especially the English and the French, which had their precise enclaves and conducted trade in a way often independent of the central government. The city of Shanghai now appears as a place of experimental research where a new interest in architectural design is emerging, maybe even a true school, a significant model that – also in relation to the sector of higher education – could be extended to other contexts, for a new Chinese architecture.

CAPTIONS: pag. 41 *The traces of a recent industrial past coexist with new spaces for art at the entrance to the Long Museum. The large concrete partitions bend in an umbrella-like form and wrap the ruins of a structure for unloading coal from the 1950s. (photo Xia Zhi)* **pag. 42** *Left: exterior view (photo Alessandro Villa); right, a large interior space (photo Su Shengliang). The whole building is in exposed reinforced concrete, like a big inhabitable sculpture, while at the same time providing a neutral setting for the artworks on display. Below, section model of the building* **pag. 43** *The interior of the Long Museum at the ground floor features a sequence of communicating spaces, without barriers. The repetition, orientation and varied combination of the concrete vaults produce complex and at the same time legible spaces. The austerity is tempered by the shadings of light on the curved surfaces of the ceiling and the surprising views across the rooms. (photo Su Shengliang)* **pag. 45** *The position of the trees has determined the arrangement of the architectural volumes, a composition of rooms and passages resting on slender pillars that intersect the branches. The building blends with the vegetation but remains distinct in terms of the materials: steel and glass. (photo Su Shengliang)* **pag. 46** *In the projects of Archi-Union the study of surfaces represents much more than a ‘garment’; it embodies a constructive idea of architecture. Above, two images of the studio facility created in an abandoned industrial warehouse. A porous wall of concrete blocks, slightly off axis, defines the border and the visual richness of the construction obtained by means of an algorithm. On the facing page, below, the conceptual scheme of transposition of the iridescent effect of silk into the pattern of installation of the blocks* **pag. 47** *Left, the red brick facades of the Songjiang Art Campus. The non-linear laying of the bricks creates waves that distinguish the buildings of the complex. The use of digital techniques in the design of the surfaces makes it possible to develop precise schemes and special templates for the installation.*