

Chinese Museum Architecture – Aedes

In 2014 a total of 4164 museums were reported in China. 672 of these were owned by commercial industries or corporations, while 864 were initiated and owned by private individuals. It's interesting to compare these figures with the ones counted in 2009, totalling 2601 museums of which 464 were established by commercial industries and 277 by private individuals alone. In 1949 only 25 museums existed in China, which number was practically reduced to nil by the time of the cultural revolution in 1966. Such figures speak, but they are still 'humble' compared to the 35000 museums in the United States. Yet, it is the architecture of Chinese museums, which stands out. Indeed, it is not exaggerated to state that in China the architecture of museums comes first, before collection policies, exhibition programs, audience engagement, educational functions and staffing structures. The Chinese museum boom was very much due to new governmental, economical policies, having declared museum growth as part of the new economics, with spin offs such as real estate deals between the state and corporations and an enormous growth of private wealth. While recently the Chinese museum boom has slowed down in the coastal centers of Shanghai and in Beijing, with some privately owned museums closing down, new museums are quickly rising inland in second and third cities. And even if these newest museums do much better in terms of museology, education and staffing, it is the architecture which strikes before everything else. Such gives us a chance to evaluate the development of Chinese architecture per se. Indeed, a new breed of home grown architecture has become visible with a distinct attitude and vision.

A young generation of Chinese architects is drawing ideas on the best design- 'thinking' around the world, but their real strength is that they participate in tangible social and urban transformations in the peripheries of Chinese cities and even in rural areas.

It was interesting therefore to read the refreshing thoughts of Liang Ying Yu, curator of the Chinese pavilion at this year's architectural Biennial in Venice: 'Chinese architecture has been pioneering in the nation's modernization for the last three decades.....Whether we noticed it or not, while claiming victories for spectacular modernization, we are losing our home base.'

Liang Ying Yu pleads instead for an architecture which 'mediates communities' and makes design accessible to the lives of the majority. For instance, in Hangzhou two museums are currently being built which try to do exactly that. One is the Kengo Kuma, a museum of folk art, the other one will be called 'the international Design Museum'. Both new museums are linked to the excellent Hangzhou China Academy of Art, one of the country's top art universities. The design of the International Design Museum is led by Siza, Castegneira and Wang Shu. It will host the university's rich design collection, featuring Bauhaus objects as well as examples of De Stijl and the Deutsche Werkbund. But there is more.

The art school has established a Bauhaus institute that will provide a foundation for the museum's mission improving China's design culture. The museum leadership draws a parallel between Germany in the twenties and China today. And the latter needs to improve its industrial design, back to daily life. Away from superficial luxury and endless consumption. Back to normalcy. What a difference with the exhilarated words which could be read in the V&A catalogue 2008 'China Design Now' which celebrated, coinciding with the Olympics in Beijing, the emergence of a China - to be understood as Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen - as an exciting new player in the field of global design. But the new awareness of local responsibility is not entirely new. At the end of the 90's, I participated in a discussion in Guangzhou about Chinese architecture and urbanism. During the discussion, the young architect Doreen Heng Liu stated: 'In the past Chinese architects were always a tool of society working for the government and for the people who needed them but it was not viewed on the same level as art...What I learned (studying abroad) was to try to raise the level of architecture to that of art. And try to bring the ideas back home and work with the society. However, I found that the society is not mature enough to fulfill what I want.'

In 2005, in a discussion about Chinese museum architecture at Art Basel, led by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Hou Hanru, Chaos Yang Chen, who now heads the organization 'Wie Kultur' in Berlin, voiced the same concerns:

'The way museums in China work is totally out of sync with the speed and quantity of work that is requested to run art projects. There are many things to learn when working face to face with the audience and the artists.'

A harsh judgement, followed by even harsher judgements by Yung Ho Chang and Hou Hanru, which were repeated to me recently: 'Very often the museums being built

have no programs....and basically most of the projects are not in tune with public interest.'

Claire Hsu of Asia Art Archive wondered in the same discussion, if Hong Kong really needs four gigantic museums. She said: 'Will these new cultural facilities really address the needs or interests of the Hong Kong people?'

Very often the reason for building museums in China is the fast paced urbanization. And looking at the bigger picture, a great percentage of China's museums are solely due to unflagging property developments, partnering with corporations or enormously rich private individuals.

Though we have to be aware, that in the west, notions of private and public are very different from the Chinese concept of the same. In China, 'public' stands mostly for the 'official' side of things and 'private' is to be understood as 'people's private space'. The former is related to the State, the latter is more like a grassroots movement. Nevertheless, China is facing right now the beginning of the collapse of the private museum. Despite the rapid growth in numbers in recent years, a few have the ability to be sustainable. The Long Shen Museum closed down last month due to delayed payments of rent, after operating for a little more than one year. The UCCA in Beijing, after operating for eight years, announced recently it was up for sale. The dependency on single individuals only, the anti-corruption efforts of the current Chinese government, severe censorship and consequently degrees of self-censorship, along with developments in the Chinese art market such as failing auction sales and the sagging Chinese economy in general, make these museums fragile to say the least. It's therefore refreshing to see what else is happening in China at the museum front. Think for instance of the excellent, unique public programs in the field of architecture and design initiated by the Power Station of Art in Shanghai.

Let's listen again to Yung Ho Chang who stated already ten years ago: 'I do have a dream-museum. Actually two dream-museums. One is to be built with recycled material, reusing old materials because I see the concept of a museum always related to the notion of time. My second dream museum would be a museum so light that it's actually not permanent, because the collection, even if it is to be a permanent collection, expands and changes all the time. So I would like to see a museum which is formless, almost shapeless, so it can go through a metamorphosis when the needs change.' I thought this was an interesting dream. Chang's colleague, Wang Shu of

Amateur Architecture Studio, stated recently: ,One problem of professional architecture is that it thinks too much of a building. For me any building activity without comprehensive thoughtfulness will be insignificant.' Indeed, isn't the main problem of Chinese museum architecture that it thinks too much of ...architecture? All I can say, is that the architects at work in this exhibition are very thoughtful and thoughtful enough to require thoughtfulness from their commissioners and clients. In spite of failed museology, Chinese museum architecture is an important building typology, maybe it is the most important Chinese building typology right now.