



DONG GONG

2 0 1 9

Plym Distinguished

Visiting Professor

School of Architecture

University of Illinois

at Urbana-Champaign



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EDITED BY BOTOND BOGNAR
DESIGNED BY VECTOR ARCHITECTS

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Summer tide under
ocean-viewing
platform, Seashore
Chapel, completed
in 2015, photo by
WANG Zhen.

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Courtyard, Chang-
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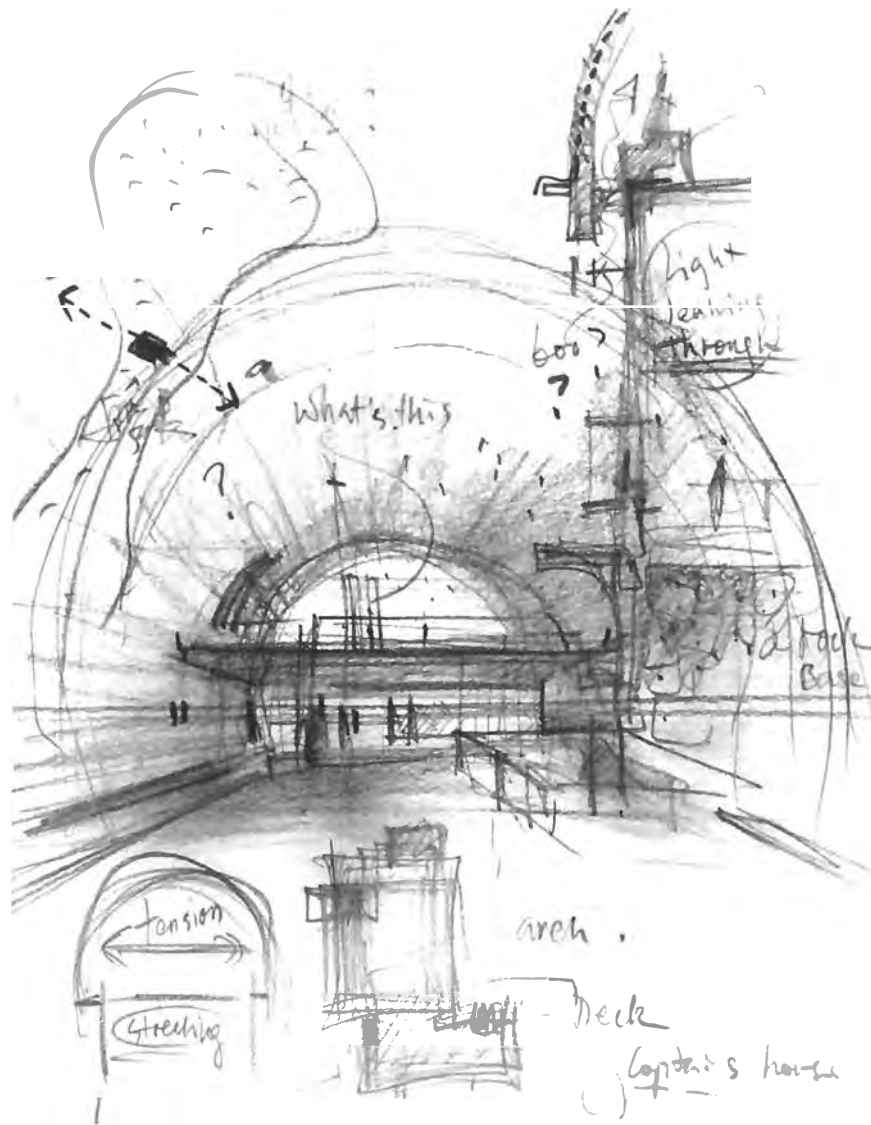
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Above
Sketch, Renovation
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House, 2016, graph-
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DONG Gong

Founder / Design Principal of Vector Architects
 Foreign Member of French Academy of Architecture
 Plym Distinguished Visiting Professor at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
 Visiting Professor at Tsinghua University



DONG Gong founded Vector Architects in 2008. He was elected as the Foreign Member of French Academy of Architecture in 2019 and in the same year, was appointed as the Plym Distinguished Visiting Professor at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He has been teaching Design Studios at Tsinghua University since 2014. He and Vector Architects have been invited to various major exhibitions, including the 2018 Free Space Venice Biennale, and have won international awards such as "100+ Best Architecture Firms" selected by *Domus* (2019); nominated for the Swiss Architectural Award (2018); the overall winner of the Italian "Archmarathon Awards" (2016); and the "Design Vanguard" selected by *Architectural Record* (2014).

DONG Gong has been invited as a guest speaker and critic by academic and professional institutions including Tsinghua University (China), the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (USA), the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zürich-ETH (Switzerland), and la Société Française des Architectes (France). Vector's projects have been published in *Casabella*, *The New York Times*, *A+U*, *Detail*, *The Architectural Review*, *Domus*, and many others.

The firm's representative works include the Renovation of the Captain's House, Seashore Library, Seashore Chapel, Chongqing Taoyuanju Community Center, Alila Hotel in Yangshuo, and Suzhou Intangible Cultural Center.

直向建筑

Vector Architects

Vector Architects in Beijing was founded in 2008. During eleven years' practice, we have always believed design needs to confront problems, and it should be the attitude an architect ought to possess. Regarding ontological architectural thinking, when designing architecture, we focus intensely on the issues of Site, Light, and Making.

No architecture can be without a site. We believe each site has its own certain spirit that already exists there. It could be a unique landscape, a bustling city scenario, or the people and their lively movements. What we favor is the discovery of such energy through a precise action in the architectural space and transform it into people's perceptions and lives. It is just like when we drop a pebble into the water, it generates expanding concentric ripples; this action enables us to realize the water flow. In this sense, architecture is neither the beginning nor the end. Instead, it is a medium, a medium to connect and reveal.

Natural light, while illuminating the fixed, tangible materials and boundaries of space, simultaneously dissolves their physical limitations. Light is an energy that imparts suffused emotions and lends ambience to space. As the sun moves along its trajectory throughout the day within the shifting conditions of weather and seasons, the evoked intangible quality is ever changing. In architecture, light is a phenomenon for our eyes to observe, and an aura in which to immerse our body and soul.

Architecture is the art of making. In the Chinese construction industry, many apparent shortcomings such as delays, chaos, and defects, are issues that architects might actually take advantage of, and transform them into positive potentials. We insist on the strategy of working together with construction workers. For each project, we send a site architect to participate in the entire process of construction – from the initial manufacture of, and experimentation with materials, the testing and correction of details, and later to conduct full on-site supervision in the spirit of cooperation. It is this long-lasting process of adaptation and collaboration that gives us more opportunities to learn the wisdom of making from the ingenious local and on-site workers, and so to constantly amend the limitations and deviations during the process of design.



Above
Office of Vector
Architects in Beijing,
photo by Marc Goodwin.

THE PLYM DISTINGUISHED VISITING PROFESSORSHIP

Jeffery S. Poss

Professor and Interim Director, FAIA



I am delighted to introduce this marvelous booklet that examines the tenure of the 2019 Plym Distinguished Visiting Professor Gong Dong. The Plym Distinguished Visiting Professorship is a special appointment within the UIUC School of Architecture. It is conferred upon an architect who has a renowned record of achievement and can make a positive contribution to the enrichment of the professional education of students. Gong Dong, the first graduate from our school to fill this role, was preceded by former Plym Professors Gunnar Birkerts, Paul Rudolph, Joseph Esherick, Minoru Takeyama, Edmund Bacon, Thom Mayne, Carme Pinos, Dominique Perrault, Frances Halsband, Norman Crowe, Ken Yeang, Kengo Kuma, Kenneth Frampton, and Juhani Pallasmaa. The professorship was made possible by a gift to the School in 1981 by the late Lawrence J. Plym of Niles, Michigan, past president of the Kawneer Corporation. Mr. Plym and his family have a warm, long-lasting association with the University of Illinois and the School of Architecture.

Gong Dong received a Bachelor & Master of Architecture from Tsinghua University, followed by his Master of Architecture from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where he completed his design thesis with now Emeritus Professor Henry Plummer. Gong went on to work for Solomon Cordwell Buenz & Associates in Chicago, then for Richard Meier & Partners and Steven Holl Architects in New York. In 2008, Gong Dong founded Vector Architects in Beijing and has been a visiting Studio Professor in Tsinghua University since 2014. The work of this young firm has been widely covered by the academic and professional media and acclaimed throughout the world. The firm's work is noteworthy for its sensitivity to site conditions, thoughtful application of materials, and seductive use of natural light.

Above
Prof. DONG Gong gave the lecture titled "New Into Old" after the final review of Plym Studio, photo by Vector Architects.



Top Left
Dean ZHU Pei (left) and Prof. DONG Gong in the final review of Plym Studio, photo by Vector Architects.

Top Right
Plym Studio student Colter Wehmeier presented his design and 1:100 spatial strategy model in the midterm review, photo by Vector Architects.

Next Page
West elevation, Seashore Library, completed in 2015, photo by SU Shengliang.

During the Spring 2019 semester, Gong Dong was in residence at Erlanger House, the mid-century masterpiece by the late Emeritus Professor Jack Sherman Baker, FAIA, now operated by the School of Architecture. Professor Botond Bognar, the Edgar A. Tafel Endowed Chair in Architecture, served as the faculty host and collaborated with Gong on the development of a Spring 2019 graduate studio, beginning with a site visit in January to China for the entire studio! Botond also coordinated Gong's various activities on campus, such as lectures, symposia, and a joint lecture with Gong and Zhu Pei, Dean of China Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA). While in residence, Gong provided our students and faculty many opportunities to develop a deeper understanding of his work and process. Gong transformed the Buell Hall design studio and Erlanger House into incubators of architectural activity, entertaining groups large and small of faculty, students, and guests. The very special collaboration of Gong and Botond will culminate in a November 2019 lecture given by Gong in Chicago, supported by the Alphawood Foundation of Chicago, and in partnership with the Chicago Architectural Biennial.

I am very fortunate to have had the opportunity to lead the School when Gong Dong was in residence. It has been a pleasure to get to know this gifted man, to observe close-up his unfolding career as an internationally recognized architect, and to see the deep bond he realized with the students at his alma mater.



WORK IN PHENOMENOLOGY DONG Gong - Architect and Plym Professor

Botond Bognar

Professor and Edgar A. Tafel Endowed
Chair in Architecture
Associate, Center for Advanced Studies,
University Scholar, University of
Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Laureate, Architectural Institute of
Japan Special Prize

It is not often that a professor can jointly teach a course with a former student.¹ Yet, this is exactly what happened when I co-taught a graduate studio with Gong Dong, one of the most prominent representatives of the new generation of Chinese architects. With a rapidly growing reputation since establishing his firm Vector Architects in 2008, Gong was invited as our School's next Plym Distinguished Visiting Professor. In this capacity, he joined the most accomplished and internationally recognized architects previously awarded this position, but the first who is also an alumnus of the School. Leading the studio, Gong was responsible

for both its program and requirements. Then, while attending to his increasingly busy practice in Beijing and absent from classes, supervising students' day-to-day work became my duty and pleasure.

Since Gong's graduation some two decades ago we have kept in touch and during my trips to China I was able to see several of his projects and discuss our common interest in architecture. Visiting his buildings was a powerful and most memorable experience, to say the least. Moreover, it once again proved to me that the quality and significance of any architec-



ture cannot be fully or properly assessed and appreciated without actually being exposed to it, engaged in it, thereby slowly discovering it.

Much of the attraction of Gong's buildings is engendered by their close connection to the site. In each of his projects, architecture and landscape are inseparable and mutually enhance each other. It might be said that his buildings refresh the landscape. In other words, in fostering such strong bonds and intimate interactions between the two, he also proves to be an exceptional master of transforming the everyday reality of a given scene's presence to make our

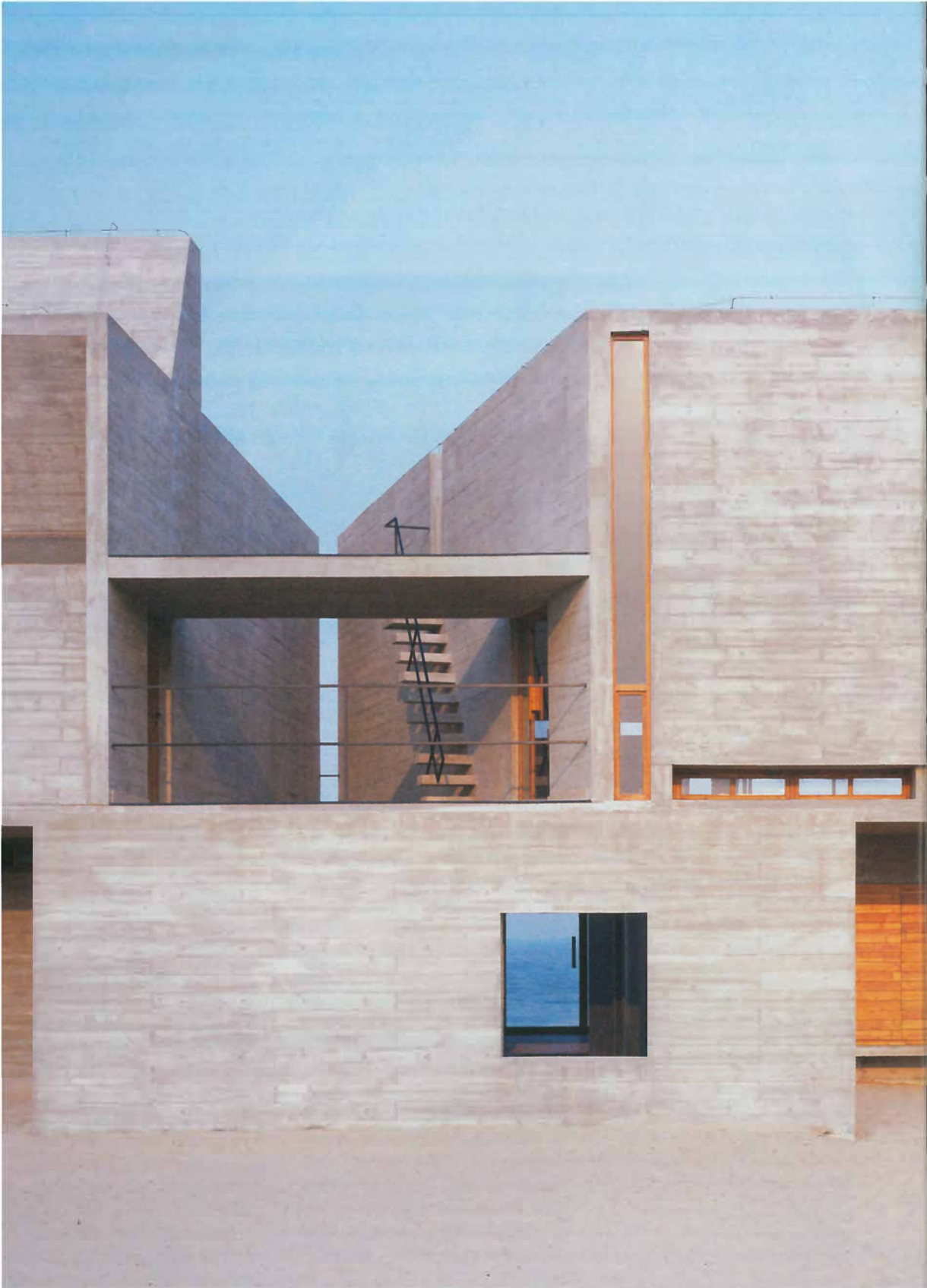
perception of it more profound. This new reality we encounter at his *Alila Hotel in Yangshuo*, the *Seashore Chapel* and *Seashore Library* in Beidaihe, borders on the hallucinatory or the surreal.

Gong orchestrates sequences of spaces while choreographing the movements of visitors through them in a hide-and-seek manner and so always with a sense of anticipation and mystery. Spaces folding around freestanding walls or corners, as much as his carefully calibrated apertures or narrow slits in walls, roofs, and even through entire buildings, offer unique vistas and/or unexpected glimpses

Opposite
Students working in
Plym Studio, photo
by Prof. Botond
Bognar.

Top
Prof. DONG Gong
gave the workshop
in Vector Architects
office in Beijing
during the China vis-
its, photo by Vector
Architects.





Top
Reading area, Seashore Library, photo by SU Shengliang.

Opposite
Close-up view of west elevation, Seashore Library, photo by CHEN Hao.



of things to come, increasing our curiosity while triggering our imagination. Framed and seen as if through a high-powered telescope, phenomena are brought into sharper focus, subtly altered by our particular means of observing, thus heightening our awareness of them.

Such a modus operandi is not unlike the one that shaped historic Chinese as well as Japanese architectures and gardens with their Buddhist-inspired milieu and the intrinsic capacity to let us envision and sense the poignancy and transient nature of our own world and existence. Along with these qualities, one can detect in Gong's work the best of Le Corbusier, Steven Holl, and Tadao Ando infused with the traits of China's long-standing architectural culture. All these, rendered by him with no traces of sentimentality or nostalgia, are convincingly transformed into something unmistakably new, contemporary, modern, and authentic.

Rather than catering to busy and frivolous formalistic solutions and

largely empty spectacles prevalent in today's popular and commercialized world, Gong's architecture invites us to pause, to nurture our sensitivity to ephemera, the transitory nature and poignancy of things. His spaces are quiet but not entirely silent; they speak to us in *sotto voce*; they are timeless but not without a sense of the incessant, though almost imperceptible passing of time. Here things happen at their own pace; they reveal themselves slowly and almost by stealth. Amid the enigma of this transformative process we are prompted to take our time to observe and absorb them. The introduction of natural light through intricately placed yet often concealed openings, and the selected materials, whose textured surfaces act as screens for light and shadows to sweep across, play significant roles, bestowing an unhurried dignity upon all.

Gong's architecture is the outcome of a rare craftsmanship. While paying much attention to the particulars of constructing his buildings, he also aspires to the art of crafting



the possibility for richer, more insightful human experiences to authenticate our own existence within the physical world. Nothing elucidates better his intentions toward such crafting than his evocative sketches and paintings in which he envisages what he calls the “atmosphere” of the spaces to be created. These renderings are never solidly lined or immutably complete; they are speculative, tentative, and thus nebulous, yet always emotionally suggestive.

It is not surprising that the intention of his Plym studio was similarly explorative or experimental; it called for conceiving spaces, each with its unique range of atmosphere. The goal was to cultivate students’ sensibilities toward a way of crafting architecture that could engage a wide range of natural and human phenomena, and in so doing to make it an integral part of the site and the broader environ-

ment, both physical and cultural. The building to be designed was a new farmers’ market and community center in one of Beijing’s old and dilapidated *hutong* residential areas, now under a preservation program. After sketching and devising plans and physical models for site-strategy and spatial strategy, in the final stage of the work each student was required to craft a large-scale sectional model of one public space in the project and, while using the intended actual materials, to work out its proper structural solution. Upon carefully exposing this spatial model to direct sunlight, the achieved spatial atmosphere needed to be recorded and revealed on large photographic prints.

At the outset of the studio, the class was able to visit and observe the project’s site in Beijing and the surrounding city. Students were required to record their findings,

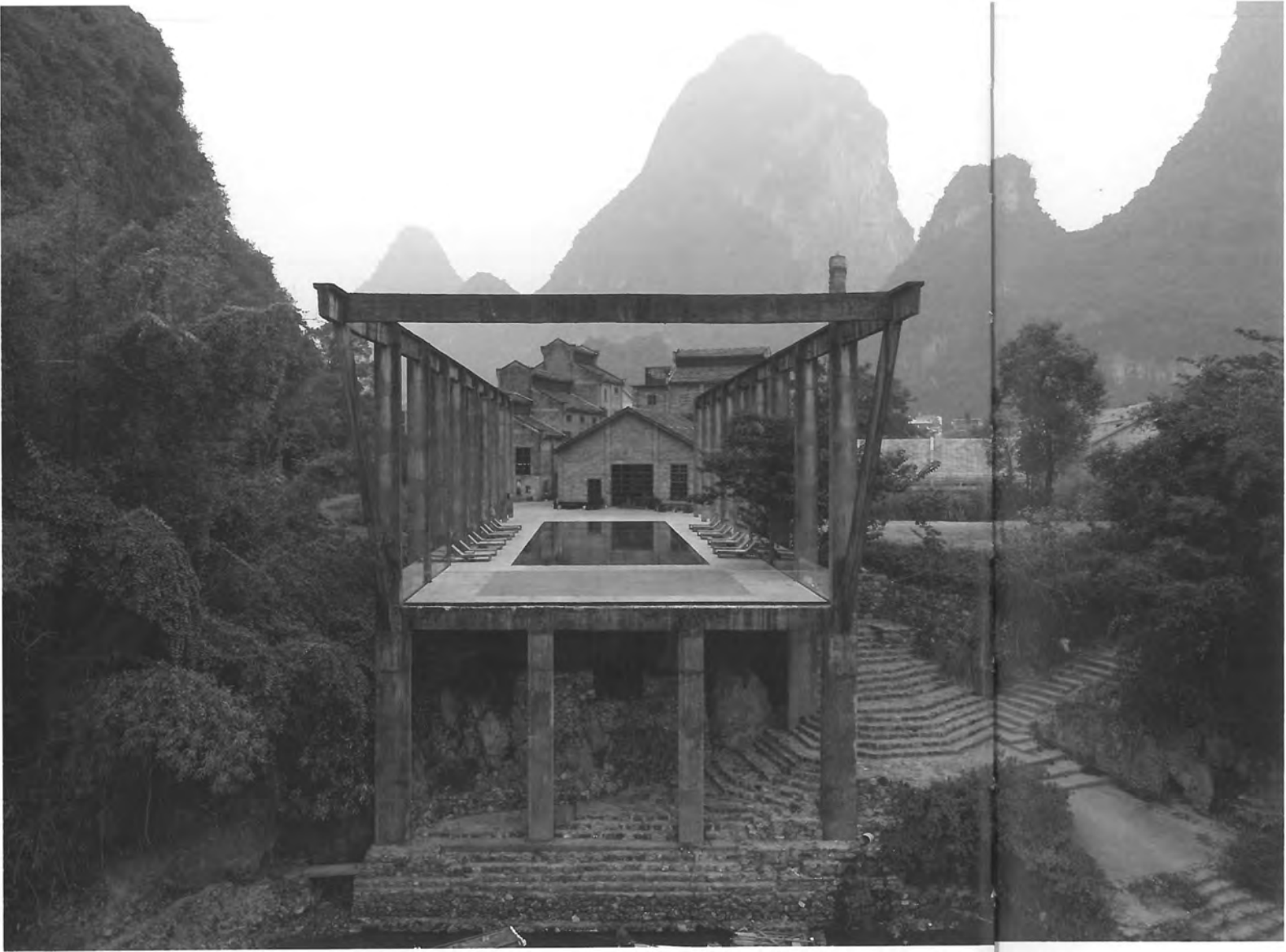


Left
Plym Studio student Adam Souhrada presented his design in the final review, photo by Prof. Botond Bogнар.

Opposite
Activity room, Seashore Library, photo by SU Shengliang.

Previous Page
Reading area, Seashore Library, photo by CHEN Hao.





Above
Swimming pool and wharf, Alila Yangshuo, completed in 2017, photo by SU Shengliang.

Opposite
Prof. DONG Gong gave an on-site workshop at Alila Yangshuo, photo by Vector Architects.

Next Page
North facade of main building, Alila Yangshuo, photo by SU Shengliang.



which were discussed in short seminars lead by Professor Dong. The travel to China included a two-day trip to the *Alila Hotel in Yangshuo*, where students could personally experience one of his most outstanding works not only within its hauntingly dramatic setting in the previously abandoned and now skillfully reused sugar factory, but also the stunningly beautiful mountainous Chinese landscape around. Altogether, the Plym studio provided students with a special and much needed learning

opportunity and the experience of a lifetime. Yet, Gong Dong's architecture is bound to serve as a strong inspiration also to everyone who becomes familiar with it and, even more so to those who have the chance to directly experience it.

¹ Professor Henry Plummer, now Emeritus Professor, was Gong's actual thesis adviser who worked with him, while I was a member of his Thesis Committee.



DONG GONG'S CHINESE PUZZLES: Meaning in the Work of Vector Architects

Juhani Pallasmaa

Architect, Writer
Professor Emeritus at Aalto University,
Helsinki
Plym Distinguished Visiting Professor
at University of Illinois at Urbana-
Champaign, 2010

After the era of ideologically directed eclectic traditionalism and later decades of imported Western commercialized architecture, China has now produced a score of remarkable architects, who are conceiving variations of a new Chinese cultural regionalism. Their projects reflect both Chinese historical traditions and atmospheres, and the Western masters of modern abstraction, such as Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn. At the time when architecture in the wealthy Western consumer world is becoming increasingly aestheticized, manipulative, and existentially meaningless, China and many of the countries in the Far East, Africa, and Middle and South America are producing buildings that arise from life's realities and limitations to reflect an assuring aesthetic of necessity and reduction.

The best Chinese architects create architecture that has a deep cul-

tural and mental echo, and a sense of reality and lived experience that reinforces and celebrates life. Meanings in art and architecture cannot be fabricated or invented, as they stem from a full sense of life and the depth of tradition. They can only reflect the designer's authentic personality, ethical sense, and empathic capacity. All true art re-activates and re-articulates the invisible threads of tradition. Even the most radical art works allow us to grasp and value the continuum of culture.

One of the Chinese architects today, whose work fuses and integrates the worlds of timeless Chinese culture and technological contemporaneity, is Gong Dong and his firm Vector Architects in Beijing. His works do not emulate traditional Chinese motives, but his buildings radiate a convincing Chinese character. They could not emerge anywhere else. These



Top
Cave space, Alila
Yangshuo, photo by
SU Shengliang.

Opposite Top
Hotel view from vil-
lage, Alila Yangshuo,
photo by SU Shengli-
ang.

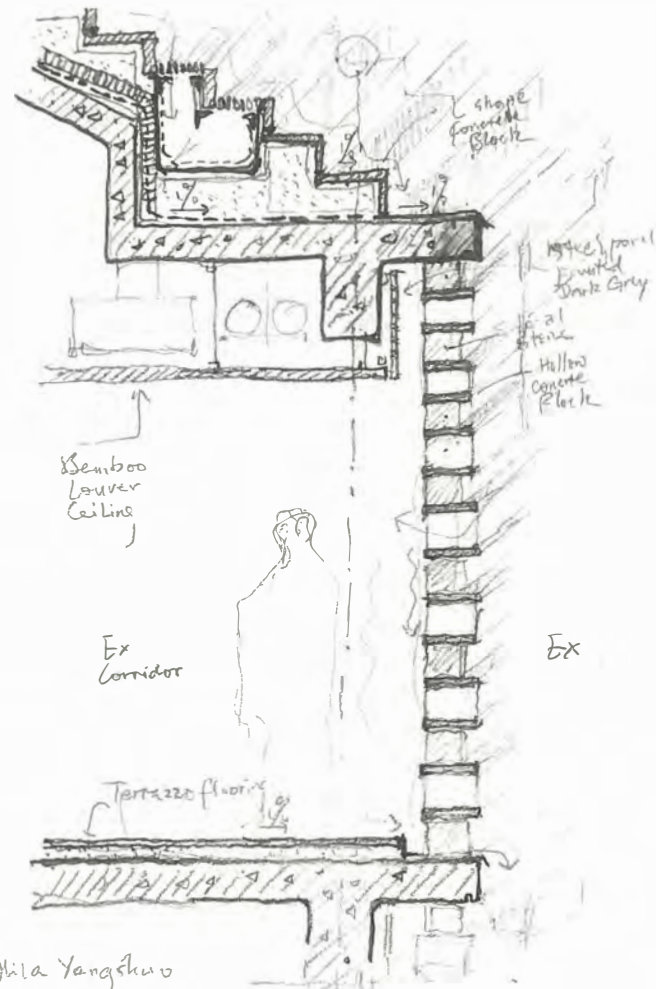
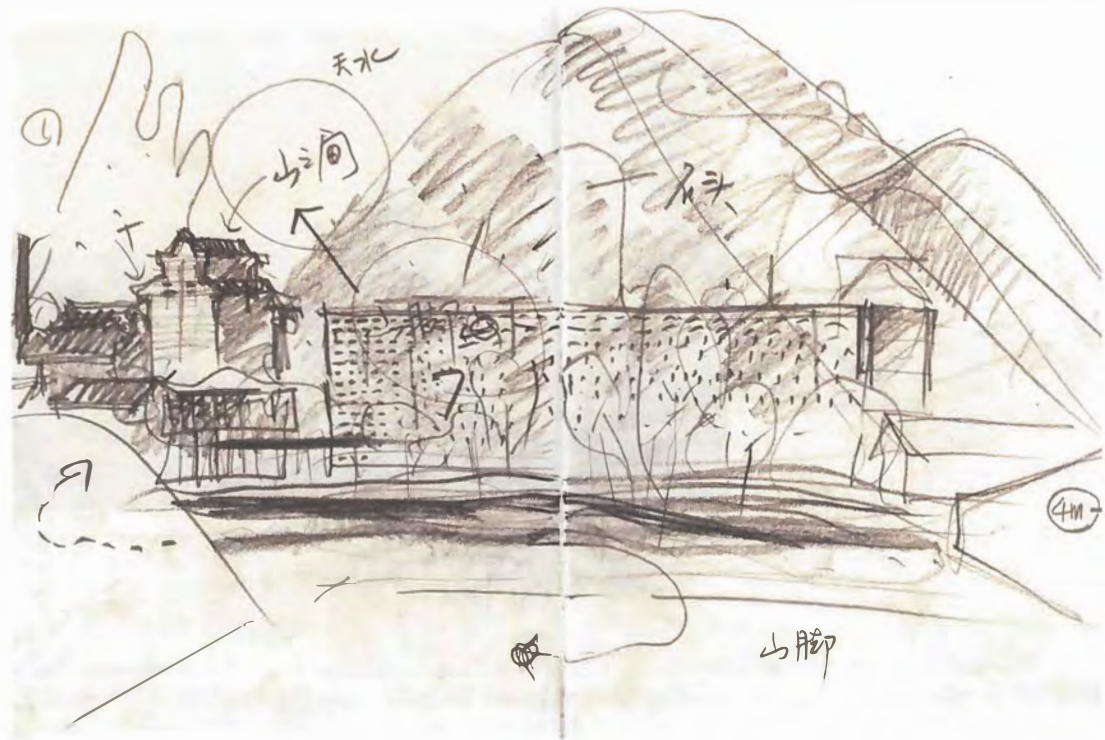
Opposite Bottom
Swimming pool and
industrial truss, Alila
Yangshuo, photo by
CHEN Hao.

buildings seem to reflect "the deep structure" of Chinese culture, to use a notion of Chomskyan linguistics.

The *Alila Hotel in Yangshuo* (2014-17) expresses the interaction of the past and present through the juxtaposition of a partly reconstructed sugar cane factory, an abstracted modern language, and the archetypal Chinese mountain scenes surrounding it, to remind us of classical Chinese landscape paintings. The entity is based on a number of dualities such as weight and lightness, materiality and abstracted surfaces, ornamental and plain, light and shadow, harmony and contrast. The bamboo canopy occupies its space between two buildings with the unexpectedness and authority of a living creature, whereas the repetitious clarity of the new structures plays against the whimsical outlines of the mountains. Water pools not only

create a world of calm reflection, but also a feeling of refined and dignified luxury. The long pool surrounded by columns suggests a classical ruin, perhaps of Roman origin, and radiates a dreamlike air. The elevated swimming pool is another example of the architect's themes of contrasting flight and gravity. Water naturally rests on the ground before seeping into the earth, but here the architect's choice intentionally underlines a constructed artificiality. Here reality and sur-reality co-exist.

The *Renovation of the Captain's House* in Fujian (2016-17) is located in the coastal town's maze-like urban context. In its silhouette, the structure stands out through its semi-circular roof shape, but next to the sea, ship hulls, and fishing boats it feels at home. At the same time the building is simple and complex in its themes, formal and cozy, ordered and casual — espe-



Alila Yangshuo
Detail (staircase) 2014

Left
Wall section sketch,
Alila Yangshuo,
2014, graphite pencil
on paper.

Opposite
Sketches on site, Ali-
la Yangshuo, 2013,
graphite pencil on
paper.



cially in its use of dark brown wood to create sub-spaces of tactile intimacy and warmth, such as the occupiable windows within the cast concrete and plastered structural surfaces. The vaulted upper floor projects a celebratory and spiritual ambience.

The *Seashore Chapel* in Beidaihe (2015) simultaneously suggests an instrument of flight, a vessel sailing in space, and an elevated artificial ground. The roof's extreme steepness abstracts the volume into the symbolic visual gesture of two hands in prayer depicted in countless religious paintings since the Middle Age. The ascension to the Chapel underlines its marine imagery and it is boarded as one would a ship ready for its spiritual journey. It also creates an association with Noah's Ark, the vessel that saved earthly life during the Flood. The view from the Chapel to the sea practically pulls the visitor's consciousness to sublime dimensions. The structure is also a rich instrument of illumination

with occasional appearances of colors as sunlight washes and caresses the textured walls evoking a subtle tactile awareness.

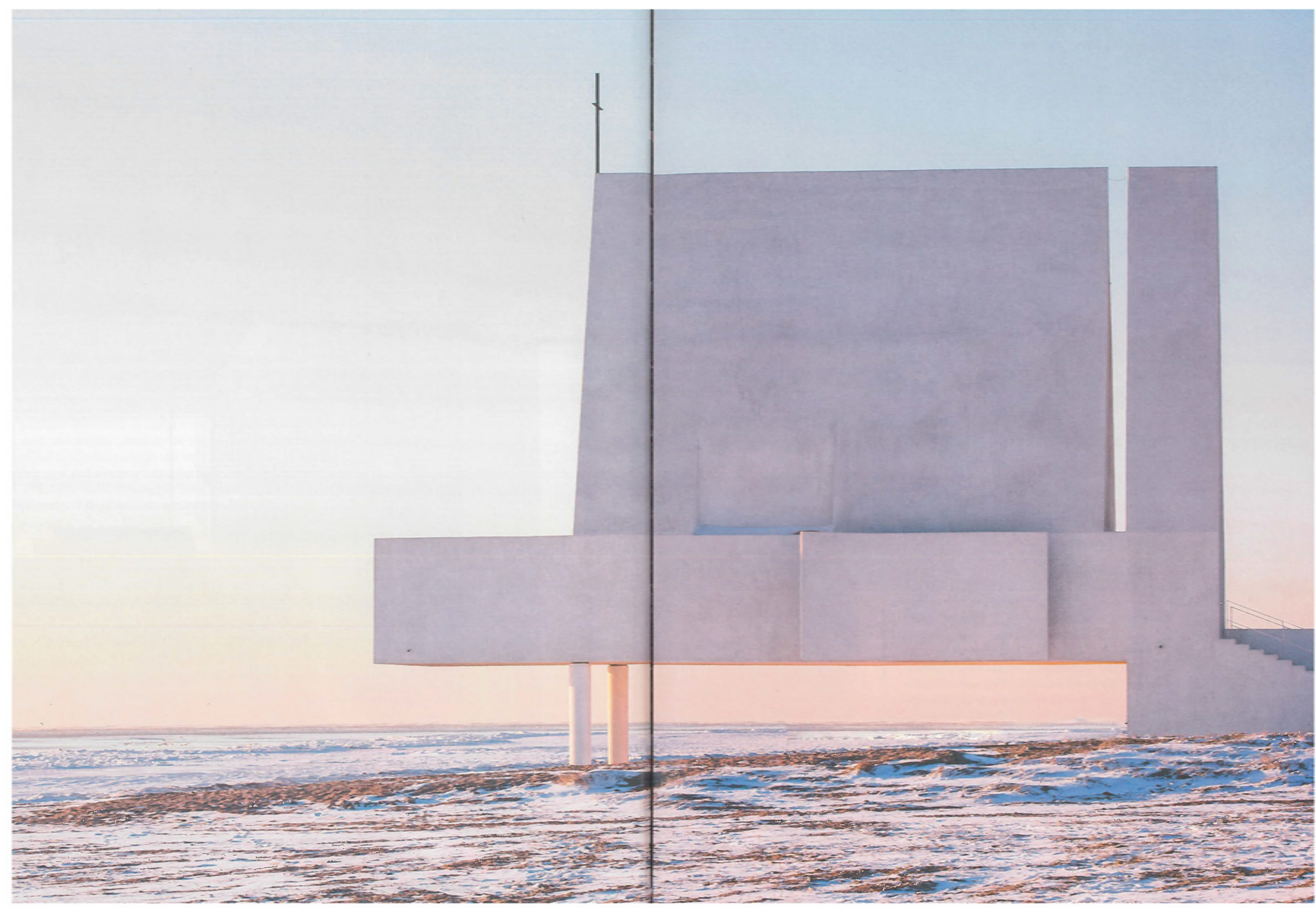
Another seaside project, the *Seashore Library* in the Beidaihe (2014-15) also takes advantage of its location next to the sea. The library's three stepped levels create a magnificent spectator stand to observe the varying characteristics of weather and illumination over the sea. The three differing horizontal window layers crossing the entire length of the building articulate the view and distance to make the sea an essential part of the library experience. Furthermore, experientially the library turns into a vessel, suggestive of a journey of imagination. The spaces and volumes are interwoven instead of simply being placed side by side. This weaving into spatial and interlocking volumetric puzzles seems to be one of Dong's design strategies, but I also see this interweaving in the works of other leading architects in today's China.

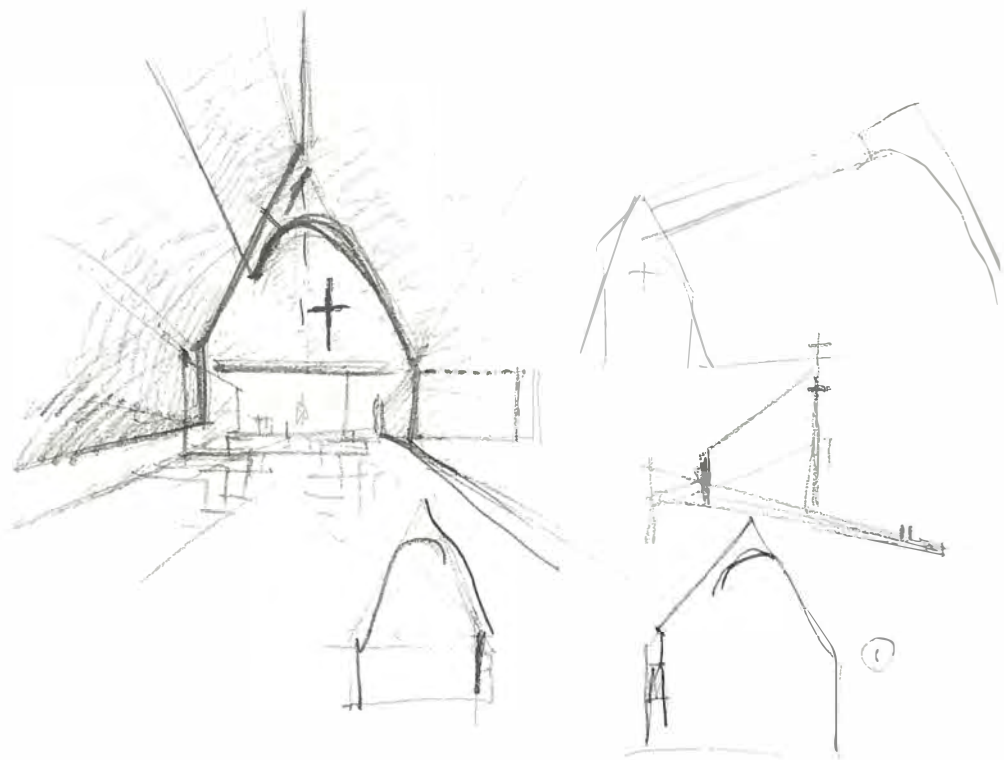


Top
Multifunctional living space, Renovation of the Captain's House, completed in 2017, photo by CHEN Hao.

Opposite
Interior view of auditorium in summer, Seashore Chapel, photo by CHEN Hao.

Next Page
North elevation in snow, Seashore Chapel, photo by Vector Architects.





In contrast to Western architecture aiming at clarity, Chinese architecture seems to favor complexity and enigma.

Gong Dong's sketches reveal his concern for the feeling of the weight of the walls in contrast to various grids and lattices of concrete and surfaces in wood. His drawings not only show the lines and edges of surfaces, but also the sense of materiality. Moreover, the weight, thickness, and surface texture is mediated, as is the play of light and shadow. The architect's sketches and drawings evoke a sensory experience instead of mere geometric reality.

Gong Dong's buildings project a calming sense of reality and metaphysical melancholy. In art and architecture, melancholy arises from the fundamental realization

and acceptance of the temporality of human existence and its basic mystery. In his buildings, the sense of existential melancholy and gravity are reminiscent of Albrecht Dürer's impressive engraving *Melencolia I* of 1514, in which the world of architecture is suggested by geometric solids. What the architecture of our obsessive consumer age misses most today is an existential seriousness, sincerity, and meaning. The task of architecture is not only to provide utilitarian and aestheticized settings for our daily activities, but also to make our lives more meaningful and dignified.



Above
Melencolia I, 1514,
engraving, by Al-
brecht Dürer.

Top
Sketch, Seashore
Chapel, 2015, graph-
ite pencil on paper.

Opposite
View from Piano
Room to Auditorium,
photo by CHEN Hao.



VECTOR ARCHITECTS

Kenneth Frampton

Ware Professor at the Graduate School of Architecture and Planning, Columbia University, New York
Plym Distinguished Visiting Professor, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2008/2009

Certain young Chinese practices such as Vector Architects directed by Gong Dong have brilliantly assimilated the syntactical legacy of both pre-war Russian Constructivism and the Purist discourse of Le Corbusier.

At the same time, Vector's capacity to rework the modern project in relation to China's profoundly rooted past is just as evident in their so-called *Courtyard Hybrid* work of 2015 in which they demonstrate their capacity to work with tradition in a particularly sensitive way. What is hard to believe in all these

instances is the extraordinary responsiveness of the client, which in each case and for different reasons, has allowed Vector Architects to take the lead, so to speak.

Of all the works they have been able to achieve to date, the *Seashore Library* is surely the most remarkable, particularly given the fact that the client was the local developer of a nearby residential settlement, so that the library functions in part as an exotic communal attraction and stimulus. However, it is the form and the program of the library

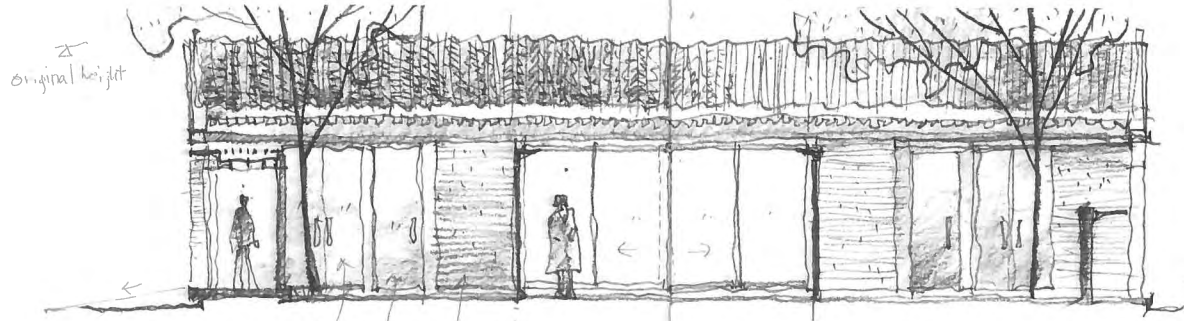
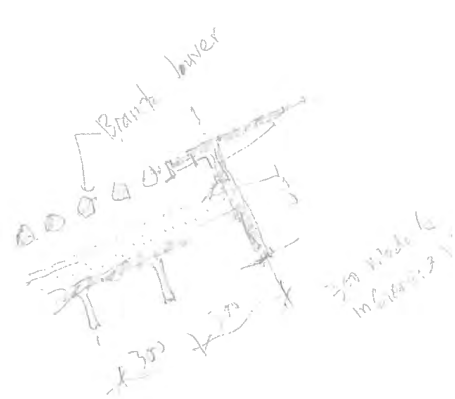


Opposite Top
Aerial view, Courtyard Hybrid, completed in 2017, photo by XIA Zhi.

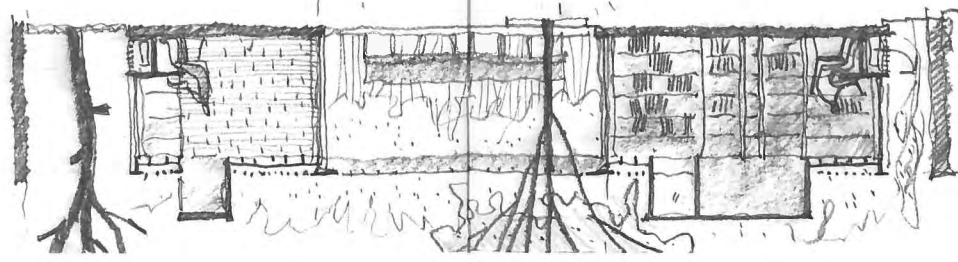
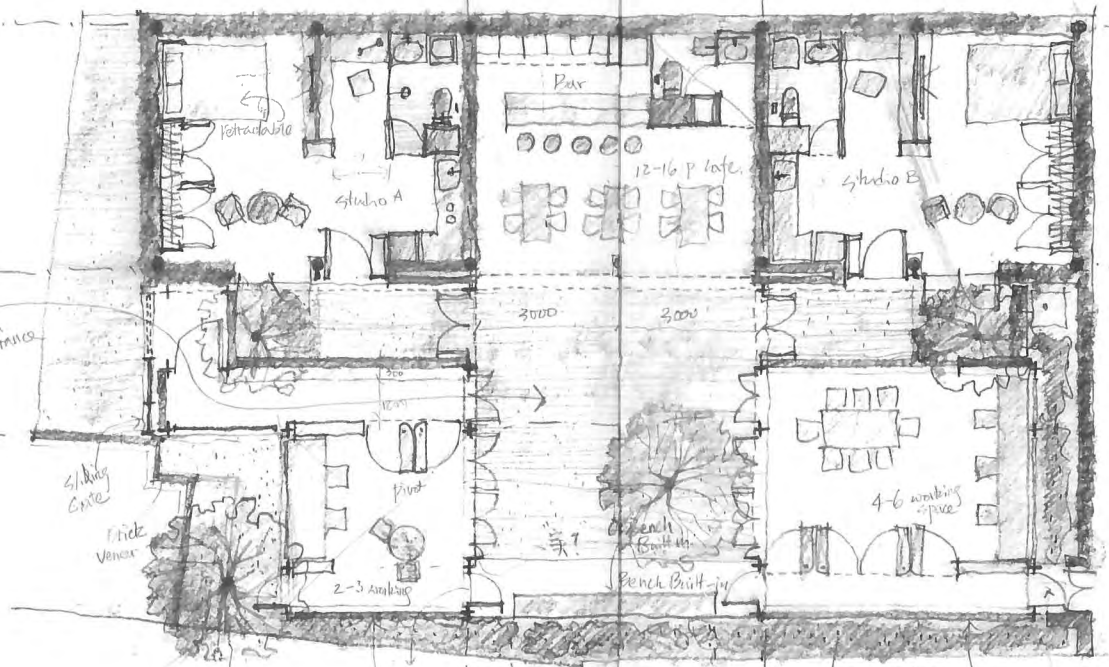
Opposite Bottom
Main entrance, Courtyard Hybrid, photo by XIA Zhi.

Next Page
Sketch, Courtyard Hybrid, 2015, graphite pencil on paper.





Weathering? Wind proof? Brick?







that are so atypical. While the library has ample bookshelves, now somewhat empty, and reading desks, the building is not first and foremost a library. As is often the case with the generic provincial library type today, it is as much a community center as it is a library and moreover, in this instance, it is conceived as a kind of theatrical belvedere overlooking the sea. The lower floor is equipped with full height glazed double doors opening directly to the beach and the ocean as though it is expecting an entire congregation to emerge from the sea. Thereafter the enigmatic volume is organized as though it were a set of auditorium galleries

looking on to an empty stage with the horizon of the ocean as a backdrop. This all but surreal section encompasses a narrow foreshore in which the *mise-en-scene* is ultimately the people themselves moving back and forth, or alternatively climbing up to look down on the empty stage that they themselves have previously occupied.

Obviously designed to appeal to a younger generation, this extremely successful yet nonetheless bizarre arrangement is symbolic, all but inadvertently of a totally new beginning in Chinese architectural culture, as exciting and optimistic as it is informal.

Above
Multifunctional
room and courtyard,
Courtyard Hybrid,
photo by XIA Zhi.

Opposite Top & Bot-
tom
Sketches, Seashore
Library, 2015, graph-
ite pencil on paper.

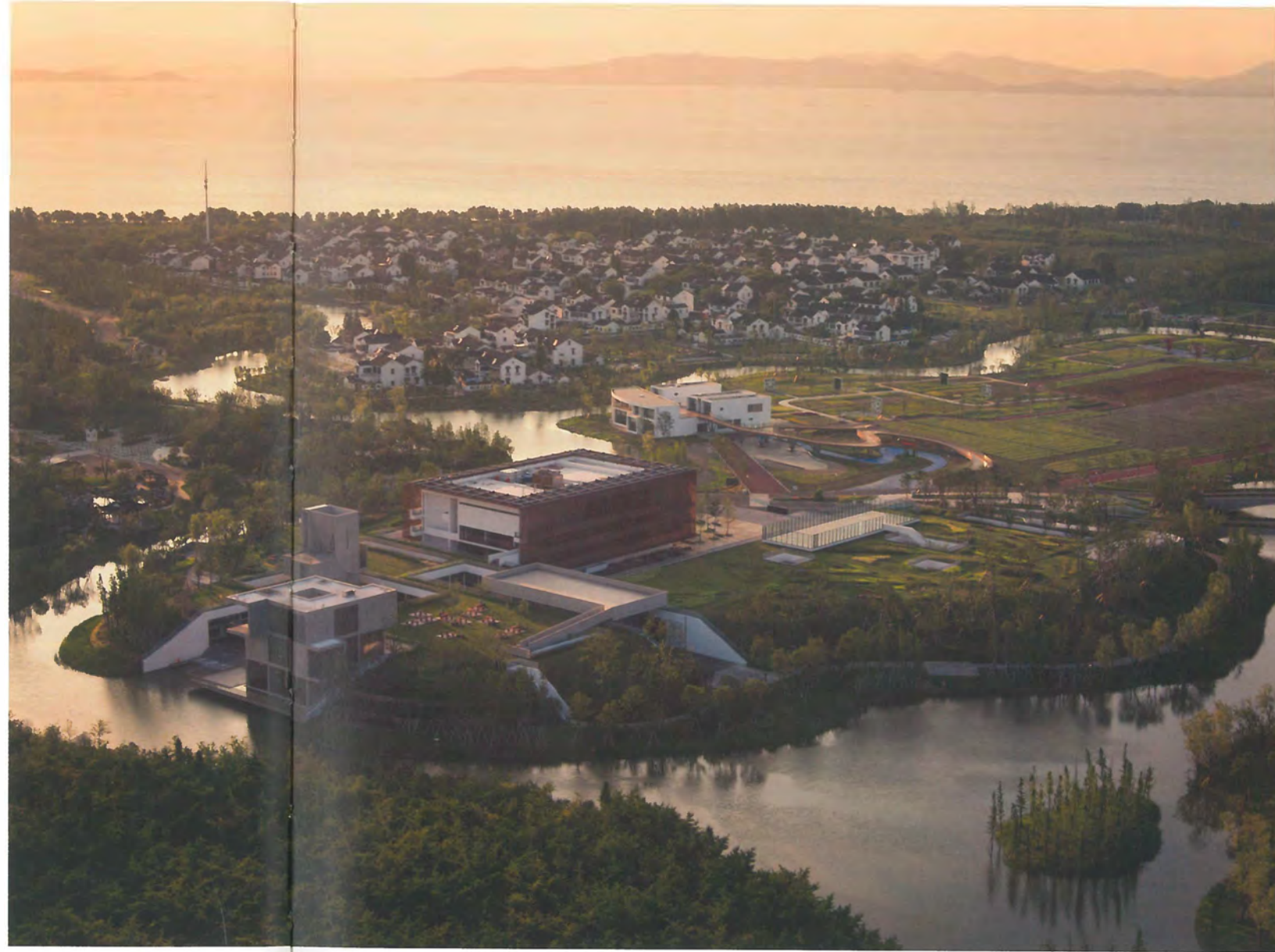




This is never more evident than the *Suzhou Intangible Heritage Museum* realized by the designs of Vector Architects in 2018. This complex work is situated on what is in effect a peninsular of land jutting out in the bend of a river. In the last analysis it is as much a landscape as it is a building because a great deal of the accommodation is subterranean and covered with a continuous half-wild greensward. It is not easy, at a distance, to fully understand the brief for this work, as it erupts here and there into a number of cubic pavilions, the concatenations of which are vaguely reminiscent of Le Corbusier's *Shodan House* in Ahmedabad with each one looking out over the landscape toward the sea. Built in celebration of

Suzhou's famous gardens, it is, in itself, a wild garden undulating somewhat randomly over what is, in effect, a major cultural institution, simultaneously acting as both a museum and a theater.

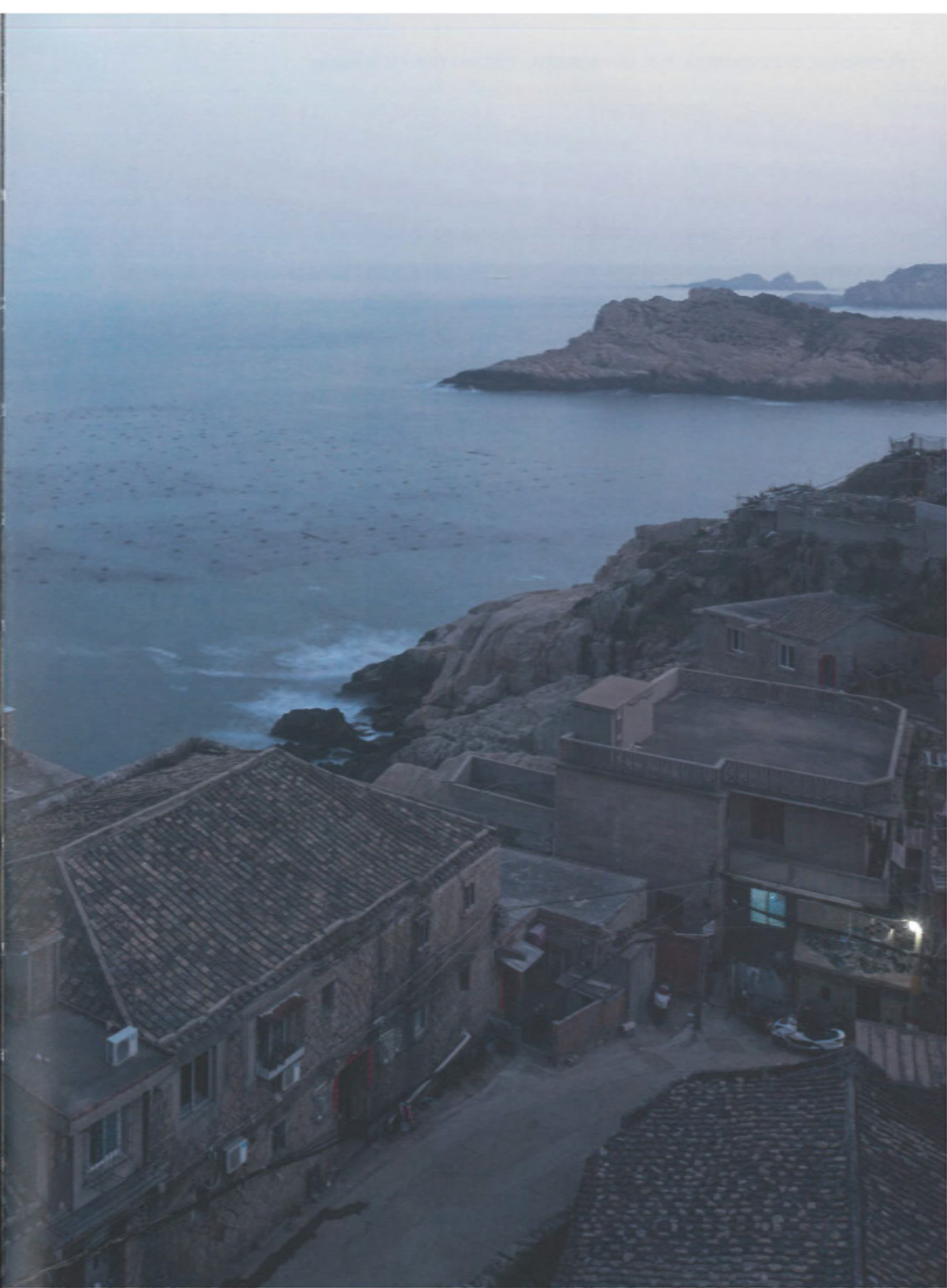
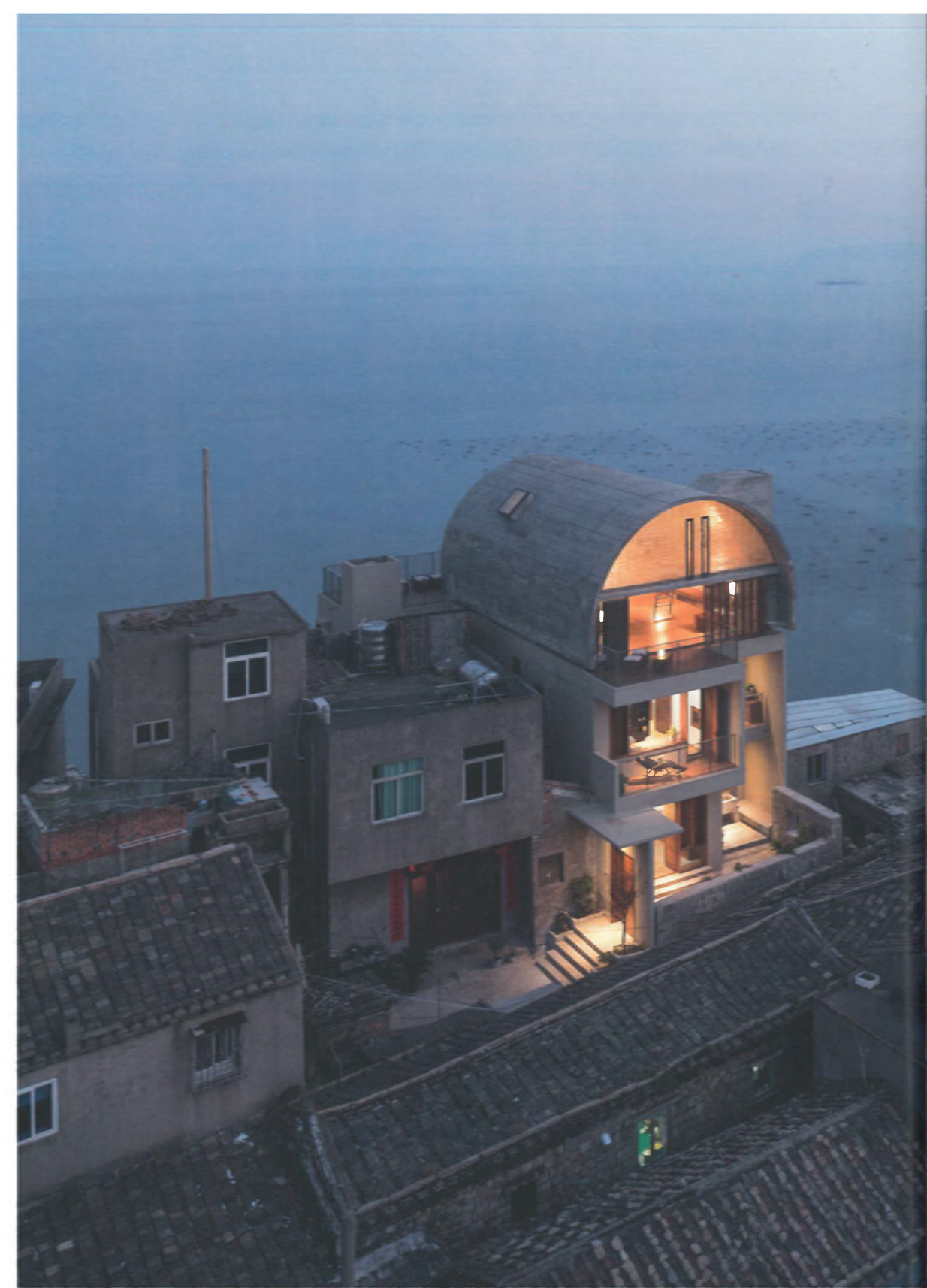
Last but not least, one can hardly ignore the extraordinary achievement of the so-called *Renovation of the Captain's House* completed in Fujian in 2017, which surprisingly recalls the early work of Arata Isozaki, during the brief period when he favored the use of semi-circular concrete vaults. Here the vault with its cubic body is inserted into the time-honored fabric of a seaside port, asserting its newness but, at the same time, looking as if it has always been there.



Above
Southeast aerial view, Suzhou Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum, completed in 2016, photo by Eiichi Kano.

Opposite
Loft, Renovation of the Captain's House, photo by CHEN Hao.

Previous Page
View from veranda to observation tower and dome theater, Suzhou Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum, photo by CHEN Hao.



MODERNISM, TECTONIC STRATEGY, AND SPIRITUAL EXPLORATION: The Design Practice of DONG Gong and Vector Architects

LI Xiangning

Deputy Dean, Professor, College of
Architecture and Urban Planning,
Tongji University



Top
Multifunctional living space, Renovation of the Captain's House, photo by CHEN Hao.

Opposite
Manufacture and construction of hollow concrete blocks, Alila Yangshuo, photo by Vector Architects.

Previous Page
Evening view, Renovation of the Captain's House, photo by Chen Hao.

Next Page
Courtyard view from reading space, Suochengli Neighborhood Library, completed in 2017, photo by SU Shengliang.



The explosion of contemporary Chinese architecture over the past three decades has created enormous practical opportunities for both international and Chinese architects. But within the past decade, Chinese architects have gradually revealed a critical reflection toward this development model. This reflective criticality points to the pursuit of quality while questioning the quantity and speed of architectural development. Moreover, it also implies a re-evaluation of the relationship between Western modernity and the Chinese architectural tradition.

At the 2014 Venice Biennale, director Rem Koolhaas gave the 65 participating countries the task of addressing the theme of "Absorbing Modernity," inadvertently revealing the discrepancies between Chinese and Western concepts of modernity and modernization.

During the Chinese economic reform period in the 1980s, the country distanced itself from the influence of Soviet architecture and formalism and had not had time to digest the true meaning of modernist architecture. A surging wave of Western post-modernism and deconstructivism consecutively flooded the world of Chinese architecture. Today, architects are beginning to address this missing period of collective enlightenment. The modernist approach to research and practice concepts such as space, light, materials, and archetypes are reappearing in contemporary China. Gong Dong is undoubtedly one of the architects who best showcases this reflective backtracking.

Perhaps the early days of his career at the studios of Richard Meier and Steven Holl allowed Gong Dong to create his architectural



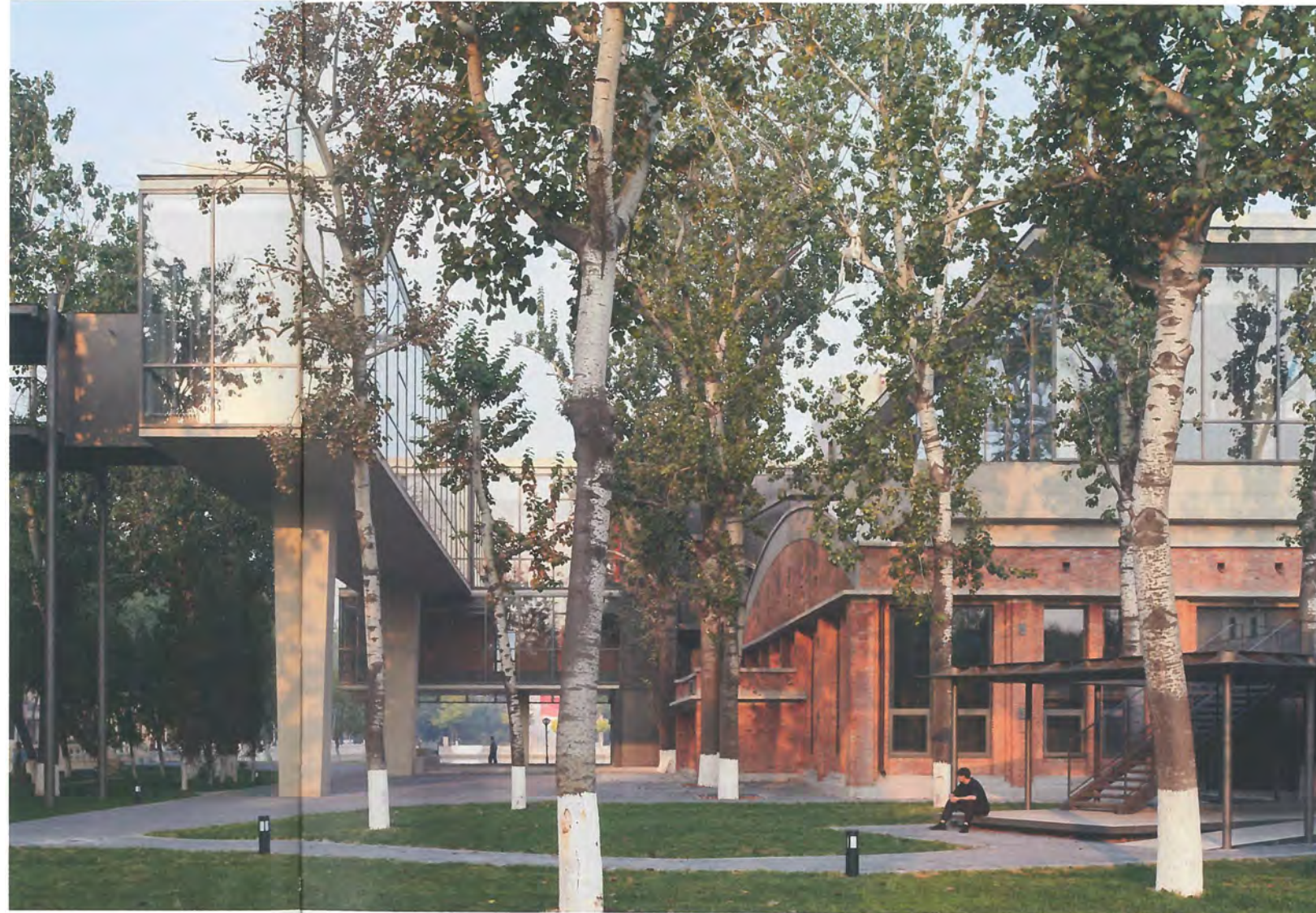


language: his buildings integrate Meier's modernist tradition of using the color white and Holl's phenomenological experience of light and atmosphere. Gong Dong's architectural language tends to be a simple, monolithic mass of centripetal aggregates. By slicing and excavating a rectangular body on a nearly empty space, he reverses the shape of the rectangle by guiding the view inward.

Gong Dong's two "lonely" buildings in the Beidaihe New District of Qinhuangdao — the *Seashore Library* and the *Seashore Chapel* — have a mesmerizing interior visual effect through sophisticated light manipulation. These two works use

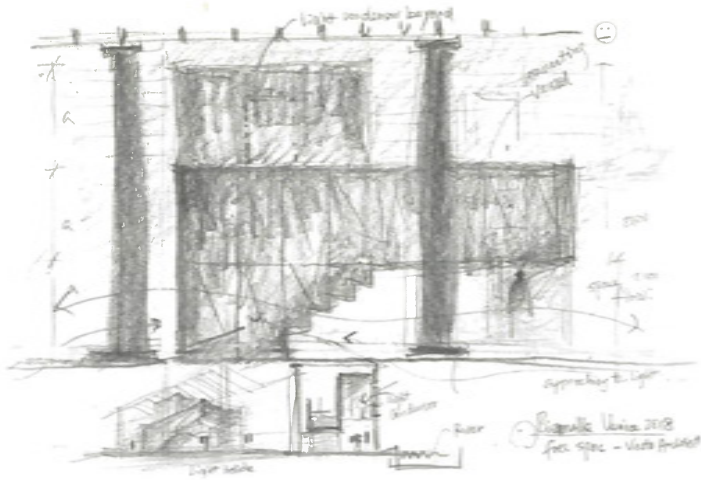
their cross-section as the starting point for the design by mirroring the mystery and sublimity of light manipulation of Kahn and Holl, or Corbusier's chapel of *Notre-Dame du-Haut* in Ronchamp, to the extreme. Gong Dong's buildings are not merely containers for the human use of space, but rather a container for capturing light. The horizontal, vertical, pointed, transparent, translucent, and diffuse reflections of different light rays are projected on to plain concrete surfaces. The isolated seaside setting of the buildings is matched by a monastic solitude.

The manipulation of landscape, vision, and light, as well as the



Above
East view, Faculty
Development Center
of Nankai University,
completed in 2019,
photo by XIA Zhi.

Opposite Top
View from Seashore
Library to Seashore
Chapel, Seashore
Library, photo by
WANG Zhen.



dramatic contrast of weight and weightlessness, represent an important theme of his work. Another recurring topic is the exploration of simple, yet delicate materials based on structural studies. In the *Alila Hotel in Yangshuo* and the *Nankai University Faculty and Student Culture Development Center*, the volume of the buildings is almost dissolved in the vague haze of glass and grille skins. The emergence of this effect is based on the recognition of contemporary Chinese low-tech construction and production systems, as well as the development of on-site tectonic strategies.

Gong Dong is one of the representatives of a generation of Chinese architects who bridge Western and Chinese architectural traditions. They have consciously and unconsciously accepted the language of modernism and have tried to make up for the lack of modernist

enlightenment in contemporary China. Based on this modernist language, he has developed a set of material and tectonic strategies adapted to China's current social situation, upgrading its limited construction quality to a spatial quality with spiritual power.

At the same time, he is one of the very few architects to be recognized by both the public and the media for his high-quality works. International architectural circles are overrun with a politically correct language, while Chinese architecture is inevitably trapped in imagery and mass scale, and rapid construction. In this dual context, Gong Dong uses the silent power of his work to showcase to fellow Chinese architects and the public what a building should look like.



Above
Sketch, Connecting Vessel, 2017, graphite pencil on paper.

Top
Overall Perspective, Connecting Vessel, completed in 2018, photo by CHEN Hao.

Opposite
Atrium, Faculty Development Center of Nankai University, photo by CHEN Hao.

Next Page
South view of grand hall, Faculty Development Center of Nankai University, photo by CHEN Hao.





UIUC AND I

DONG Gong

Founder / Design Principal, Vector Architects
Foreign Member, French Academy of Architecture
Plym Distinguished Visiting Professor, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Visiting Professor, Tsinghua University

Eighteen years after I was a student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, I returned as a Plym Distinguished Visiting Professor in 2019. Everything seemed the same as before; the streets, the towering oak trees in the parks, and those familiar faces of professors in the School of Architecture; only a few newly built academic buildings scattered around the vast campus. In contrast to this university's tranquil setting, in the past eighteen years in China, my home country, and in Beijing, where I live, earth-shattering changes have been taking place.

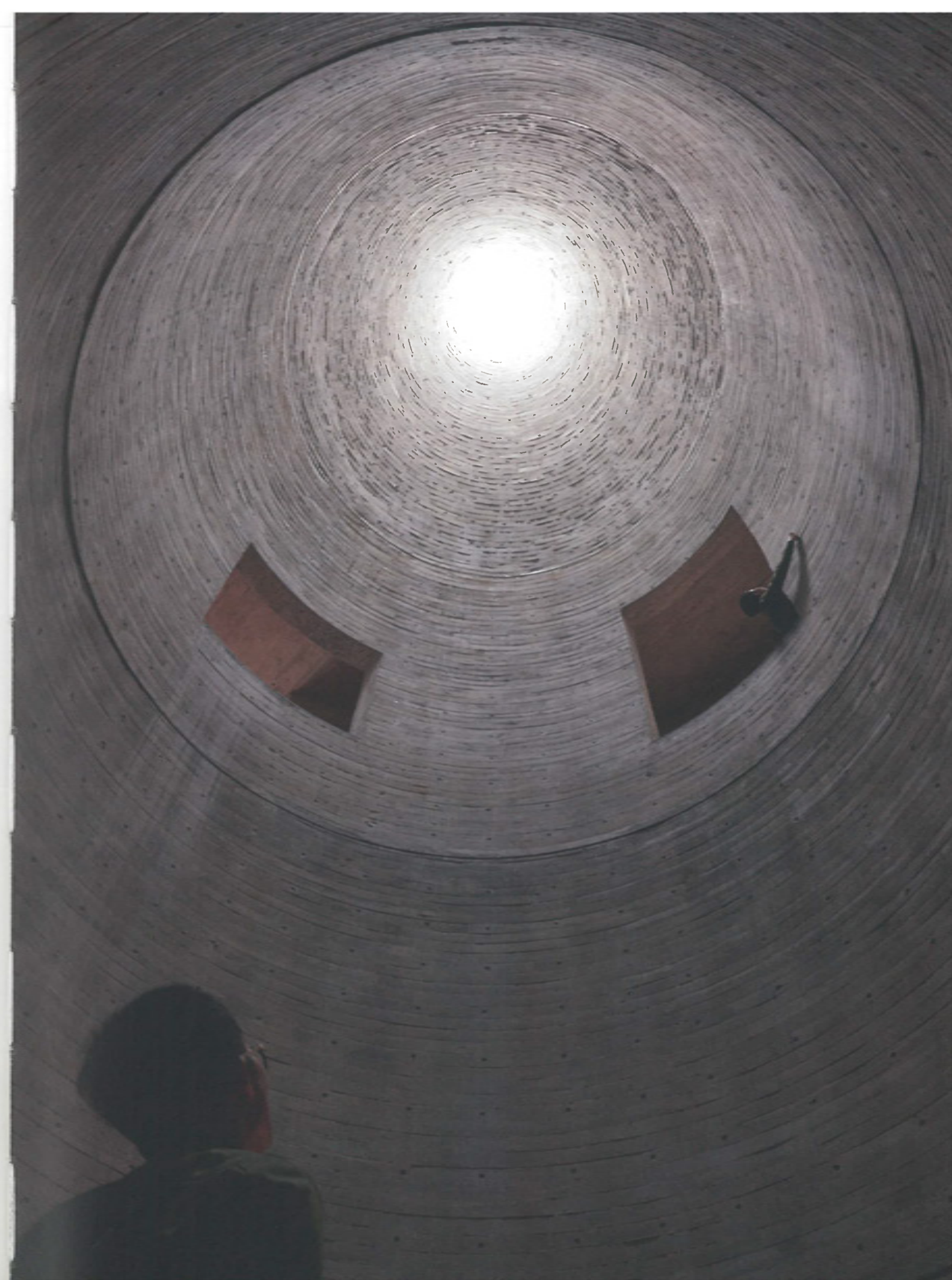
China has been known as the world's construction site for the past two decades. Underpinning urban fabrics and transport infrastructure are redefined in the rapid progression of urbanization. Monolithic contemporary building volumes and open fields between them have replaced old neighbourhood blocks. While the entire country is under massive construction at unprecedented speed and scale, the modern building industry along with the management mechanism, imported from the West, is beset by lagging adaptation to new challenges. Under such pressure, it seems that architects, as a collective whole, have consciously or unconsciously ceased self-interrogation and are devoid of principles and aspirations for high-quality building standards. Hijacked and pushed by the torrent of the times, we have gradually become part of the force behind the production of architecture that is often unresolved in detail, exaggerated in form, oversized in scale, and inappropriate for the context.

At the same time, China, this ancient nation with her vast population, embraces all the changes to the society brought by globalization, informatization, digitalization, with all its tolerance and capacity. All these



Above
Aerial view, Chang-jiang Art Museum,
photo by CHEN Hao.

Opposite
Light atrium, Chang-jiang Art Museum,
photo by CHEN Hao.



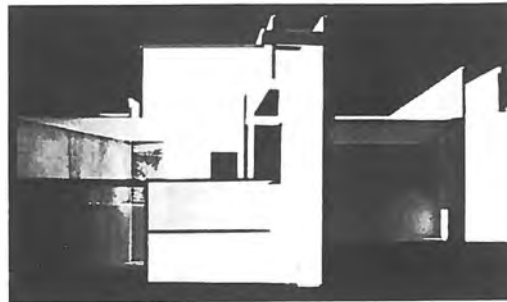
GALLERY

Gong Dong's Daylight Museum

Gong Dong (Prof. Henry Plummer's thesis student) was selected for the first place prize which is called the Benn-Jonck Award in the annual Chicago Awards Competition. It includes a cash prize as well as a certificate.

Every year the Chicago AIA accepts five selected projects from each of the architecture programs in the region and assembles a jury of professional practitioners to jury the projects and recognizes select projects for their excellence in design. Part of the project is currently exhibited in the Chicago Architecture Center.

In the main exhibition area, the gallery cube, light is filtered, diffused and reflected before illuminating the vertical exhibition wall and the rest area of the gallery. While this interior gallery space is largely detached from its dynamic and noisy environment, in terms of creating the peaceful and quiet ambience for the artworks, visitors can also realize the link with the outside world by the ever-changing quality of the natural light. This particular character of natural light also endows the artwork with its various appearances at different time of the day, season and year.



Cutting through the hallway of the museum, this sectional model experiments with the way that natural light defines and endows spatial character for the different interior zones.



The east elevation along the Chicago River.

CONTINUE FROM NEXT PAGE

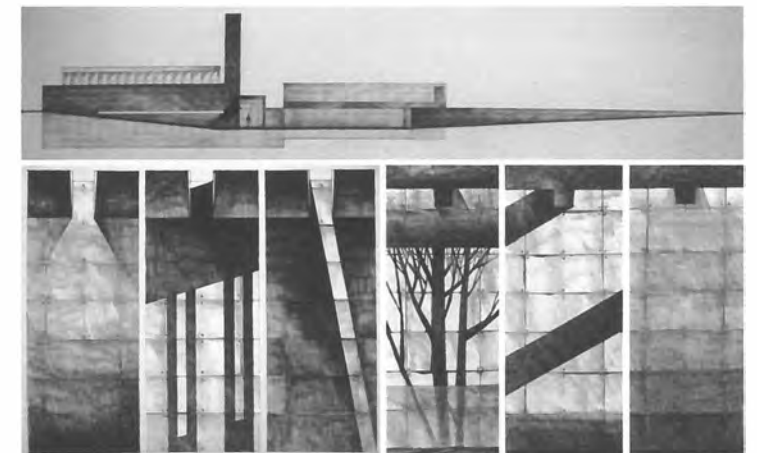


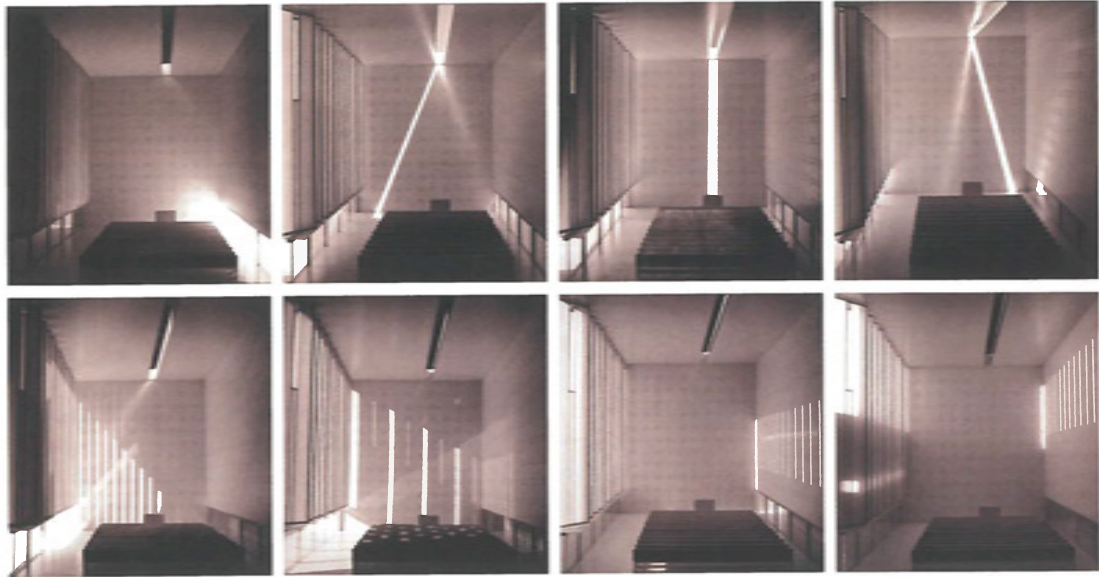
new waves have not only brought great convenience, efficiency, stimulation, and excitement, but they have also impacted the core of the public's inner consciousness. Undoubtedly, the consequential anxiety and agitation are challenging the architects' stance and judgement. Enchanted by the seemingly garish sounds of new concepts, new courses, new voices, we believe that everything is possible. But I think this is the most confusing and struggling time for Chinese architects.

Being from China and a part of the story, I still often recall those days when I was studying at UTUC from 1999 to 2001. I joined Professor Henry Plummer's design studio in the second semester of my first year and studied as his thesis student for the entire second year, during which I travelled to study in Munich in the summer. Throughout these years, for the first time in my journey to study architecture, I was systematically introduced to ideas of natural light, materiality, atmosphere, tonality, and aura, which remain the key words of the architecture I care for today. For the first time I attempted to use a charcoal pencil to portray the space of light that was longed for in my mind; and for the first time I delved into making large section models trying to observe those fascinating moments when the sun sheds real light into the space. These experiences were like seeds planted inside me, and after I founded Vector Architects in 2008 and I had the chance to think about architecture in a more holistic way, they slowly started to sprout and grow, and have continuously influenced the way I view architecture.

Right
Drawings done by Prof. DONG Gong when he was Prof. Henry Plummer's thesis student, 2001, graphite pencil on paper.

Top & Opposite
Prof. DONG Gong's thesis project was published on *Ricknotes* as cover, 2001, print.





Top & Bottom
Large scale study model on natural light done by Prof. DONG Gong when he was Prof. Henry Plummer's thesis student, 2001, photography.

Opposite
North elevation, Changjiang Art Museum, photo by CHEN Hao.





I have faith in the primitive, tranquil, and eternal power of architecture that can resist times of unrest and uncertainty. A good design needs to address the context and respond to the reality of social, political, geographical, and environmental parameters. However, after solving all the “problems,” architecture needs to reclaim its *raison d’être*, that is, to build a place by our human hands, a place with spirit, soothing our body and soul. In my view, this is the ultimate responsibility of architecture, beyond time and location. Architecture is a way to closely connect ourselves with the world we live in, enabling us to still be touched by a beam of light and its shadow, a piece of sky and earth, and a block of stone and brick, allowing us to live in this world with faith and humbleness.

For me, the Plym Distinguished Visiting Professorship is an honour, an academic job, as well as a personal opportunity to share with sixteen students my belief and determination in architecture gained from the enlightenment I experienced eighteen years ago in the same school. It will be my greatest hope and pleasure if the students’ learning experience can also become like seeds planted in their minds, and that these seeds will sprout and grow at an unknown moment in their future.

I would like to give special thanks to Professor Botond Bognar, who gave me continuous support for these academic events, and with whom I enjoyed co-teaching during the whole semester. I would also like to thank Professor and Interim Director Jeffery Poss, and all the dedicated staff who made this year’s Plym Distinguished Visiting Professorship possible. Again, I would like to express my gratitude to my mentor at UIUC eighteen years ago, Emeritus Professor Henry Plummer.

Above
Site visit at Baitasi district during Plym Studio’s China trip, photo by Vector Architects.

Opposite
View from light atrium to exhibition hall, Changjiang Art Museum, photo by CHEN Hao.

DONG Gong
Autumn, 2019 Beijing

RECOVERING URBAN MEMORY

Farmers' Market in the Baitasi Historic District of Beijing, China
(Studio Program)

Facing the challenging reality of destruction and fragmentation of the historical urban fabrics in old town Beijing, the studio program was devised to engage students in site-specific architectural solutions. The goal was to respond to the loss of a long-evolved lifestyle and cultural memory resulting from the drastic urbanization in China. The site of the design proposals was in the local community known as the Dongxicha Hutong area of the Baitasi Historic District. The task was to renovate an abandoned farmers' market with new public and cultural spaces. Each scheme needed to build some connection to the past, present, and future and attempt to achieve sustainable urban evolution.

After the initial stages of establishing their urban and spatial strategies, the students focused primarily on the study of tectonics and materials by building large-scale models and full-size details for material testing. The studio aimed at helping the students develop thorough and systematic architectural thinking and eventually understand how material and tectonic details could be integrated into the design to consistently respond to the overall architectural concept based on the intended quality of spaces in specific conditions.

The students first needed to visit and examine the existing, though abandoned Gongmenkou farmers' market, then to design a new complex on the site. The complex was to be a public facility, a place for people to meet, communicate, and interact with one another. The detailed program, developed by the students based on their own observations of the local context and life conditions, had to include a new market and additional cultural and public facilities.

Each solution needed to react to the existing overlaid and chaotic urban fabric of the local community. Materials and the architectural tonality called for establishing harmony with the existing historical built environment.

Design proposals had to accommodate a mixed group of users beyond the local residents that would include an increasing number of people, such as visitors, tourists, etc. The overall concept needed to help the local habitants re-establish their communal public life and thus to recover from the loss of their former lifestyle and cultural memory. With the active presence of a new and carefully articulated public building, the comparatively isolated local community could be opened up more to the whole city and the broader cultural environment.



List of students in the Plym Studio of spring semester 2019

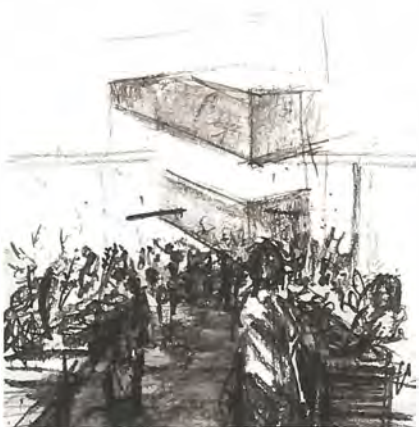
Rebecca Lynn ANDERSEN
Zachary BARBER
Zebao CHEN
Antonia Hyunjin CHO
Eliseo ELIZARRARAZ
Stephen FERRONI
Shannon Nicole FITZGERALD
Luis Felipe FLORES GARZÓN
Huangruoyi FANG
Lauren GARRIOTT
Ricky HUANG
Yoonah NOH
Adam Charles SOUHRADA
Colter Eugene WEHMEIER
Huiya YANG
Ruiqing ZHOU



Above
Interior view of the abandoned farmers' market in Baitasi district, photo by Vector Architects.

Opposite Top
Aerial view of Baitasi district, photo by Vector Architects.

Opposite Bottom
Street view of Hutong in Baitasi district, red line indicating the existing abandoned farmers' market, photo by Vector Architects.



Top Left
1:40 large scale sectional model, by ZHOU Ruiqing.

Top Right
1:40 large scale sectional model, by Stephen Ferroni.

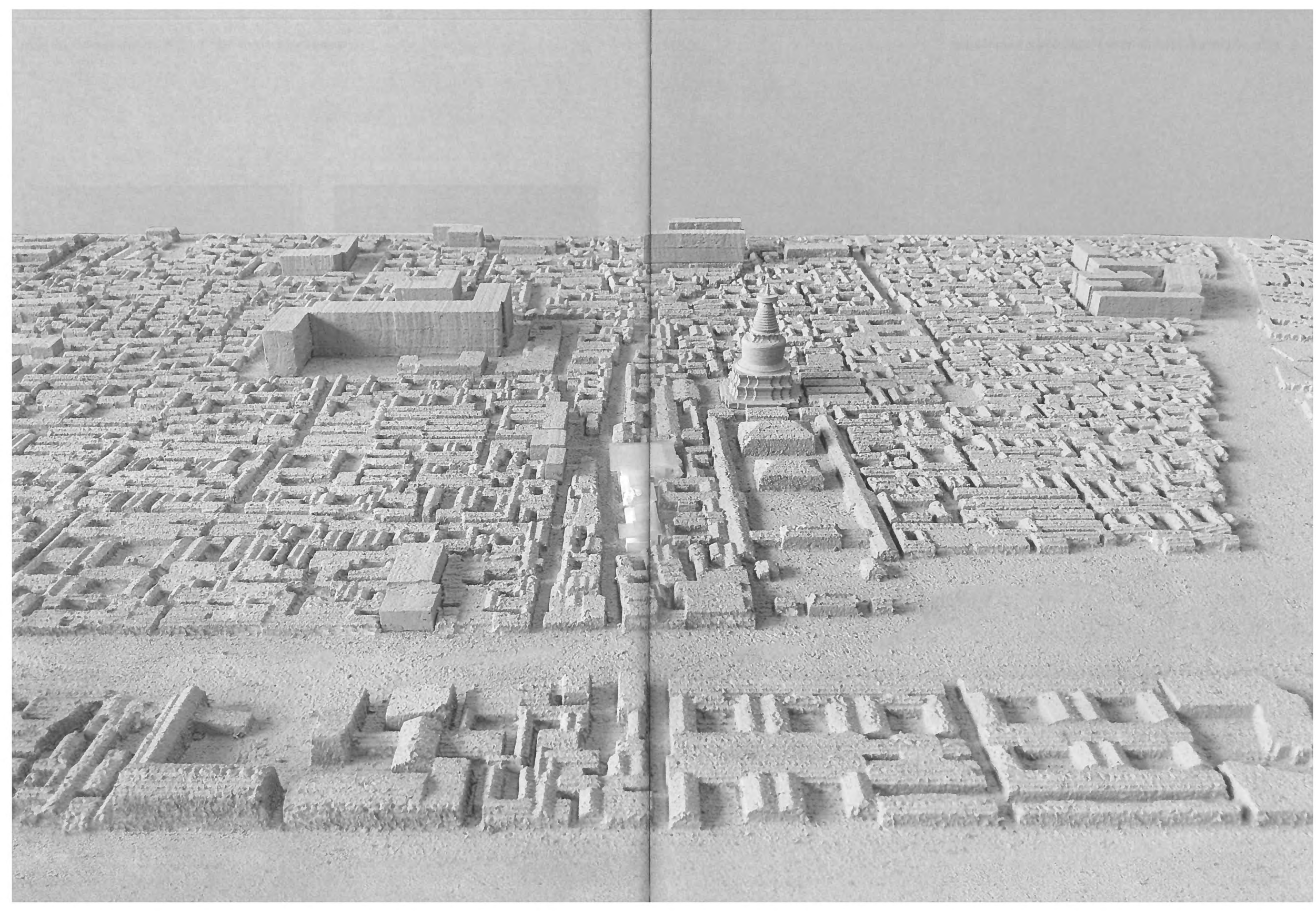
Right
Workshop at Vector Architects office in Beijing during China trip, by Vector Architects.

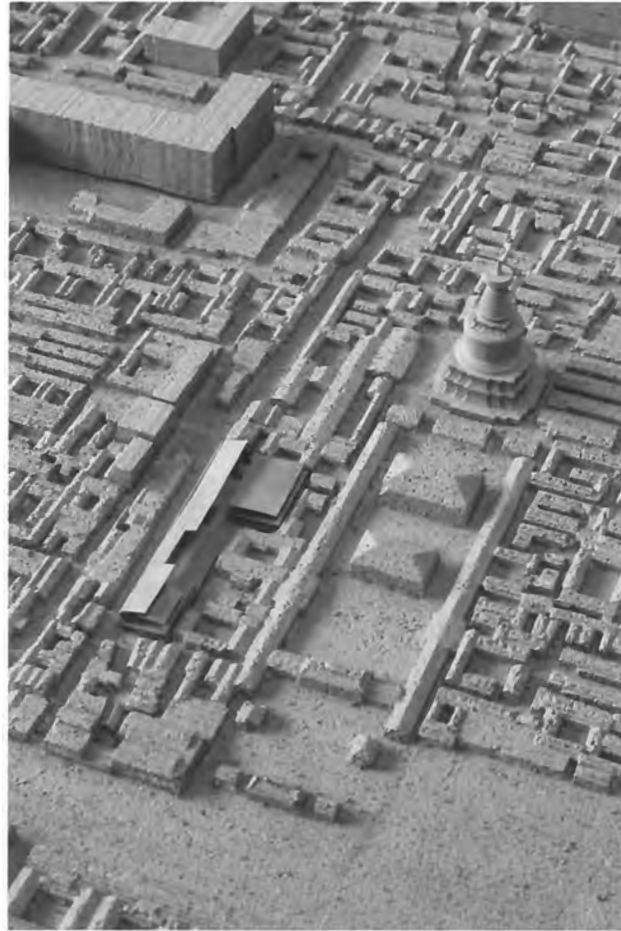
Opposite Top
Sketches of the design, by Shannon Fitzgerald.

Opposite Bottom Left
Sketch on the memorable spatial atmosphere, by Rebecca Andersen.

Opposite Bottom Right
Sketch on the memorable spatial atmosphere, by Lauren Garriott.





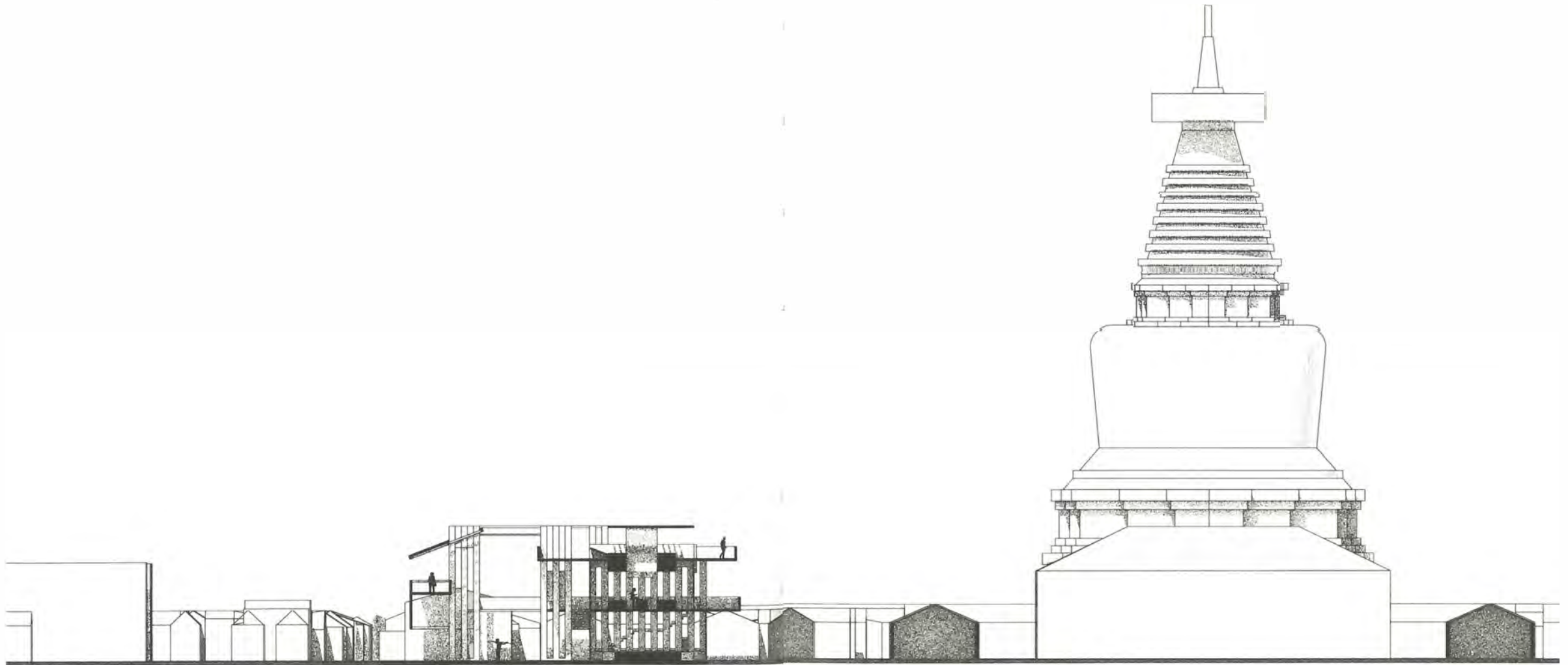


Top
1:500 urban strategy model, by Adam Souhrada.

Opposite
1:40 large scale sectional model, by Felipe Flores.

Previous Page
1:500 urban strategy model, by Colter Wehmeier.





Above
Section, by Adam
Souhrada.



Top
1:40 large scale
sectional model, by
Rebecca Andersen.

Opposite
1:40 large scale
sectional model, by
Colter Wehmeier.



Top
1:40 large scale
sectional model, by
Ricky HUANG.

Opposite
1:40 large scale
sectional model, by
Lauren Garriott.

Back Cover
Aerial view, Seashore
Chapel, photo by
CreatAR Images.

**School of Architecture
University of Illinois at Urbana-
Champaign**

Plym Distinguished Visiting Professor 2019

Trustees of the University of Illinois

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Printing

Beijing QL-ART Printing Co., Ltd.

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ISBN - 13: 978-0-9660146-6-2

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www.arch.uiuc.edu

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www.vectorarchitects.com

ISBN 978-0-9660146-6-2



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