Locality

Works by LI Li

2007–2025

Sample Chapters

Introduction

In his opening remarks at the 2023 RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) exhibition "Building Contemporary China," LI Li[1] summarized the intention behind his work as 在地性, a Chinese translation of "locality," referring to his ongoing investigations of the specificities of spatial, temporal, tectonic, and cultural contexts through the making of architecture. In English, the term "locality" dates to the 1620s and derives from the French **localité** (16th century), meaning the "fact of having a place." The French **localité** takes its origin from the late Latin localities, meaning "locality" (as a quality of bodies). It is derived from local – "belonging to a place, pertaining to a place," from Latin locus, a "place" or "spot."[2] The Chinese 在地性 used by LI emerged initially as a translation of "locality" in social studies to respond to the increasing impact of modernization and globalization on Taiwan's cultural identity.[3] 在 means "being at;" 地 means "region, place, ground, and earth;" 性 means "the quality of." The term was only later adopted in Chinese architectural discourse.

Subtleties of meaning may have been lost in the translation of "locality" to 在地性, but even though China has always been marginalized in Western architectural discourse, both terms still resonate with the concept of "critical regionalism" introduced to architecture by Kenneth Frampton, Alexander Tzonis, and Liane Lefaivre four decades ago.[4] Such a resonance compels us to investigate how LI's work aligns with the time and place in which he builds. This time and place has become increasingly intriguing as China undergoes rapid economic development, urbanization, and an efflorescence of new modes of architectural practices.

Emergence and Resistance

One cannot understand LI's conception and implementation of "locality" without considering how his peers practice in China's political and economic shifts. For many contemporary Chinese architects, "locality" means resisting globalization, searching for architectural manifestations from within, and continuing their cultural lineage through the making of architecture. However, this focus on cultural identity was never an agenda in the past, while "closed-door" China interacted with foreign cultures as the "Middle Kingdom" (the center of the world). This viewpoint shifted in the mid-nineteenth century, when China was forced to open to the Western world during the Opium Wars. The 1920s saw the first groups of Chinese architecture students to return from studying in the US. Among them were the first generation of Chinese architects to enter contemporary practice (Fig.1). LIANG Sicheng and LIN Huiyin contributed to the understanding of Chinese architecture by documenting historic buildings. YANG Tingbao and TONG Jun searched for an architectural language based on Beaux-Art proportions that maintained signs of Chinese-ness in facade treatments, roof forms, and decorative motifs. Unfortunately, these efforts were cut short by World War II and the Chinese Civil War.

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The cultural milieu shifted after World War II. The People's Republic of China, established in 1949, presented a new future for architects. More architects were graduating from the few local architectural programs, or joined their forerunners studying overseas. They were excited and ready to build the new China. The country's need for a prosperous image supported their professional dreams. In 1958, to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the nation's founding, the government decided to construct Ten Major National Day Projects[5] in Beijing. Their locations and functions exemplified their political significance. Only the Beijing Workers' Stadium maintained a pure form derived from structural function. The other nine buildings were unified by a consistent architectural language—symmetrical facades, Chinese roof profiles, and carefully articulated proportions. China announced its new presence and ambition to the world through this language (Fig.2).

Shortly after the 10th-anniversary celebrations, China experienced political and economic turmoil, and New China's construction boom paused. The architectural scene was relatively inactive for the subsequent twenty years until 1978, when the Open Door Policy was initiated, signaling a new political climate and an unprecedented architectural era. The Chinese government prioritized urban development as part of economic modernization and aimed to "build internationalized metropolises." The Chinese were eager to participate in the global scene, with architecture being central to infrastructure, and ultimately, to image.

But what do internationalized metropolises in China look like? Having been oblivious for almost three decades, Chinese architects turned their gaze outside China, out of curiosity and the motivation to catch up. The most widely acknowledged references were Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, and Frank Lloyd Wright from the Modern Movement, and Louis Kahn, I.M. Pei, and Kenzō Tange from the near-contemporary periods. For most Chinese architects at the time, New York City was the first foreign city they visited. "High-rise equals modernity" became a tacit shared value, though high-rise buildings were commonly decorated with a Chinese roof to assert their cultural status.

In 1993, regulatory barriers to private practice were lifted in Shenzhen and Guangzhou, followed by all major cities in 1995. This policy change led to the emergence of "independent architects" who treated architecture more critically than the state-owned design institutes that had previously dominated the profession. Among them was a new generation of architects who had returned from studying abroad, such as Yung Ho Chang, as well as local architects with distinctive visions about appropriate buildings for China, such as LIU Jiakun and WANG Shu, later a Pritzker Prize – laureate. Their childhoods during the Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976) impelled them to seek intellectual individuality. They were sensitive to, and informed about, the global architectural scene while resistant to conventional ideas. Their architecture started small in scale, and experimental in intention.

Yung Ho Chang was the first to launch a private architectural practice in China, after having studied, practiced, and taught architecture in the US. As a declaration of his vision, he named his practice 非常建筑, which has many possible translations in English: "extremely architectural," "extraordinary architecture," "abnormal architecture.". 非常建筑 debuted in 2002 with the Split House (Fig.3), part of the "Commune at the Great Wall" adjacent to Kengo Kuma's Bamboo House. Located in the mountains north of Beijing, the house was a strong architectural statement. Its split geometry pays homage to the 四合院 (traditional Beijing courtyard house), incorporating nature into an artificial dwelling. The space embraced by the two wings not only preserves the existing trees but also allows a natural stream discovered on the site to run through the dwelling. It may be seen as a prototype—adjusting the angle between the two wings would transform the split house into other configurations, such as parallel, right-angle, bar, or back-to-back houses, in response to site conditions. Furthermore, the house celebrates material weathering through the use of laminated wood with rammed-earth walls, and it may be envisioned as completely disintegrated and returning to nature in the future. Chang's work exemplifies the seriousness and thoughtfulness shared by independent Chinese architects. Their efforts have persisted in China's changing architectural landscape.

Foreign architects have also been interested in China's potential. Their arrival and the resulting cultural imports, mistranslations, conflicts, and excitement are analogous to the 1998 performance of Puccini's signature opera, Turandot, at the Forbidden City (Fig.4). The opera depicts a love story in an imaginary central Asian empire, composed by an Italian musician, directed by a renowned Chinese filmmaker, and performed by Italian and Chinese artists. The performers dressed in what were understood to be Chinese costumes but differed greatly from their authentic appearance in China.

01 A group photo of the Architectural Society of the University of Pennsylvania (Third row, third from left: Louis Kahn; fifth from left: Yang, Tingbao), 1924 (Image from the internet, copyright to be obtained)

02 Beijing Railway Station, 1959 (Image from the internet, copyright to be obtained)

03 Split House by Yung Ho Chang, 2002

04 Turandot Staged at the Forbidden City, Beijing, 1998 (Image from the internet, copyright to be obtained)

05 Henan Museum by QI Kang, assisted by LI Li

An architectural Turandot also started at the same time. Joining the World Trade Organization in 2001 brought China further liberalization with increasing foreign investment, stimulating the real estate and architecture industries. Government-owned Chinese design institutes, foreign design firms, internationally renowned architects, and Chinese independent architects actively designed and built China. Their architectural endeavors reveal intriguing twists and gaps in the fast-changing Chinese cityscape.

The unprecedented amount of new construction leading to the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and the 2010 Shanghai Expo energized the architectural field. During this period, the pursuit of a more modern China resulted in an enthusiastic embrace of experiments by world-renowned architects. China's regulatory environment at the time was underdeveloped, unlike the strict zoning and preservation laws of many Western countries. Such a malleable environment turned Chinese cities into progressive architectural "laboratories" with exaggerated forms, materials, and technology.

Many Western firms established China branches, most commonly in Shanghai, to claim a stake in the flourishing market. For example, John Portman Associates entered the Chinese market in the early 1990s, with significant projects such as the Shanghai Centre, completed in 1990. Gensler established a Shanghai office in 2002 and has since then been involved in high-profile projects. Perkins Eastman established its first office in Shanghai in 2006. Kohn Pedersen Fox (KPF) opened its first office in Shanghai in 2010, following the completion of the Shanghai World Financial Center. In the same year, Perkins & Will established its presence in China by opening a studio in Shanghai.

Witnessing China's rapid transformation, LI matured as an architecture student through waves of opportunities. His final project for the Bachelor of Architecture degree at Southeast University in 1993 was the interior design of Henan Museum. LI's advisor QI Kang, the principal architect of the Henan Museum (Fig.5), represented a transitional generation of Chinese architects that includes ZHONG Xunzheng, WU Liangyong, and ZHANG Jingqiu, whose architectural influence primarily came from the Beaux-Art tradition that YANG and TONG introduced, along with memorials of the mid-twentieth century Soviet Union that had resulted from the two nations' political alliance. These architects were skilled with classical design strategies, such as proportions and decorative details, contributing to exquisite plan and facade treatments. Henan Museum was watershed project for QI. He employed a three-dimensional volumetric manipulation with a central pyramid on a cross-grid, alluding to I.M. Pei's Louvre Pyramid, completed in 1989. The museum's interior was designed after the architectural design was completed, which, in LI's opinion, was somewhat odd. However, that was typical for Chinese architects at the time. Concepts that emerged during the Modern Movement had not yet arrived.

Continuing to study with QI as a master's student, LI worked as a site manager for the Henan Museum. This opportunity revealed multiple layers of architectural knowledge to LI—the processes from ideation to completion of a building, communication and negotiation with the local government, reflection on the lineage of architecture in contemporary China, and the gaps in architectural practice between China and the West. This first encounter with museum design profoundly impacted the then twenty-year-old student's aspirations toward architecture.

LI's PhD research temporarily distracted him from practice, which he initially found disorienting. The situation was exacerbated by QI asking him to study Chinese rural settlements, in which he had never been interested. Though at that time most architectural practices focused on urban areas, QI realized the importance of studying rural Chinese buildings and dwellings. However, he had not yet developed a theoretical framework. LI's search was an exemplary exploration. He scanned a variety of rural settlements across China—in Sichuan, Henan, and Zhejiang—and eventually settled on the Yangtze River South region. As a designer, his focus naturally became the morphological transformation of these settlements. This was the first time LI questioned the notions of form and style. He saw deeper factors behind the appearances. Revisiting this period, LI admitted that his sensitivity towards the distinctiveness of specific areas, rather than treating China as an abstract homogenous whole, may have started at this time.

After completing his PhD, LI began teaching at Tongji University but had few opportunities to practice. In 2007, LI read in a newspaper about the Luoyang Museum Competition. This competition launched his architectural career. 2007 was also the year when Paul Andreu's National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA), Herzog de Meuron's National Stadium, and OMA's CCTV Headquarters (China Central Television Building) were completed in Beijing (Fig.6). They all demonstrated impressive formal characteristics and earned nicknames from the local Chinese. Paul Andreu's NCPA, also known as "The Egg," presents a minimalist, universal geometry. Visitors enter through

06 OMA CCTV Beijing during construction

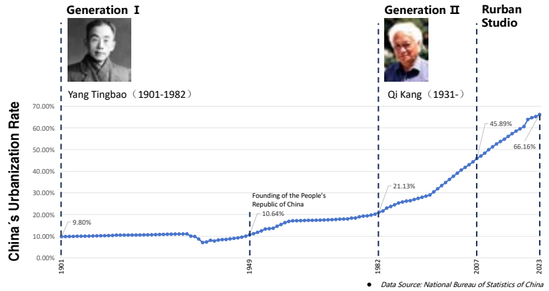
07 Nantong Museum, built in 1906 (Image from the internet, copyright to be obtained)

08 Accelerating urban growth in China

an unexpected underwater passage, an immersive drama that shocked the locals due to its futuristic spaceship-like structure. The ovoid form may be seen as a critique of the architectural symbolism toward which many Chinese architects leaned. At the same time, the un-mediated visual, conceptual, and experiential surprise of "The Egg" puts it in a capricious relationship with the locals. Also in Beijing, the CCTV Headquarters, designed by OMA, invigorated architects' and engineers' eyes with a radically cantilevered form and an overall loop configuration. It came to be referred to by the locals as "The Giant Shorts." Though the locals were not convinced that either of these iconic buildings had a connection with China, the National Stadium attempted to do so. It was designed by a team comprising Herzog de Meuron, Ai Wei Wei, ArupSport, and China Architecture Design & Research Group. The load-bearing members converge in a spatial matrix, with facades, stairs, bowl structure, and roof integrated into an engineering masterpiece. Perhaps due to the influence of the Chinese artist and architects, there is an intentional cultural connection: the form resembles a bird's nest, a Chinese delicacy. The building came to be known as "The Bird's Nest."

Like Beijing, Luoyang had been the capital city for several historical dynasties, and consequently is important to locals. In contrast to Beijing, Luoyang seemed to lag behind in its urban development—public buildings always defaulted to using Chinese roofs. Though the city had been preserved from audacious architectural gestures, renowned architects' experiments, and building nicknames, Luoyang was awaiting some form of architectural acupuncture.

Luoyang is the location of many archeological discoveries as well as uncontrolled thefts from ancient tombs. The emptied burial sites mark a lost history, which inspired LI. He intended to capture these impressions in his proposal. The site for the museum was flat, but LI augmented it with a sloping volume of offices and storage spaces. Within this artificial slope, LI sunk the museum and surrounded it with ponds, revealing the section of the artificial ground, similar to Maya Lin's Vietnam War Memorial. Truncated pyramids are repeatedly carved into the overall rectangular volume of the building, alluding to archeological digs while providing natural lighting to the interior. The exterior geometry of the building reflects the interior volumes, a response to a discrepancy he had observed in the design of the Henan Museum. LI's proposal was audacious, given the familiar Chinese roofs in the area, and refreshing, responding to the locals' eagerness to be part of the new architectural era. After two rounds of proposals and selections, LI's design won, and he emerged within the younger generation of Chinese architects that followed QI and Chang.



Museum

LI's works include a significant number of museums. Since 2007, LI has led his team in entering over one hundred competitions and constructing over forty buildings, including twenty-three museums. Compared to other architectural typologies, museums are arguably at the forefront of cultural reflection, as their primary functions are cultural display, conservation, and research. To facilitate such cultural reflection, the exhibited objects and their containers – their architecture – denote, exemplify, and express meaning.[6] The exhibits connect the audience to other historical periods, ideas from other cultures, and forgotten lifestyles; museums contain and choreograph such encounters.

The emergence and resurgence of museums in China exhibit distinctive characteristics. The first museum, Nantong Museum (南通博物苑) (Fig.7), was built by ZHANG Jian (张 謇) in 1906, more than three centuries after the first purpose-built museum in the West, the Ashmolean Museum (Oxford 1683). The collection of the Nantong Museum was comprehensive, including nature, history, fine art, and education, and by 1933 had grown to 3,605 pieces. However, the aspiration toward knowledge and cultural sharing was affected by unstable social and economic periods, particularly between 1937 and 1949, during the Japanese invasion and the Chinese Civil War.

After 1949, museums, which were solely owned and operated by the government, underwent a socialist transformation. A 1952 document issued by the Director of the Department of Culture in China defined the overarching mission of the museum as "servicing revolutionary, patriotic education, enabling the public to correctly understand history and nature through museums, fostering a love for the motherland, raising political awareness, and increasing enthusiasm for production."[7] Museums thereby became vehicles for political messaging, as culture was no longer a neutral concept.

Rapid urbanization during the 1980s contributed to the emergence of new museums. The urbanization rate was 21.13 percent in 1982 when QI started practice, but had more than doubled to 45.89 percent in 2007 when LI won his first competition, and continued to grow to 66.16 percent by 2023 (Fig.8).[8] Every new urban district of significant size, suburban areas, or a satellite cities in planning, contained a museum that was invariably zoned together with a movie theater and a performance hall, a so-called "cultural building type," to attract and maintain the population of the area. Museums were also necessary to store, preserve, and exhibit archeological discoveries made when breaking new ground during rapid urban expansion. The government released a policy stating that archeological investigation must precede any new construction,

in order to protect the heritage of more than three thousand years of written history and civilization. It is not uncommon for historical discoveries to be unearthed before a new city is realized. The expansion of urban development caused a flourishing of museum design opportunities.

Compared to Western history museums, their Chinese counterparts house few artifacts from foreign civilizations. Many Western museums acquired foreign artifacts through conquest, trade, or plunder during their colonial and imperial eras. In contrast, China was a target of imperial aggression during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Chinese cultural treasures were taken abroad, but collectors rarely brought foreign treasures back. Consequently, Chinese museums currently house artifacts mainly from their own culture. Their collections concentrate primarily on small and light-sensitive artifacts, as the archeological digs tended to reveal objects made of wood, fabric, ceramics, metal, and precious stones. Large architectural elements and stone carvings were typically left on their original sites rather than being relocated to museums, such as the terracotta warriors in Qin Shi Huang's mausoleum in Xi'An. Architecturally, this led to intimate, dark spaces, rather than large spaces filled with natural light to showcase, for example, an Egyptian sculpture.

Art museums in China also inherited their collection's specificities. Unlike Western countries with centuries-old art collections, art museums as public institutions in China were established relatively recently, in the beginning of the twentieth century. During the Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976), significant collection material was lost, as traditional artworks and cultural heritage artifacts were often destroyed, confiscated, or sold abroad. The flourishing of art museums only happened following the economic reforms of the late-20th century. Contemporary art exhibits came to prominence in China, allowing a new generation of artists' voices to be heard. Travelling exhibitions were enthusiastically embraced, as few art museums possessed permanent collections. Instead, these museums introduced their audiences to developments in contemporary art by hosting travelling exhibitions one after another.

Educated in the primacy of space in architecture,[9] LI responded to the specific architectural type of museum in China with deliberate spatial configurations. These configurations reveal the particularities of museum organization, reflecting a changing social logic, as Bill Hillier predicted.[10] Unlike Western architects, who could become well-acquainted with a museum's collection before developing its architecture, LI usually designs for flexibility in housing the exhibits while focusing on the visitors' spatial experiences. The darkness necessary for preserving light-sensitive exhibits becomes an aspect of rhythmic sequences. Scale transitions between compression and expansion prepare visitors for viewing the most exquisite details while leading them on a promenade that allows an appreciation of the surrounding landscape and cityscape. In some cases, the details of the museum architecture become exhibits that represent historical Chinese crafts. In other cases, the museums recall Chinese scroll paintings, with a continuously panning vantage point, transforming the visitors into scale figures within the paintings. The exhibition spaces, non-specific to artworks, quietly express the purity of volume and light while suggesting celebratory events.

LI only later realized the social mission implied by such spatial configurations. Interviewed during the construction of Shanghai Museum East, LI confessed that his most rewarding moments were seeing local residents drop by the museum during their after-dinner strolls, highlighting the "atmosphere of people" (人 气) that he strives to cultivate through his architecture (Fig.9). Such a simple desire, common in Western plazas, was anomalous in Chinese cities. China is known for its characteristic walls, such as the Great Wall, the walls around the Forbidden City, and walled-in courtyard houses. Even today, most Chinese public campuses, including research institutes and universities, are surrounded by walls. Walls provide protection and security, but also produce separation and exclusion.

LI challenges the social logic embedded in the insular spatial organization of walls, which contradicts the museum's central mission of public knowledge sharing. He designs museums as systems of open campuses and transitions interwoven with secured exhibition areas. Shanghai Museum East was intended as an urban plaza that would flourish due to the city's density. Swan Science Museum is gently elevated from the ground, hovering over outdoor spaces for migrating swans. Tibet Art Museum provides a plaza connected with the emerging urban fabric. Erlitou Site Museum is surrounded by resting areas for nearby villagers to enjoy the winter afternoon sun, as their parents and grandparents did in the past, only now in curated architecture. Around LI's museums, there are always layered public spaces.

Within these open configurations that engage the public, allusions to Suzhou gardens constantly recur in LI's work. These gardens crystallize the local culture in multiple layers. In historical southeast China, houses owned by intellectuals often incorporate gardens, creating a microcosm of nature in an urban context. The house owners' integration of poetry, calligraphy, and painting defined the aesthetics of these gardens within a specific niche – the integration of human beings and nature. They attempt to escape the mundane by symbolically returning to nature.

09 Urban livelihoods in China (Image from the internet, copyright to be obtained)

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Within his contemporary architectural vocabulary, LI adopts the Suzhou garden as a spatial and symbolic device that allows a transition of scale from the city to the visitor's embodied experience, thereby constructing relationships between seeing and being seen in an architectural promenade. Fei Xiaotong Memorial Hall of Kaixiangong Village is a Suzhou garden. The building masses are positioned as if dancing around the existing trees on the site. Visual connections between the interior and the exterior allow a spatial imagining of the vast scale of nature, just as in a Suzhou garden. Taicang Art Museum is located on a lot much larger than the required interior exhibition area. The garden occupies the "empty" area but allows a transition from the three-story sculptural space to an intimate personal space, subdivided into various chapters in the spatial sequence. The garden in the World Skills Museum serves as an urban-scale transition device and a metaphor for a silk scroll of paintings. As visitors meander through the space, they are led from an urban scale to an object scale of the finest embroidery on silk fabric, while temporally experiencing a metaphorical scroll painting and thereby becoming part of the narrative. Shanghai Museum East articulates a Su-style (苏 式) garden in its original form on the rooftop. Seemingly out of context, the garden becomes an exhibit itself. The openness of these garden spaces complements the darker exhibition spaces, performing a similar role to the vertical open spaces in Western museums but contrasting with them due to their horizontality and bodily scale, suggesting a much larger reality than the exhibits themselves. In LI's museums, the varied articulations drawn from Suzhou gardens intimately connect his architecture with the local culture.

Selflessness

LI founded Rurban Studio (若本) in 2015, eight years after the completion of Luoyang Museum. By that time, he had built six museums and public buildings in various provinces in China and arrived at a critical moment of self-reflection. The name of the studio indicates the conscious orientation in his pursuit of architecture. The English spelling is a wordplay combining the first letter of "rural" with "urban" to imply interweaving and negotiating the boundaries between urban and rural contexts. The Chinese name 若 本 is phonetically similar to Rurban, where 若 means yield or follow, while 本 denotes essence. Rurban defines a place, while 若本 defines an objective.

The search for architectural essence resonates with the "architectural-ness" that Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre use in their discourse on critical regionalism, a concept also referred to by Frampton. This search for essence

entails peeling away style, picturesqueness, and iconography, zooming into "the configuration of a given topography and the fine-grained specificity of the local context", an approach "patently tactile and materialist, rather than visual and graphic."[11] It "draws its forms from the context,"[12] committing to "place rather than space."[13]

Li's work dwells in and commences from "place" as defined by Frampton and Lefaivre. The topography, the vegetation, climate, varying light of seasons and days, construction materials and technologies lead to diverse spatial configurations and appearances, and hence, local culture, all of which are integral to the work. However, the places to which LI commits are not homogenous. Practicing architecture in more than two-thirds of the provinces in China, LI carefully observes and investigates the reasons behind the construction and the cultural characteristics of each project, and derives his architectural responses from such observations and investigations.

The place in which each project resides is unique. Shanghai Museum East is on the busiest street in the booming Pudong area; Erlitou Site Museum of the Xia Capital is on an open field next to an ancient archeological site and small villages; Tibet Art Museum is at the foot of Mar-po-ri (Red Mountain), 1.7 kilometers west of the Potala Palace; Taicang Art Museum is in a newly developed area of a small and economically burgeoning city in southeast China; Swan Science Museum faces a lake in Shandong province to which swans migrate in the winter; Sui-Tang Dynasties Grand Canal Culture Museum is at the edge of a historical city, overlooking a canal that is more than fourteen hundred years old; Fei Xiaotong Memorial Hall is located in Kaixiangong Village on a meandering hillside in the mild climate of southeast China; World Skills Museum is situated in the "heavenly" city Hangzhou, its natural beauty enhanced by poetry, silk, and tea; Luoyang Museum is built in the city that became the first capital of the Zhou Dynasty (700 – 256 BCE). Finally, the Memorial Hall of Chinese Laborers Abroad at WWI faces the Bo Hai in Rongcheng, a small city that used to be a fishing village. All these places are imbued with intriguing implications awaiting the architect's response.

LI's architectural interventions are not only about place but also about time, in response to the ephemerality of nature. His interventions question, stimulate, and integrate the myths and reality of these places, transforming them and connecting them to the future. Shanghai Museum East opens up as the city's "living room" and redefines a museum's role in Shanghainese everyday life. Erlitou Site Museum of the Xia Capital mimics the open cavities from archeological digs, carefully experimenting with the materiality of rammed earth and weathered copper. Tibet Art Museum re-interprets the structures of a former cement factory while performing "urban acupuncture" so as to provide residents with public gathering spaces. Taicang Art Museum revives the city's cultural memory by incorporating the spatial rhythms of a Chinese garden. Swan Science Museum addresses its visitors and swans by engaging their bodily scales and habitats. Sui-Tang Dynasties Grand Canal Culture Museum reestablishes visual connections to the historic canal by elevating the site, and reviving the material history by adopting the Tang tri-colored glazed pottery in the building's cladding. Fei Xiaotong Memorial Hall of Kaixiangong Village articulates the harmony between architecture and nature. World Skills Museum highlights the poetry of the Chinese garden and the art of silk. Luoyang Museum recreates the voids of empty tombs that have been robbed over centuries, transforming them into vessels of light. Memorial Hall of Chinese Laborers Abroad at WWI is completely embedded in the ground, so it is not uncommon for the nearby residents initially to be unaware of its presence, and be emotionally impacted upon discovering it.

LI's museums speak of and to the locals, engaging their participation, which enlivens his architecture. In a way, nicknames such as "The Egg," "The Birds Nest," "The Giant Shorts," and "The Bottle Opener" demonstrate the locals' need to connect to their place, albeit sometimes in an alienated way. LI deeply understands this phenomenon. Though some purist architects may not agree, figurative and symbolic thinking is adopted in LI's work to establish familiarity with the locals. For instance, one of the architectural elements that convinced the jury in their selection of his design for Luoyang Museum was the inclusion of a column that, in Chinese myth, records the political achievements of the first and only female emperor, WU Zetian (700 AD). LI designed an abstract version of it to emphasize that Luoyang was the capital during her rule.

Simultaneously, defamiliarization is a parallel device that deliberately engages the locals in new perspectives on material and construction, similar to critical regionalists' strategy to "make the building appear to enter into an imagined dialogue with the viewer."[14] LI is a magician at manipulating local materials. The rammed-earth wall in Erlitou Site Museum was built to an overwhelming height of fifteen meters, impacting the visitors' sense of scale. The Tang Dynasty tri-color ceramic technology was transformed into the visual fluidity of architectural interior. The white granite envelope of Shanghai Museum East alludes to the rhythms of waves. These works speak a sophisticated, balanced language that addresses meanings in multiple layers to connect with varied perceptions and memories.

China was absent from the development of the concept of critical regionalism. Any effort to retroactively include LI would be superficial, as his work is literally and metaphorically rooted in other places and times. Instead, the concept of critical regionalism serves as a reference for emerging comparative discoveries. To Frampton, critical regionalism promotes an "identity" and "aspiration for some kind of cultural, economic, and political independence."[15] To Tzonis and Lefaivre, it champions the resistance to the universal formulas of architecture and image-serving architecture. However, such a search for identity and resistance seem to miss LI's true motivation, as he ultimately seeks a state of 无我[16](literally, "no-self") in architecture. It is an acceptance of the impermanence and interconnectedness of the self, a way to deliberately address given architectural conditions – by surrendering the self to them, making a conscious choice of selflessness over the self.

From this perspective of "no-self," we may understand why a signature architectural language or style is absent from LI's work, and grasp the focus of Rurban (若本) as the essence of architecture in which the self is only a vehicle. We also unexpectedly arrive at a realization of similarities across cultures in the pursuit of architecture. Despite the absence of the self in LI's search for locality, themes that occur in Western architectural discourse continue to appear, such as site, material, tectonics, body, memory, and symbolism. Finally, his conceptual distillations of locality resonate with many other architects' objectives, regardless of their culture. Such resonances are like the sound of "ma-ma," a word shared many human languages share to refer to mother, who gave birth to each of us. Perhaps, regardless of culture, the search for locality is, in fact, the search for the architectural sound of "ma-ma," both a precondition and a consequence of architecture.

Notes

1 Dr. LI Li is an architect and professor of architecture at Tongji University, and founder and sole principal of Rurban Studio.

2 https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=locality.

3 YANG Hongren, "What is Locality? Starting from Local Knowledge and Contextual Domains" *Thinking and Speaking* 49, no.4 (December 2011), 5 – 29.

4 See Kate Nesbitt, ed. *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), pp. 468 – 492.

5 The projects included the Great Hall of the People, the Museum of Chinese History and the Chinese Revolution, the Military Museum of the Chinese People's Revolution, the National Agricultural Exhibition Center, Beijing Railway Station, Beijing Workers' Stadium, the Ethnic Culture Palace, Ethnic Diversity Hotel, Diaoyutai State Guesthouse, and the Overseas Chinese Mansion.

6 Nelson Goodman. "How Buildings Mean," *Critical Inquiry* 11, no. 4 (1985), 642 – 653.

7 Minister of Culture, SHEN Yanbing (沈雁冰), issued the "Opinions on the Guidelines, Tasks, Nature, and Development Direction of Local Museums" (《对地方博物馆的方针、任务、性质及发展方向的意见》) on October 27, 1951.

8 Data Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China.

9 When LI was attending the architecture school at Southeast University, China's oldest architecture program, there was a significant pedagogical change just after the return of a group of young design faculty led by GU Daqing, who had studied as visiting scholars at ETH in Zurich. Their pedagogy focused on spatial organization and grids, profoundly impacting later generations of architects.

10 The theoretical foundation of the Space Syntax group pioneered by Bill Hillier is that spatial configuration reflects social configuration. See Hillier, Bill, and Julienne Hanson. The Social Logic of Space. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

11 Kenneth Frampton, "Prospects for a Critical Regionalism"(1983), in *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture*, ed. Kate Nesbitt (New York: Princeton Architectural Press), 473.

12 Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre, "Why Critical Regionalism Today" (1990), in *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture*, ed. Kate Nesbitt (New York: Princeton Architectural Press), 490.

13 Frampton, "Prospects for a Critical Regionalism," 473.

14 Tzonis and Lefaivre, "Why Critical Regionalism Today," 489.

15 Frampton, "Prospects for a Critical Regionalism," 471.

16 The concept of 无我 (no-self) is a profound philosophical idea rooted in Buddhist philosophy, and later influenced Taoism.

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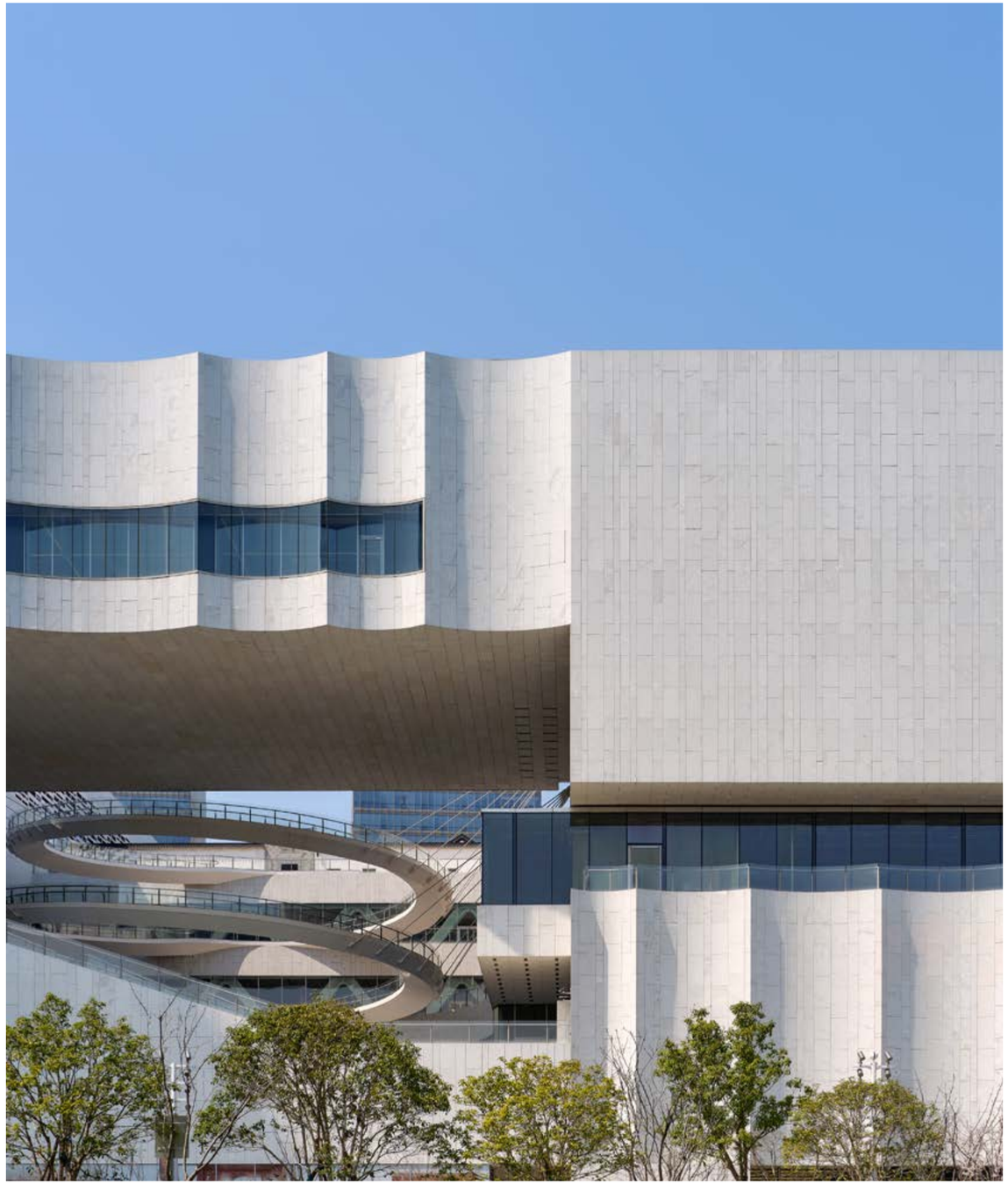

Shanghai Museum East

Location: Shanghai
Area: 113,200 ㎡
Site Area: 46,001 ㎡
Year: 2024

Shanghai Museum East is situated alongside the central axis of Pudong, a new urban subcenter that faces the Bund district across the Yangtze River. Reflecting China's economic rise since the 1980s, urban development in this vicinity signified a new era for Shanghai. Following more than forty years of construction, the Pudong cityscape showcases high-rise business and commercial districts, as well as dense residential neighborhoods. Among the buildings are works from internationally acclaimed architects such as SOM, KPF, Nikken Sekkei, and Paul Andrews.

Shanghainese are known for their open personalities and refined lifestyles. Exchanges between Shanghai and the West at the end of the nineteenth century, followed by the arrival of expats and the return of Chinese students who studied overseas starting in the 1990s, have constantly updated the city's port culture and reinforced its ethos. The local people are also known for finding aesthetic value in everyday routines. Even leftover rice is prepared, presented, and enjoyed as a Shanghainese delicacy.

Unlike historical capitals such as Beijing or Xi'an, Shanghai has no ancient ruins or palaces. Therefore, Shanghai Museum East enhances the city's culture by connecting its port culture to Chinese history, while engaging both in contemporary life. From this perspective, the museum has been envisioned as a cultural portal that is integral to everyday activities in Shanghai, or as a "city plaza."

Located on Pudong's busiest road, the museum welcomes visitors and residents, and even people on their regular after-dinner strolls. Its programmatic and spatial system induces the liveliness of the "city plaza." The interior and exterior hierarchy of spaces allows visitors to alternate between gazing at the objects and tracing the promenades. The interior volumes of the museum act like a machine comprising synchronized functions and intricate parts, integrated into a programmatic system of exhibition, education, research, and conservation, all serving the purposes of exploration, ceremony, leisure, and study. The exterior volumes reintroduce a sense of the city. Visitors may be invigorated by the unusual trajectory of walking along the spiral ramps suspended in the air, looking toward the city through the aperture framed by the building while sensing the rhythms of urban noise, or else quietly relax in the rooftop Chinese garden.

Reflecting the complexity of its urban context, the museum speaks various languages in order to connect with visitors and passersby. Playing with vantage points and scale, the museum wittily stages moments when the viewer becomes an exhibit. The roof garden is the largest display in the museum, and a traditional Chinese garden is replicated as an artifact that allows embodied experiences. A three-story opening in the building, facing toward Pudong Avenue, deliberately frames the hanging spiral ramps as if they are an exhibit being displayed to the city. These spiral ramps, circular within a rectangular outline, also allude to the Chinese symbolism of "round heaven and squared earth," the same symbology adopted by the Shanghai Museum's main venue, located at People's Square on the other side of the Yangtze River. Continuing this symbolic language, the museum's white granite-clad facade gracefully wraps around the structure, undulating like ocean waves, and thereby referencing Shanghai's geographical location and resulting cultural identity at the confluence of sea and land.

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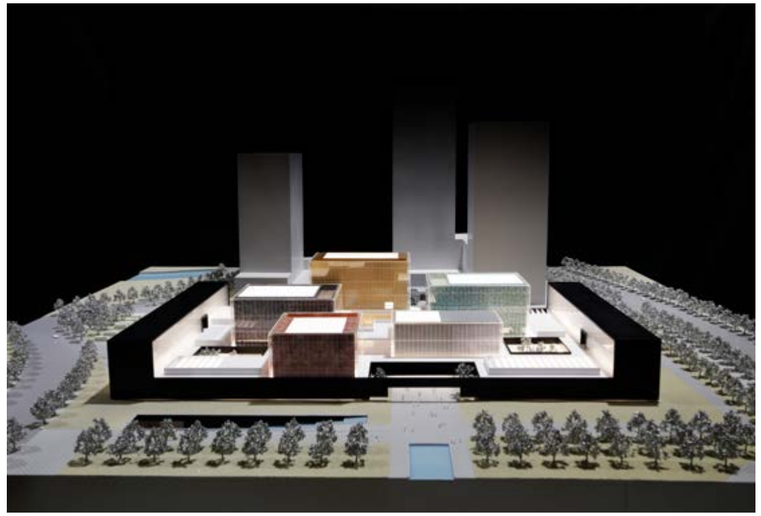


WH: The year 2024 was significant for Rurban Studio due to the opening of the Shanghai Museum East, a major project in a major city. How was the process, from design to construction, for you?

LL: The Shanghai Museum East project began with a lost competition. In 2016, the Shanghai Museum East Open Competition was announced, inviting architects worldwide to participate. Unfortunately, Rurban's proposal was disqualified due to late registration. Later that year, the Pudong District government and *Time+Architecture* magazine organized a parallel competition for young Chinese architects to explore a concept-focused version of the Shanghai Museum East. I entered, and won first prize. Meanwhile, the client was dissatisfied with all the proposals in the open competition, which resulted in a second open competition for Shanghai Museum East. As the winner of the young Chinese architect competition, I was this time allowed to participate. It felt like a classic American-dream story—you persevere even if there is a one-percent chance, and in the end, your dream comes true.

WH: It does sound like an American dream with a happy ending. However, the competition process must have been complex, or at least complicated.

LL: Yes. The open competition went through four rounds, with nine teams competing in the first round, which was narrowed down to four, then to two, and finally one was selected. Among the nine proposals, six were from international firms and three from Chinese ones. The client may have initially wanted a Western firm to design the project.

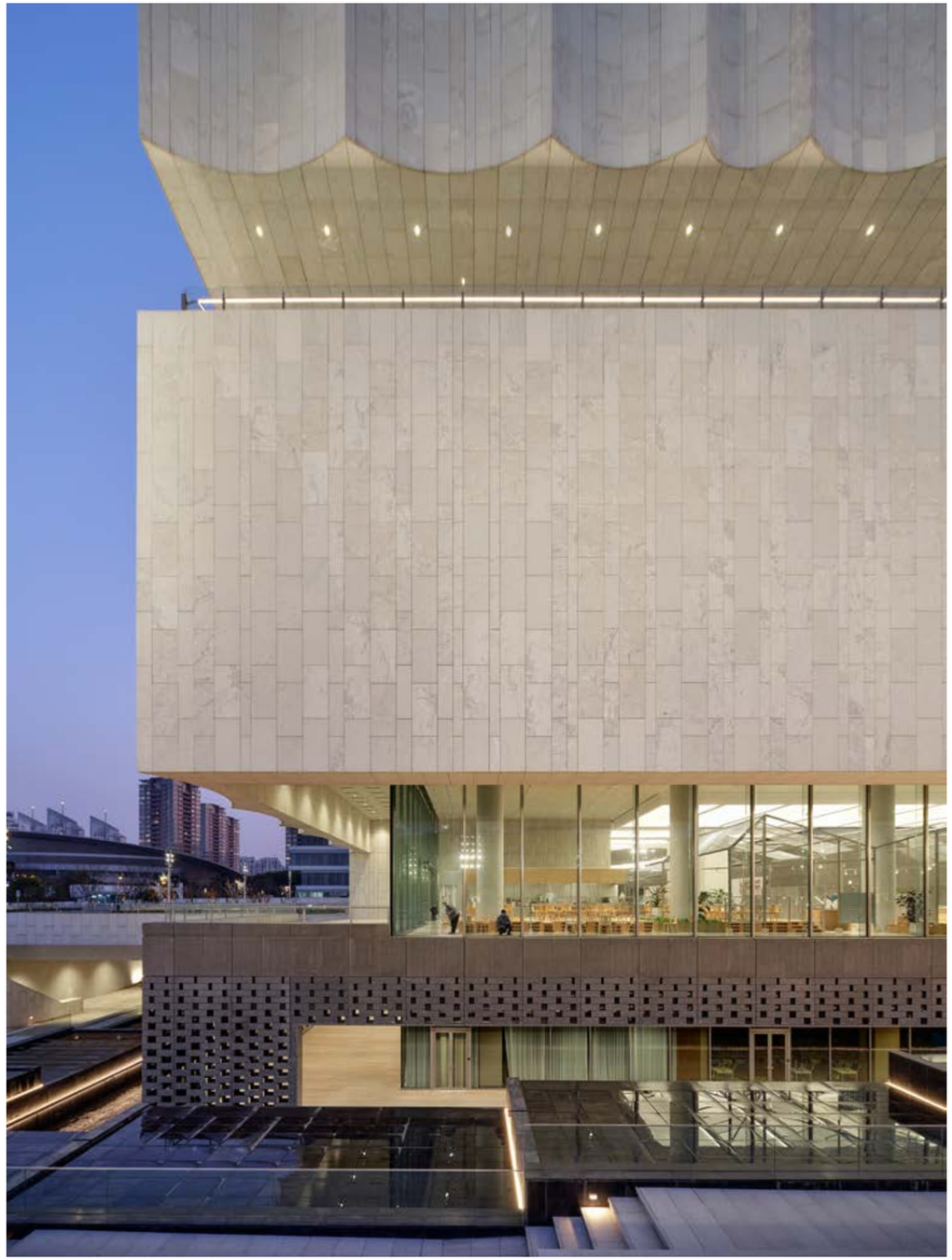
Open competitions in China differ from those in the US. For example, I. M. Pei was chosen from among 19 candidates to design the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library because Jacqueline Kennedy liked his design philosophy and provided him with complete creative freedom. In China, architects must incorporate the jury's design recommendations, which may dilute the distinct qualities of a design.

The competition scheme underwent significant evolution across the four rounds. For example, in the first round, I designed the outer layer of the black box with a fully transparent skin, as a challenge to the conventional image of a museum. But the jury felt it didn't look like a museum, so I had to change the material to stone while maintaining a perception of openness. One of the competition jurors teased me by saying that he liked my design for the young architects'competition better, because the design was subtle and less of a landmark.

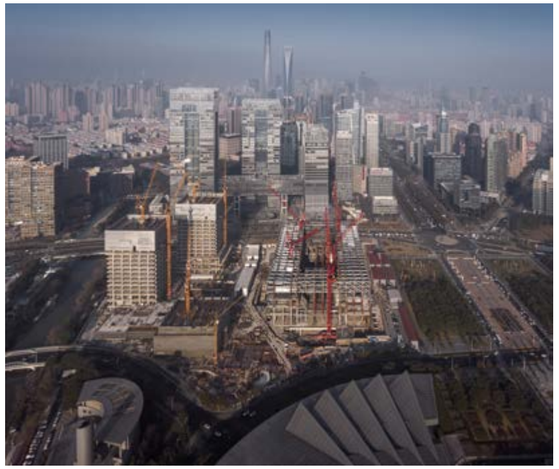
WH: It must demand incredible willpower to ignore such comments. I guess the public and city officials expected a landmark.

LL: Traditional landmark buildings often prioritize form and image. However, I focused on the ways in which people would experience the public spaces within the museum. Can a new landmark be created through experience rather than form? That's why, in the design of the Shanghai Museum East, I integrated an "urban street system" within the building interior.

Conventionally, museum spaces comprise a central public area surrounded by exhibition halls. I retained the core museum structure by positioning a "black box" at the center, and then added an outer layer—a street-like system surrounding the "black box." In this "urban street system", visitors may take a stroll before or after exploring the exhibitions. Shanghai is a commercial metropolis. Strolling (逛街) is deeply embedded in Shanghai's culture, as part of daily commercial events. Therefore, I incorporated this behavior pattern into the design to create an inviting and relaxed environment, rather than solemn and ceremonial spaces.



01 Elevation detail
02 Young Chinese Architect Competition entry by Rurban Studio, 2016
03 Open Competition entry by Rurban Studio, Round One, 2016
04 Open Competition entry by Rurban Studio, Round Three, 2017
05 The L-shaped "city living room"
06 Shanghainese wandering along Nanjing East Road, Shanghai
07 Shamghai Museum East under construction, 2021



A friend of mine visited the museum every month during the first eight months after its opening—not because he lives nearby, but because he enjoys going there. He often posts photos of the museum on social media. I told him, "You've fulfilled my vision—I want people to wander through the museum when they visit." I also go there often—when I need to meet someone, I'll invite them to the museum and we grab a coffee together.

WH: In a way, this museum functions as an urban living room. A similar idea was also evident in I. M. Pei's master's thesis project, a design for the Shanghai Museum, from 80 years ago. In that project, Pei explored the role of museums in Chinese culture and modern Shanghai. Some of the ideas he proposed—such as the museum as a civic space, the avoidance of overtly "Chinese" visual symbols, and the integration of garden-like spatial experiences—have been realized in the Shanghai Museum East. Regardless of how architectural trends change, architects continue to explore such enduring topics.

LL: In I. M. Pei's era, China was relatively underdeveloped, and his initial design intention was to promote a sense of "Chineseness." His Shanghai Museum was conceived as a courtyard-style, meandering space, much like an artistic journey. Interestingly, his site was along the central axis of the Greater Shanghai Plan at the time, while the current Shanghai Museum East is located along the central axis of the Pudong District. Both projects recognize the importance of location for a museum.

During the 80 years between Pei's project and mine, Shanghai witnessed numerous cycles of large-scale urbanization, and its population demographics underwent significant changes. Pei's design was concerned with expressing "Chineseness" through a modern architectural language. For me, however, the focus was not on identity but on everyday relevance, on questions such as what the urban context demands and what today's residents need from a museum.

WH: If architecture should respond to people's everyday life, then "Chineseness" is also embedded in daily life, rather than being an abstraction.

LL: For me, space is always the priority in any design, as a container for everyday life. In all my projects, I focus on how people move and interact within the spaces. That's why the concept of "wandering" (逛) is key to the Shanghai Museum East. I wanted visitors to transition from an outer, commercial street-like space into the museum's core exhibition space, analogous to the way that Shanghai, despite being a highly commercial city, still has a distinct cultural core.

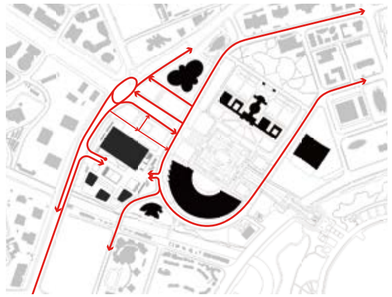
WH: Essentially, these spaces form a flexible architectural boundary, a connecting tissue to the urban fabric.

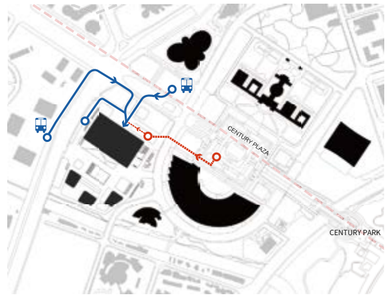
LL: In fact, these "streets" extend to an adjacent commercial district filled with restaurants, cafes, and leisure spaces. The museum is thereby integrated into the city's rhythms. Many Chinese museums are built in isolated environments, surrounded by vast lawns and plazas, prioritizing vehicular access while neglecting pedestrian spaces. Shanghai Museum East attempts to humanize the urban space rather than being a detached monument.

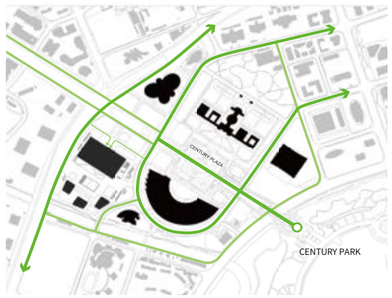
WH: The museum allows the surrounding urban fabric to merge with the architecture while it extends outward to the city. However, this transition is not always neutral; for example, the spiral ramp facing the street is a bold visual statement of the interior of the museum in relation to its interaction with the urban streetscape.

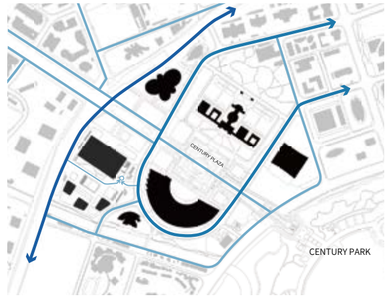
LL: This is about openness and a spatial narrative focused on scale. As visitors walk along the ramp, they engage directly with the urban space—they are given views that connect them to the city's central axis, the Science and Technology Museum, and the Art Center across the street.

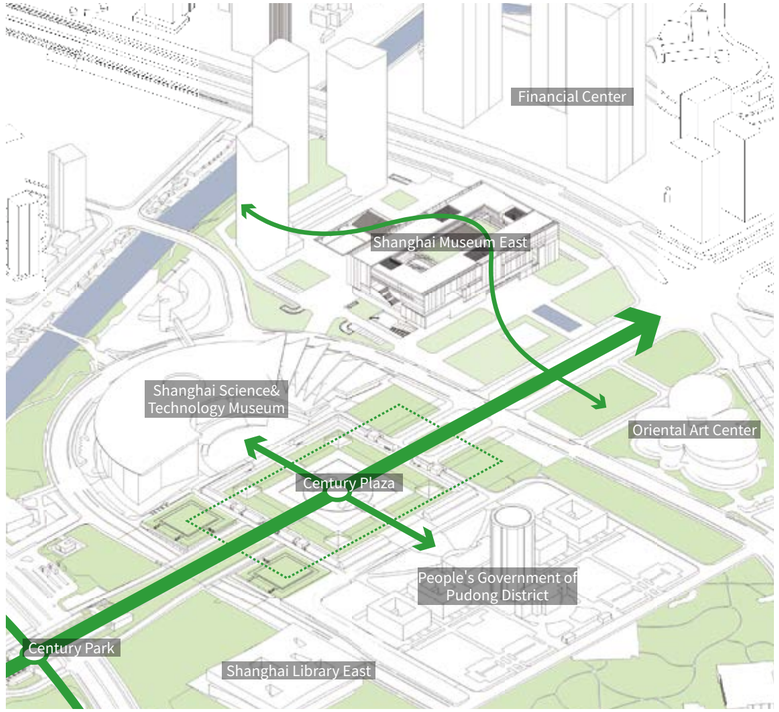
The Shanghai Museum East is probably the most open building in this area, compared to the Science and Technology Museum, the Shanghai Library East, and the Oriental Art Center (designed by Paul Andreu). Though glass curtain walls enclose those buildings and they appear transparent, their occupants cannot physically enter the surrounding spaces.











08 Traffic analyses
09 Urban connectivity
10 Looking out at the Oriental Art Center
11 Shamghai Museum East under construction, 2021

08 | 10
09 | 11

12 | 14 15
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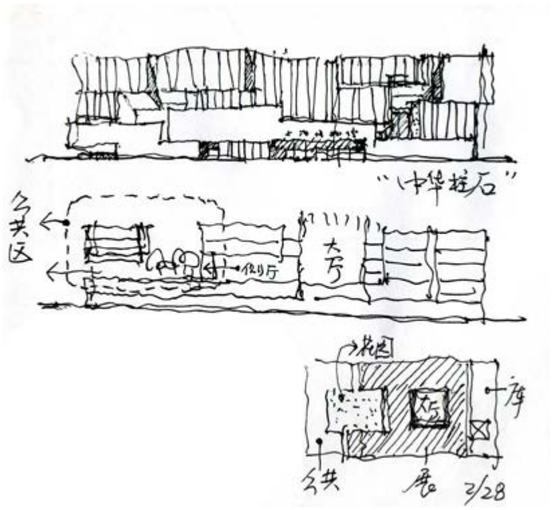
12 Roof plaza 13 Roof garden 14&15 Sketch



WH: So, the ramp resulted from the desire to create a specific urban experience.

LL: It was a natural outcome of the design thinking. The spiral ramp emerged as a response to the urban context facing the Science and Technology Museum. We designed a series of stepped terraces there, and the ramps were a natural outcome of that spatial logic. Some critics have suggested that the ramp was inspired by the Andalusian Museum of Memory by Alberto Campo Baeza, but that is not the case.

WH: Simultaneously, the ramp functions as a large-scale sculpture, with people moving inside it.

LL: It is part of the spatial assemblage. The sunken space of the Shanghai Museum East is slated to connect with the future metro, the rooftop features a garden, and the ramp in between is constantly animated by people walking on it. It's a multilayered and vibrant scene in which different spatial experiences intersect and unfold.

WH: Yes, and it also establishes a sense of contrast—the rooftop garden is completely hidden from the city, literally a secret garden, while the spiral ramp is conspicuous.

LL: You could also interpret it as a reinterpretation of Chinese landscape paintings in which tiny figures often walk along mountain paths—a classic compositional motif. Some people even associate the curved facade of the museum with an unfurled Chinese scroll painting. Of course, I didn't intentionally force such associations, but I find it interesting how people naturally connect the design to such references.

WH: Architecture provides a space for imagination, allowing people to connect it with their own cultural and lived experiences.

LL: I find that quite interesting as well. An architect's initial design intent gains new meanings once the building is completed. These new interpretations add layers to the significance of the spaces, similar to a collage. This approach differs from, for example, **Snøhetta**'s design for the Shanghai Grand Opera House, in which a fan shape is the dominant concept. I aim to create a layered collage, with open-ended spatial meanings.

WH: How did you organize this layered collage, in particular the rooftop garden? It feels surreal.

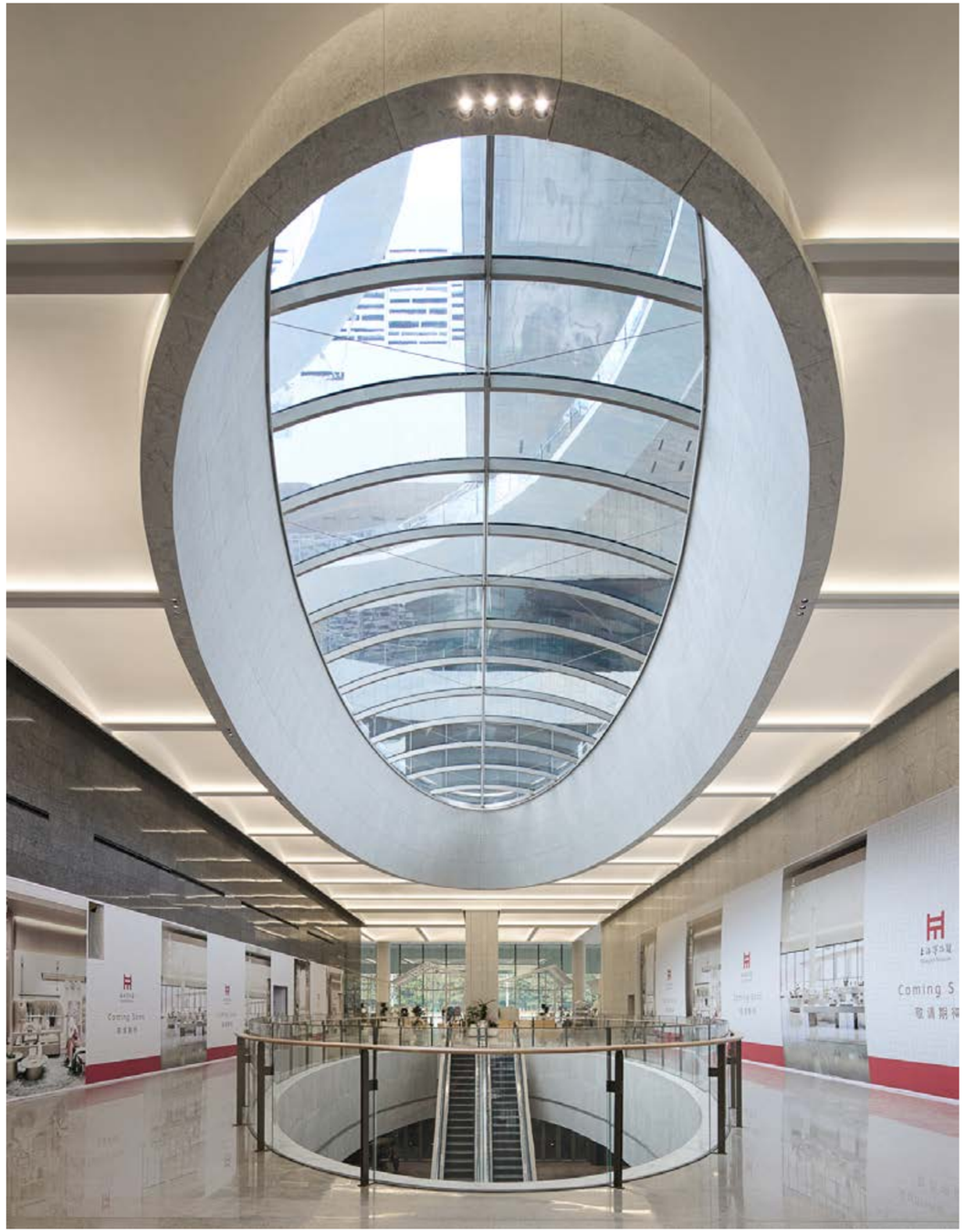
LL: By embedding a narrative logic. The building features a "black box" at the center, and an urban street system at the periphery. The "black box" comprises galleries for artifacts, including bronze, jade, ceramics, seal engraving, calligraphy, and painting, and hence is a core of culture. And then, above the "black box" is the garden.

The garden is a setting that contextualizes artifacts that are displayed in isolation in the "black box," bridging their past and present through an experiential landscape. So, the narrative logic here is that visitors first explore the galleries, where each category of artifact has been separated from its original use and function. Then, they arrive at the rooftop garden, where these objects, with the presence of people, return to a lively setting.

WH: I am always fascinated by how a Chinese architect such as yourself relates to the work of architects in locations and times that are completely different to Chinese culture. For example, I remember you studying the curves in the **Bagsværd** Church and the Sydney Opera House by **Jørn** Utzon. In Shanghai Museum East, you also incorporated curves on the facade. How would you compare these curves?

LL: Utzon's curvilinear forms define the space and induce the atmosphere. I didn't set out to deliberately create curves in Shanghai Museum East. I still remember sketching the concept of a massive rectangular box while I was riding on a high-speed train. Aside from the contrast between solid and void, I felt it needed texture, so I drew some vertical lines to suggest that. Then I stopped right there. The curves emerged naturally from that. On each elevation, I used segments of a curved surface to break up the scale of the massive volume, making it approachable from a human perspective.

I once saw a 7- or 8-year-old child moving his body against the curved surface—the curve just happened to match the width of his body, so I can guess it must have been fun for him. That small, spontaneous interaction was exciting to observe.



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WH: You and your team must have encountered significant challenges in constructing the curved surfaces and the large ramp.

LL: The construction process was indeed quite complex. To begin with, the Shanghai Museum East spans more than 113,000 square meters and is approximately 186 meters in length. We used an all-steel structure above ground, to meet basic load-bearing requirements, ensure earthquake resistance, comply with green building standards, and guarantee a minimum lifespan of 100 years, as is required in China.

The curved stone facade system was also intricate. We designed five curvature types, each with three different widths, creating a modular system that reduced the complexity. Manufacturing the facade system was another challenge. However, the difficulties were manageable, given China's advanced fabrication capabilities. We utilized CNC (Computer Numerical Control) cutting technology to achieve precision and efficiency.

WH: In other words, if this building had been designed ten years ago, constructing it wouldn't have been as easy.

LL: If fabrication techniques hadn't advanced, it would have been a harrowing process—the material waste would have been enormous. However, with today's advanced cutting technology, stone can be cut with almost no waste.

Another critical aspect was stone selection. Most clients tend to prefer uniformly colored stone, but I firmly believe that natural color variation is essential for such a large project. I had to negotiate with the client for over a year and a half to get approval. For me, the stone texture pertains to bodily experience—from afar, the building appears white, but as you move closer, you notice its subtle variations.

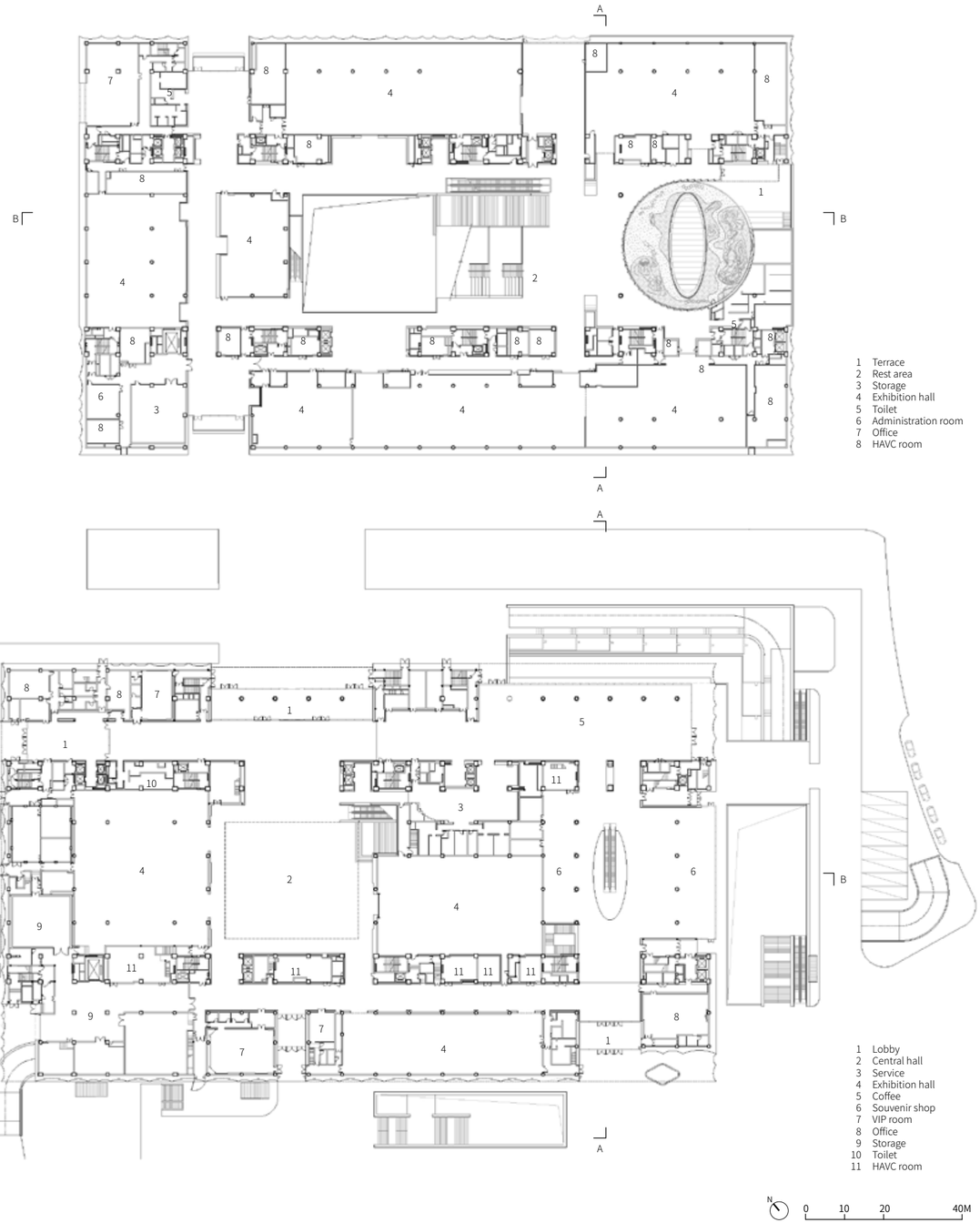
As opposed to the opacity of stone, glass curtain walls exemplify physical transparency. Similar to my treatment of the stone, I didn't limit myself to a uniform curtain-wall system, thereby providing varied experiences in such a large building. On the ground floor, T-shaped steel mullions for the glazing help to maximize visual openness. On upper floors, tension cables minimize obstruction in some nodal spaces where I wanted to create an even greater openness. In the courtyard, a sawtooth-patterned glass facade allows people to experience a richer texture up close, so that the details feel as if they engage in a dialogue with visitors.

WH: This reminds me of Zumthor's Thermal Bath at Vals. His design with stone aimed to achieve variety through the use of minimal elements. But your approach seems the opposite—you intentionally incorporate varied elements. Is this due to the difference in scale?

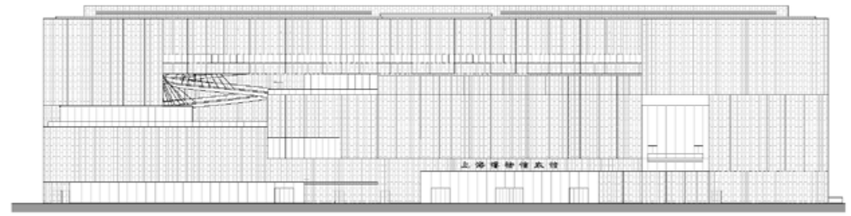
LL: Scale is a crucial factor. I've visited the Thermal Bath at Vals four times. The building is about 60 meters long, whereas the Shanghai Museum East is three times that length. Therefore, avoiding monotony is essential. Stone and glass are expressive. Though the museum unavoidably became a visual icon in the end, I nonetheless designed it to provide a human-scale experience by embedding a wealth of details that surround the visitors once they are inside.

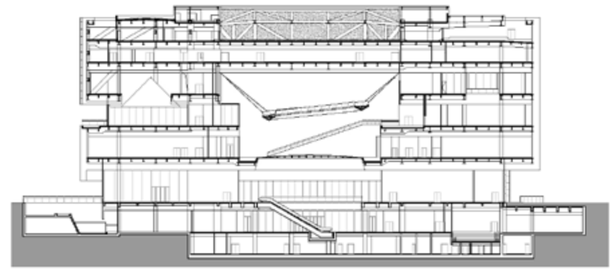
WH: Shanghai Museum East appears to address the body on two levels: as embodied experiences and as a container of urban life.

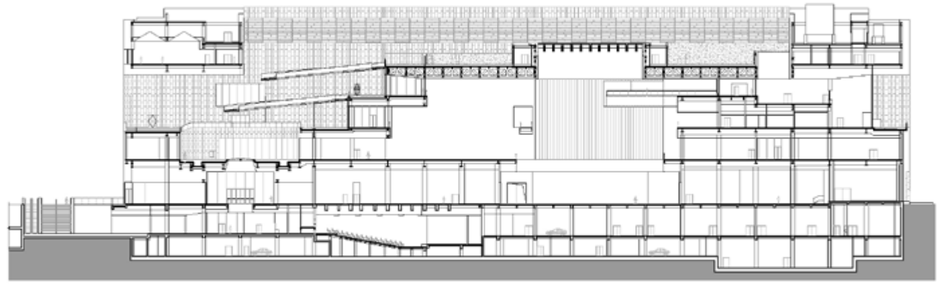
LL: Yes. From a close-up perspective, the Shanghai Museum East engages the visitor on a bodily scale. From an urban perspective, the museum does not serve a single individual. It is a space for the collective. As I mentioned before, historically, museums in China were often structured as temples of culture, inducing ceremonial rituals. By contrast, at Shanghai Museum East, I emphasized its everyday and urban character. For an individual, the Museum becomes their living room. It could also be a living room for a group of people. In this sense, the Museum is a part of urban life. That is why I explicitly requested the photographers to shoot the Museum with people in it. You would miss the point if you showed only empty, staged spaces.



The roof-top Su-style garden (p.24) 16 Atrium
17 Steel structural frame of the elliptical skylight
18 Steel structural framework 19 Varied curtain-wall systems
20 Second floor plan 21 Ground floor plan 22 South elevation
23 Section A-A 24 Section B-B







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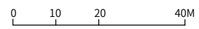


Erlitou Site Museum of the Xia Capital

Location: Luoyang, Henan
Area: 31,781 ㎡
Site Area: 147,286 ㎡
Year: 2019

The Erlitou Site Museum is a project that takes the site as its theme, though one might claim the same for almost all architectural projects. It has been built upon an archeological dig initiated in search of the Xia Capital, the first capital city in Chinese history. This archeological endeavor was launched in the 1960s, when researchers explored various locations in Henan Province, based on written texts and the frequent discoveries of ceramic fragments by local farmers. After thorough investigations, XU Xusheng (徐旭生) identified Erlitou as the site of the Xia Capital, the largest urban settlement in China and East Asia at that time, approximately 3,800 years ago.

Erlitou Site Museum was envisioned as a center for studying the formation and development of early Chinese cities and a pilot study for architectural intervention in national heritage sites. However, building on such a significant site entails tremendous responsibility. The site is extremely delicate, as undiscovered historical remains are still buried there. Visiting it is also very humbling, as one is surrounded by the expansive horizon. Due to limited technological limitations, the excavated areas were refilled with dirt in order to preserve what had already been discovered. The refilled areas are two-to-three meters higher than the untouched areas. However, in such a vast landscape, these height differences are relatively inconspicuous.

The design was inspired by photos of the excavation, in which a series of rectangular holes in the ground sprawl outward with no apparent limit. The sides of these holes expose soil strata, hinting at the layers of history. A warm brown hue saturates the surroundings in the autumn sunlight, resonating with the waving golden crops in the distance. The museum could probably not have been designed in any other way than to surrender to the site, to be visually silent, and to embrace the existing harmony.

In plan, the museum mimics the excavation's rectangular organization, with a flexible periphery for potential expansions. In elevation, it comprises shifting horizontal lines that merge with the horizon. From the entry to the foyer, the secondary lobby, and the central atrium, visitors move through the museum's interior spaces, drawn forward by the rhythm of compression and expansion, and gradually being affected by their experiences. At certain moments, an opening in the roof or an unexpectedly narrow courtyard will make them look up as if they are buried in the ground, like fragments of artifacts waiting to be discovered. Finally, the visitors ascend to the roof terrace, suffused by the scent of crops and earth, with a panoramic view of the vast site that overwhelms the architecture.

Copper and rammed earth, the museum's two signature materials, were intentionally selected from the archaeological excavation. Their use is literal: the earth is manipulated by digging, and there are many copper artifacts among the discoveries. Copper cladding applied to the exterior and the columns connects the museum to the historical Bronze Age. Bronze objects with exquisite markings and patterns are also among the archeological discoveries. The use of copper makes a material connection to this history while imbuing a temporal sense due to its patina.

The use of rammed earth led to exciting experiments. A vernacular material in this region, some farmers use it for their residences even today. The material is harvested locally, the techniques require manual labor, and the tools are simple. More relevant to the project, rammed earth reintroduces the excavation context — the earth — to the interior and exterior of the building, thereby establishing an intimate connection between the artificial structure and its site.

Memories inherent to rammed earth are articulated through systematic experiments with materials, structure, and construction details. Key aspects, such as structural calculations, detail design, material optimization, experimental data collection, and construction planning, were undertaken and synchronized with a mockup lab built on the construction site. As a result, the museum not only comprises the structural and architectural expression of a 15-meter central rammed-earth wall, but also incorporates 4,000 cubic meters of rammed earth, thereby becoming the largest rammed-earth structure in the world to date.

Like the excavation followed by the refilling of the holes, the museum is returned to its surroundings by being camouflaged with a saturated, warm brown texture. These barely noticeable, raised volumes merge with the site, the rammed earth walls appearing to have always been there.

WH: The Erlitou Site Museum is right next to an archaeological excavation area, surrounded by small villages, yet the overall setting is quite open and expansive. Such a site must be quite challenging to work with—determining the scale and form requires highly sensitive observation to find appropriate elements to respond to. What was your first impression when you visited the site?

LL: This might have something to do with my personality. When I stood on the site, with its nearly 4,000 years of history, what I felt above all was a sense of time's passage—a deep, almost melancholic awareness of history, amplified by the vast openness of the landscape.

Of course, arriving at such a site is moving, but I did not feel the urge to create a monument expressing my identity. My first instinct was that this was not a place for self-expression. Instead, the design should be a tribute to history—something that has a humble presence, coexisting with the past rather than imposing itself.

At its core, this is an attitude of selflessness. But how do you achieve selflessness while still meeting the demands of a large-scale museum? Can a structure of this magnitude indeed disappear? Can it genuinely embody selflessness? That was the fundamental challenge of this project.

WH: What was your first impression of the site?

LL: There is often nothing visible on the surface at ancient archaeological sites, especially those from the Xia and Shang dynasties, which date back thousands of years. The actual archaeological remains lie one to two meters underground. So you see nothing but villages and farmland. Once the excavation is completed, the site is backfilled to protect the remains.

From a distance, it looks like just another stretch of farmland. But if you observe closely, you'll notice that the site is two to three meters higher than the surrounding land. This suggests that when people chose it to be the location for a capital city, they deliberately selected a slightly elevated location to avoid flooding. However, in the vast plains of Henan, a difference of two to three meters is almost imperceptible.

WH: This site has a silent yet profound kind of impact—vast and boundless, yet demanding extraordinary visual sensitivity to truly perceive it.

LL: It's just earth. It's easy to overlook such aspects of a place if you're not paying attention. Designing on such an open and empty site is incredibly challenging—you may even feel that any construction there would be unnecessary, that the place itself shouldn't be built upon. That's the feeling it evokes.

WH: This almost suggests a reverence for the site. Here, one loses the sense of scale. However, this vastness instills humility in visitors and architects, enabling them to appreciate the fragility of humanity, through the contrast in scale between people and nature.

LL: Yes. Later, I came across a particularly representative archaeological photograph of Erlitou. That photograph became the primary source of inspiration for my design ideas. In that image, the archaeological excavations continuously extend, revealing new discoveries that present an irregular and uncertain state, which left an extremely profound impression on me.

WH: Twenty years ago, Peter Eisenman published a collection of his works titled Cities of Artificial Excavation. This book gives an interpretation of his projects from the perspective of site. Your design for the Erlitou Xia Capital Museum manifests an understanding of site and excavation shaped by an

era and cultural context distinct from Eisenman's. This museum essentially simulates an archaeological excavation site—it appears to hover above the ruins, mimicking the voids formed during the excavation process. Beyond its form, the project carefully extracts and organizes spatial and experiential elements from the site, giving thoughtful consideration to the use of rammed earth and ancient bronze, while maintaining an open stance toward potential future expansion and growth. All these aspects serve as a reflection on lost history.

LL: I call it formless design. For an ancient site like Erlitou, the cultural significance and archaeological characteristics of which are continuously being uncovered, it is crucial to find a sympathetic design language. The final result is a form that resists simple description, avoiding the overly singular interpretation that a clear and definitive volume might impose.

WH: What did you draw in your first conceptual sketch?

LL: I drew an extended line, reflecting the state of an archaeological excavation site, then a second line, very close to the horizon line, with a subtle rise to indicate the building.

WH: What were your considerations for a spatial organization that would be unique to Erlitou Site Museum?

LL: The overall organization of the museum is characterized by overlapping rectangles. My focus was on establishing a rational internal spatial order, rather than imposing an unrelated outer shell—this has always been my ambition. The interior space of the museum progresses layer by layer. Horizontally, a windmill-like interlocking layout enables public spaces to shift and extend, adapting to the building's form while mediating space and scale, thereby creating rich spatial experiences. Vertically, visitors move through the transitional spaces, the lobby, and the exhibition halls, reaching an open colonnade and platform on the rooftop, where they can take in the vast archaeological site and the surrounding natural mountainous landscape. This panoramic view helps one understand the significance of this location as the capital of China's first dynasty.

WH: Rammed earth is one of the primary materials of the Erlitou Site Museum, which resonates with the archeological excavations. Is rammed earth a local construction method?

Portico at the main entrance (p.38) The site covered after excavation (p.39)
01 The excavation site 02 Unearthed cultural relic
03 Sketch 04 Rammed earth testing and construction

01 02 03 | 04

LL: In Henan, rammed earth was widely used for rural farmhouses up until the 1950s. The choice of rammed earth corresponds to the primary construction methods of the Xia Dynasty. Archaeological discoveries have shown that palace walls were built entirely from rammed earth during the Xia and Shang periods.

WH: Are the rammed earth walls of the museum made with local soil?

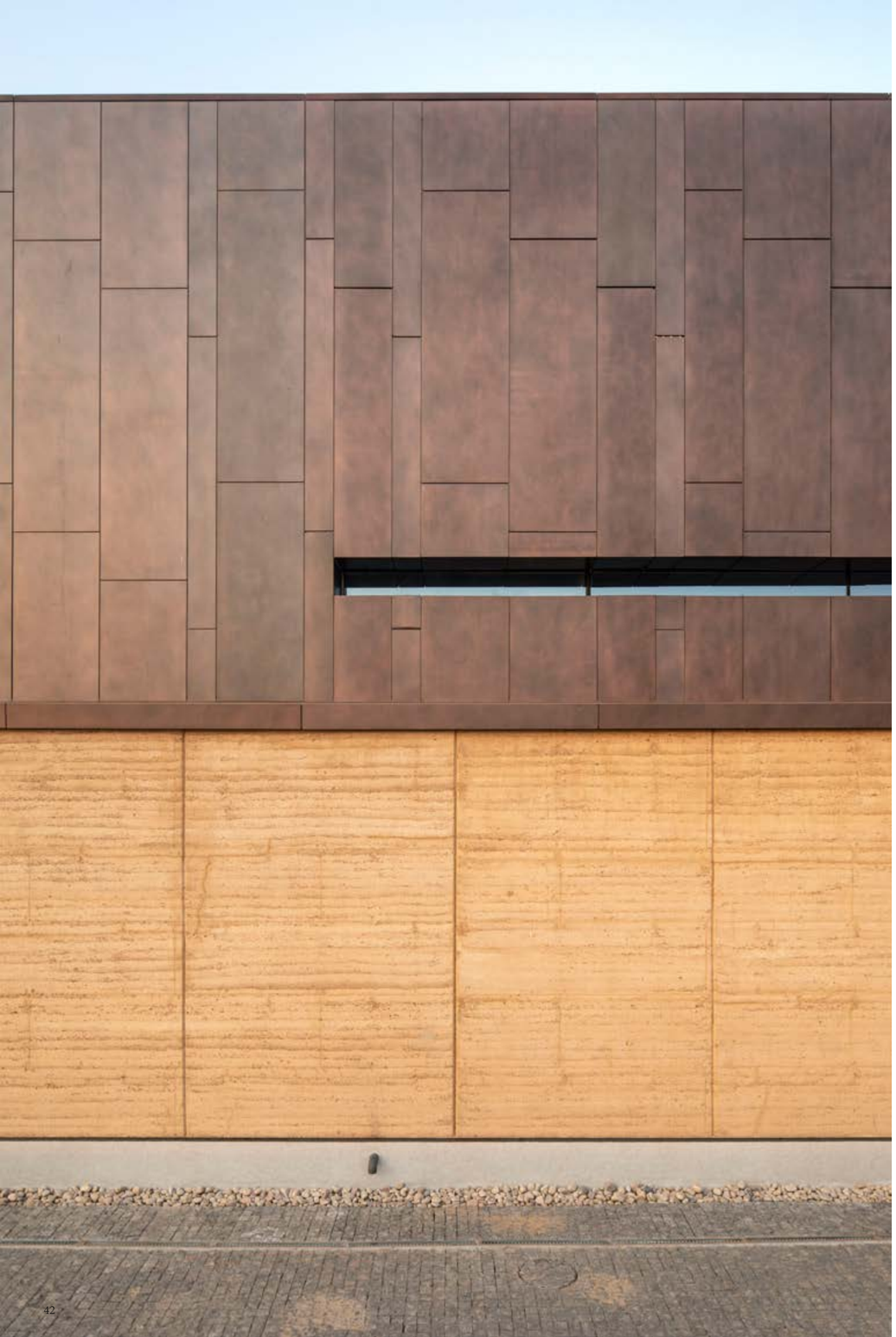
LL: Yes, the local soil is very suitable for rammed earth construction, and we conducted performance tests to confirm this. I wanted to achieve site-specific construction, so local soil should be the first choice. Wouldn't using Shanxi soil in a Henan project entirely miss the point?

WH: Today, using rammed earth, especially for large-scale buildings, is technologically challenging. I heard that you and the construction team built a full-scale test structure on-site.

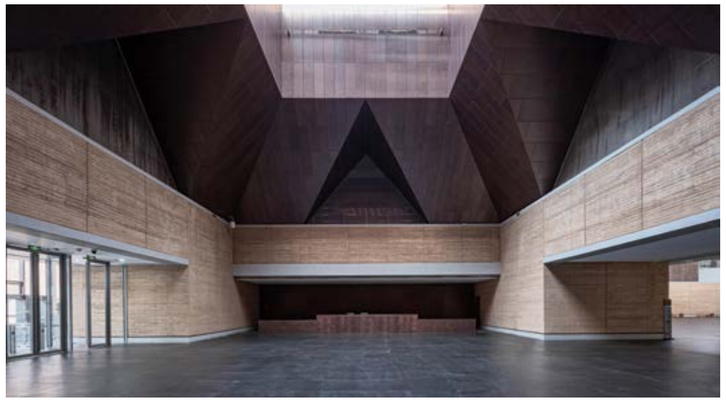
LL: The application of rammed earth on such a large scale for a public building was unprecedented. Through on-site experiments and continuous design optimization, we ultimately solved multiple challenges, including the mismatch between the rigidity of the rammed earth walls and the primary structural system, the composition and strength testing of raw earth, the height-to-thickness ratio of the rammed earth walls, structural accommodation of openings in the rammed earth walls, crack prevention, and waterproofing. The indoor and outdoor architectural design evolved as an "indeterminate" process shaped by our experimental findings. As the test results became increasingly promising, the height of the rammed earth walls continued to rise, reflecting our flexible and adaptive design approach. The result was not entirely predetermined but rather a response to ongoing discoveries. For the construction, we used custom high-strength aluminum formwork elements measuring 1.8 meters long and 0.6 meters wide, which were moved and reused layer by layer. This system ensured a high degree of smoothness in the finished rammed earth surfaces. In the end, more than 4,000 cubic meters of rammed earth were used for both the interior and exterior, making this currently the world's largest rammed earth building.

WH: The Erlitou Xia Capital Museum also features an extensive collection of bronze artifacts. Is this due to the bronze artifacts unearthed during the archaeological excavations?

LL: Yes. The earliest bronze artifacts were excavated there, marking the beginning of the Bronze Age in China. The Bronze Age began with the Xia



05 Detail of rammed earth wall 06 Foyer
07 Central Hall 08 Exhibition Hall



05 | 06
07
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09 Villagers basking in the sun 10 Weekly markets outside the museum

09 | 10

Dynasty and reached its peak during the Shang and Zhou periods. The origins of this era can be traced back to Erlitou.

WH: I watched a short video about the Erlitou Xia Capital Museum, and what moved me the most was seeing local villagers basking in the sun in the museum's open spaces. In winter, the sunlight casts long shadows of people on the ground, and the warmth of the light blends seamlessly with the rammed earth and bronze of the architecture. When designing this museum, what were your considerations and assumptions for the local villagers?

LL: The Erlitou site is far from Luoyang's urban center, and the residents have made significant sacrifices to preserve it. This raises an important question: How can the museum's construction benefit the local rural community? An isolated building cannot truly integrate with the surrounding village space. We needed a holistic design that connects rural development with heritage conservation.

Not far to the west of the museum is a small village that retains more than 30 traditional houses, making it a representative example of vernacular architecture. To support local employment and the upgrading of village infrastructure, we strategically integrated the archaeological park's visitor center and parking lot with the village's overall planning. Along with the archaeological park, this creates a new framework in which the museum serves as the core, flanked by two interconnected zones that promote eastward and westward development.

After two years of intensive construction, this new integrated framework has taken shape. Vendors gather at the park bridge, villagers dance in the square, and elderly people bask in the sun by the museum's porch columns, all indicating that the museum is gradually becoming a natural part of their daily lives.

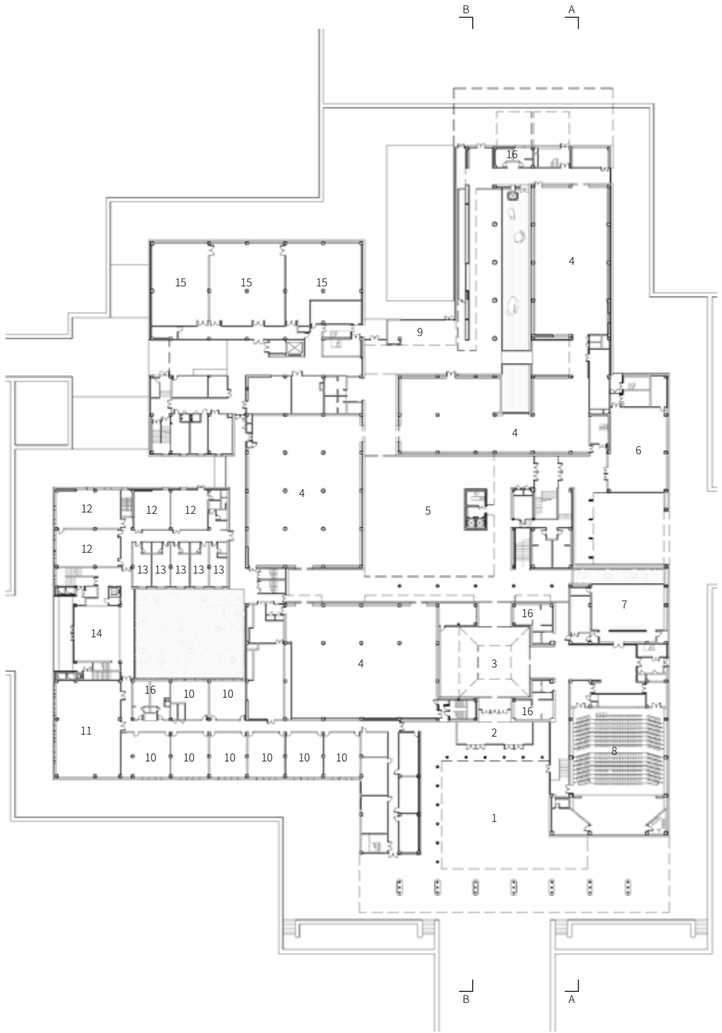
WH: The Xia Dynasty belongs to an ancient past—one could even say it is a lost era. Your museum is new now, but over time, it will be weathered by wind and rain. Patina will form on the bronze panels, and cracks will appear in the rammed earth walls. One day, it might become just another layer of ruins. How does time play a role in your design?

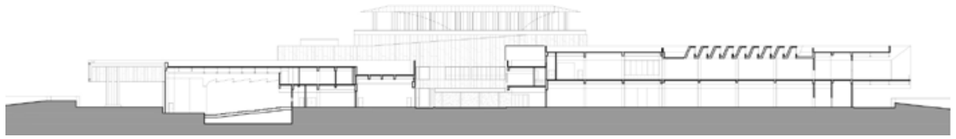
LL: I hope this new building can achieve a symbiotic relationship with the site. It too will age, but will remain a part of this continuous layering of time and ruins.

11 | 12
13

11 The museum, tourist center, and heritage park
12 Main entrance courtyard
13 Visitors resting at the village entrance portico

14 Ground floor plan 15 Section A-A
16 Second floor and third floor plans
17 Section B-B





1 Entrance courtyard
2 Security check
3 Preface hall
4 Exhibition hall
5 Central hall
6 Souvenir shop
7 VIP room
8 Lecture hall
9 Coffee
10 Office
11 Multi-function hall
12 Meeting room
13 Research room
14 Office lobby
15 Storage
16 Toilet

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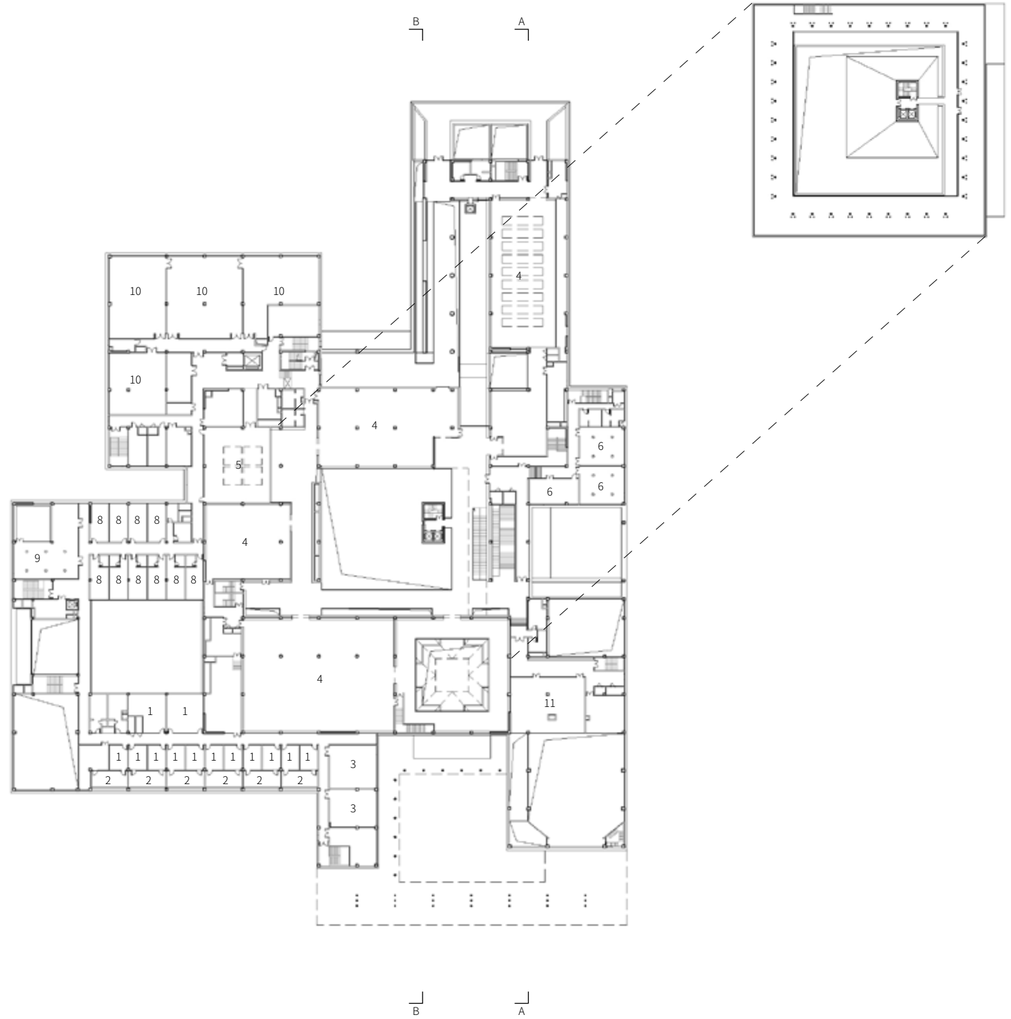
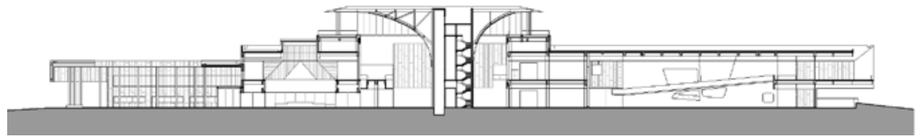
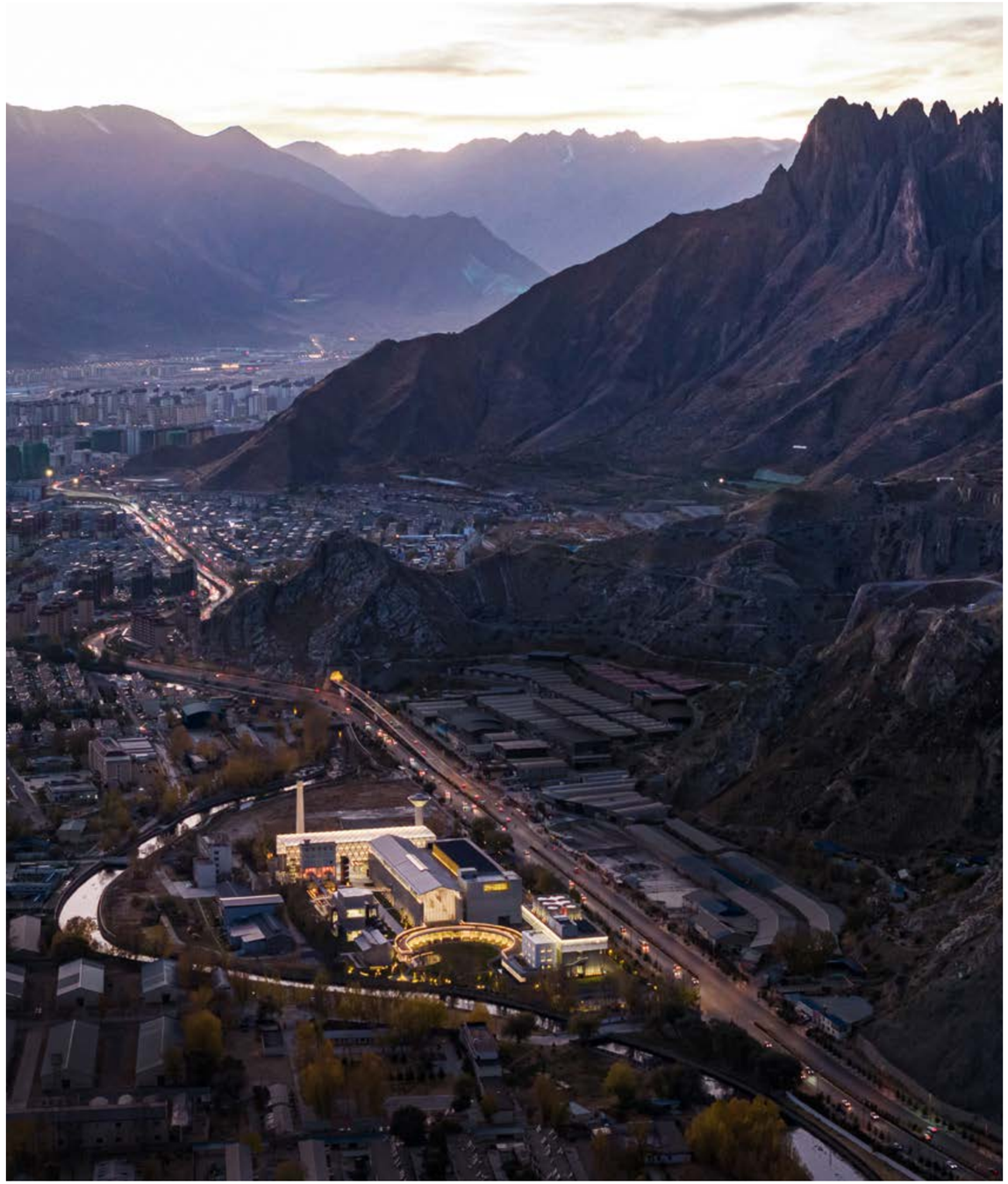




1 Office
2 Terrace
3 Meeting room
4 Exhibition hall
5 Exhibition of cultural relic restoration
6 Classroom
7 VIP room
8 Rearch room
9 Reading room
10 Storage
11 HAVC room

0 5 10 25M



Tibet Art Museum

Location: Lhasa, Tibet
Area: 32,825 ㎡
Site Area: 47,340 ㎡
Year: 2023

Tibet Art Museum is an architectural response to the obsolete Lhasa Cement Plant. The cement plant is 7.6 kilometers west of the Potala Palace, connected by Beijing Road, the city's central east-west boulevard. Unlike the Potala Palace building, located on raised ground, the old Lhasa Cement Plant was situated on the flat area south of the mountain, while being visually embraced by the hills behind. The area surrounding the plant seemed disconnected from the Palace and relatively undeveloped.

The museum intends to establish new connections with the surrounding areas. Two spatial axes—north to south, and west to east—draw pedestrians from the streets to the museum. The entry is positioned on the west side of the building complex, implying a plaza between the museum and the future city development. Interestingly, a plaza was created shortly after the completion of the art museum.

The existing structures of the Lhasa Cement Plant possess impressive formal characteristics. Located at the center of the site is the main factory chamber, twenty-six meters tall, with a typical industrial pitched-roof cross-section. A former rotary kiln, eighty meters long, extends east to west. Cylindrical volumes are aligned on the south side of the plant, with inverted conical volumes. All these structures contribute to the formal richness of the architecture.

The museum's organization integrates the dispersed existing structures and volumes into exhibition programs, thereby allowing continuous viewing sequences. By regrouping the layout of the industrial structures, the museum comprises four major components—exhibition halls, an artist residency cluster, an art interaction and experience area, and an art market. A ring structure connects the existing interior volumes while creating an outdoor gathering space. In cross section, the ring structure recalls vernacular arcades, with hanging curtains to provide sun protection.

New spatial relationships at the bodily scale are established by redefining the existing interior volumes. A viewing space with a long horizontal opening has been hung from the structural frames of the main factory to provide a direct view of the snow-covered mountaintops. The long-span former rotary kiln has been perforated with circular, colored glass apertures to allow fun experiences for children. Other kilns have become visually striking sculptures, linking the museum to contemporary definitions of art.

The new architectural components echo Tibetan vernacular construction, combining timber formwork, exposed concrete, and Corten steel. More importantly, careful considerations of the existing structure, materials, and tectonics has led to the unique details of the Lhasa Art Museum. To reinforce the steel structure, independent concrete columns have been installed adjacent to the existing ones, creating double columns with a contrasting material articulation. Surface restoration was combined with texture reproduction to enhance the original material characteristics. Fragmented steel plates have been applied to weathered concrete wall surfaces, creating new textures. Perhaps surprisingly, this wall has become a popular photoshoot location for younger visitors.

In Tibet, art is a subset of religion. Due to its adaptive reuse context, the design of the Tibet Art Museum diverges from religious obligations. Instead, the design engages visitors at a bodily level, enhancing the impact of seeing the mountains and unexpected industrial concrete objects, hearing the sound of flapping curtains and kids giggling, touching the texture of weathered concrete surfaces, and perhaps smelling the ja-srub-ma (butter tea).

Tibet Art Museum in the Himalayan foot hills (p.50)
Urban acupuncture of an obsolete industrial area (p.52)

Tibet Art Museum set against the Potala Palace (p.54)
The rotary kiln sculpture gallery (p.56) 01 A traditional Tibetan key

01

WH: The logo of the Tibet Art Museum is a key—what was the reason behind this choice?

LL: This key reflects an aspect of my design process.

When I first arrived in Lhasa for the competition, I had only three days to familiarize myself with the cultural context of Tibet. I had never been there before. In addition to surveying the site, I made three requests: to visit historical and cultural landmarks, such as the Potala Palace, to meet with local Tibetan artists, and to study traditional Tibetan residences.

Due to my second request, I was taken to meet the Tibetan artist Tsering Langjie (ཚེའེདབང་ཀྲུས་ 次仁朗杰) at his home. He is an avid collector of Tibetan furniture, artifacts, and clothing. Interestingly, he had a large bundle of traditional Tibetan keys hanging on his ceiling. These keys have a very distinctive shape, and he gave me one as a gift.

The front of the key features a large circular shape, which serves as a memory marker. At the time, I didn't anticipate it would have anything to do with my design, but I remembered it—that key left a lasting impression on me.

WH: The Tibet Art Museum was an adaptive reuse of a former cement factory. The overall organization of the floor plan also resembles a key. How did that happen?

LL: The main challenge in designing the Museum was to reorganize the separate buildings of the cement factory. The site contained more than a dozen scattered buildings, each serving a different function in the cement production process, including mining, crushing and mixing materials, processing, and storage. As a result of these industrial processes, the factory comprised irregularly shaped buildings and structures, making it challenging to transform them into cohesive museum spaces.

The two biggest challenges were access from the urban context and the spatial organization of the museum. Most traditional museums integrate their four main functional zones into a single building, stacking them vertically: collections and storage (including archives and conservation spaces), exhibition halls (galleries for display), public services (visitor amenities), and administrative, educational, and research spaces. Since the original cement factory was already dispersed, we embraced this fragmentation rather than fighting it. Instead of stacking these four functional zones, we arrayed them horizontally, thereby giving the museum a spatial organization that is distinct from traditional designs.

Another critical decision was where to place the museum's main entrance. Most of the competing design teams followed the original masterplan, which called for a central entrance at the main factory hall, creating a symmetrical layout.

During a visit to Lhasa, I noticed that many newer buildings incorporate rigid, symmetrical forms, including the newly built Tibet Museum, which tend to be highly ceremonial. However, such a rigid organization felt completely unlike the organic, mountain-adapted structure of the Potala Palace. I decided to restore this sense of organicism in the Tibet Art Museum design.

I placed the main entrance on the site's west side, defining it as a semi-open space covered by a membrane structure. This creates a welcoming and flexible transition and a connection to future urban development west of the site. The location of the main entrance triggered the museum's overall layout. I drew a circular corridor linking the existing buildings, connecting the fragmented structures into a cohesive whole. At that moment, the composition of the architecture suddenly became visually striking—a long and linear structure extending across the site, with a circular form anchoring one end. That's when I realized—this is the shape of the key!

WH: It looks like a coincidence, but demonstrates how an architect can capitalize and elaborate on happy accidents.

LL: Yes. I did not deliberately design the museum to resemble the key. Instead, the image of the key had imprinted itself on my mind and was then revealed in the design.

WH: Chinese people have a special fondness for pictorial thinking. Our written characters are based on pictographs, which unconsciously shape our ways of observing and thinking. However, pictorial representation in architecture is somewhat risky. This drive toward literal resemblance seems to be a deviation from the real issues that architecture must confront. As Laozi said, "when you fashion a vessel out of molded clay, it is the emptiness inside that makes it useful; when you carve outdoors and windows to form a room, it is the emptiness within that makes the room useful. Thus, what exists is for profit, but what does not exist is for use." Here, the "emptiness" is the opposite of the "vessel." Yet, people's attachment to objects is undeniable. The memories they carry, and the sentiments aroused by familiarity, can establish direct resonances between architecture and people.

LL: Though I said the Museum is a key, there is another layer of meaning. Lhasa is considered to be an expression of Himalayan culture, and the Art Museum is intended to display Himalayan art. Many Tibetan people are dispersed worldwide—when the Dalai Lama went to India, he brought with him a group of followers. Himalayan art is very mysterious, and my design concept is an attempt to interpret Himalayan culture through this Art Museum. It is a key to understanding art and culture.

WH: Was your first visit to the site surreal?

LL: Well, I had a severe altitude sickness at the time—my head was splitting with pain. But I told my assistant, "Since we've come all this way, we must observe everything." So, I climbed to the highest point of the cement factory. It was a tough climb because, at 3,600 meters above sea level, every step feels like one is carrying a heavy load—it was exhausting.

But after all the effort, I reached the top and experienced the most moving moment. "Ah, this trip was worth it," I thought. Through gaps in the rooftop, I caught glimpses of the surrounding snow-capped mountains. At that moment, I decided that the public space had to be placed at this high vantage point. In museum designs of the past, public spaces were typically located on the ground floor. But the Tibet Art Museum's site is unique.

02 The ring gallery 03 The old cement factory
04 Courtyard embraced by the ring gallery 05 Main entrance
06 Borrowed scenery of the snow-capped mountain

04 | 06
05

WH: This reminds me of Carlo Scarpa's Castelvecchio Museum, where he altered the proximity between visitors and exhibits through the spatial configuration, introducing perspectives that are not at the usual eye level. Viewing the snow-capped mountains in the Tibet Art Museum resonates with the "borrowed scenery" (借景) technique used in traditional Chinese gardens.

LL: Exactly. Visitors wander through the exhibition from the ground floor to the top, where a space is provided for them to pause and take in the view. This completes the spatial narrative more holistically.

WH: I imagine that the architectural form of the cement factory must have been quite distinctive in its geometric volumes, scale, and organizational relationships. From a purely formal perspective, what were your observations at the time?

LL: Form is one of the fascinating aspects of the adaptive reuse of industrial heritage. Take, for example, Zeitz MOCAA in Cape Town, designed by Heatherwick Studio, where a series of silos were cut so as to create an incredibly striking space. Another example is the Tate Modern in London, designed by Herzog & de Meuron.

In China, the adaptive reuse of industrial heritage only began gaining traction after 2000. As cities developed, old industrial zones saw a decline in productivity, and their original equipment became obsolete. Many industrial buildings were abandoned. At the same time, urban functional zones were reorganized, with former industrial areas transitioning to service-oriented industries. This shift from secondary (manufacturing) to tertiary (service) industries meant that many industrial sites were left vacant, creating opportunities for their adaptive reuse. Against this backdrop, the adaptive reuse of industrial heritage has become a growing trend.

Beyond that, industrial buildings were designed initially for production—they were spaces that served objects, not people. As a result, they feature highly distinctive spatial forms, such as the massive furnaces found in the transformation of Shougang Steelworks, with their immense scale and intricate machinery. These factory buildings were never meant for public access, so the sheer scale and atmosphere can be overwhelming for ordinary people when they suddenly find themselves inside such spaces. That's what makes these spaces so intriguing.

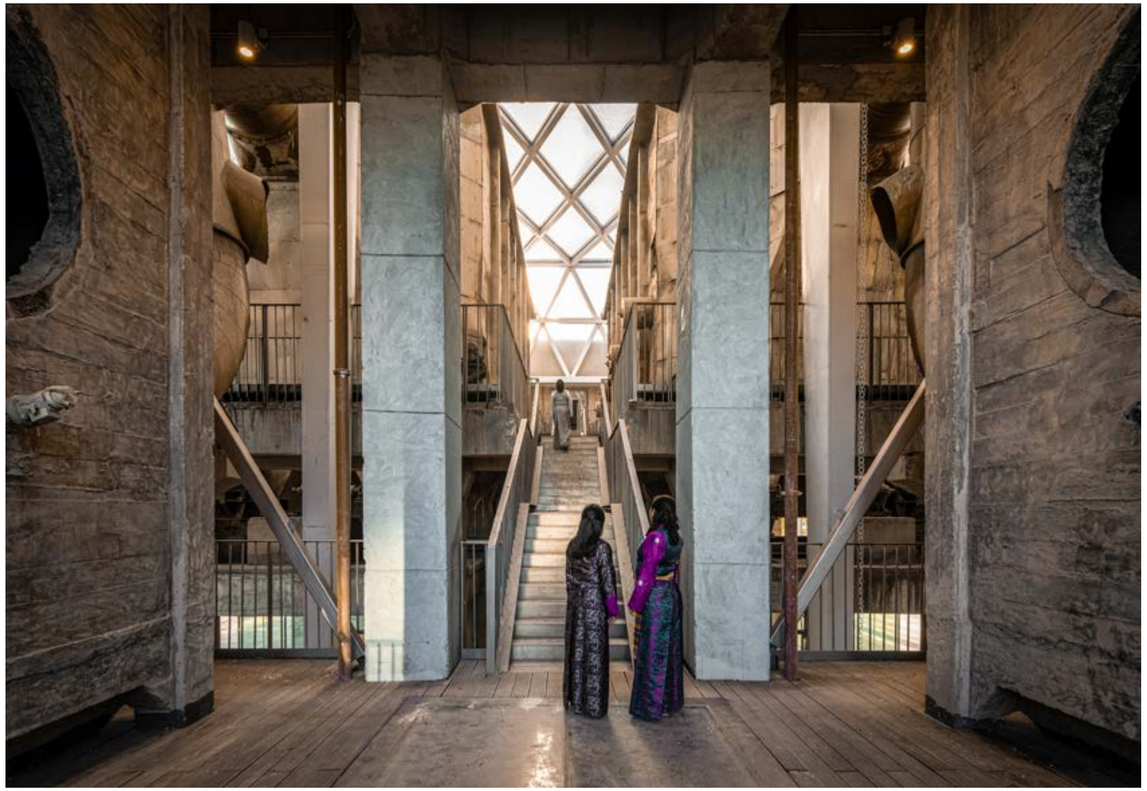
The Tibet Art Museum was originally a cement factory, and it retains many of these unique spaces. The rotary kiln, for example, consists of two exceptionally long tubes for transporting cement—a narrow, elongated steel corridor. The various irregularly shaped spaces for storing cement also had a strong sculptural presence. These highly expressive forms naturally resonate with contemporary art spaces, making industrial conversions particularly compelling.

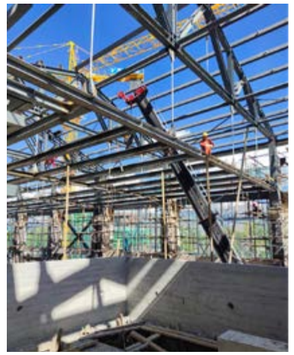
Of course, the biggest challenge is to connect these irregular spaces in a coherent sequence. Many of these spaces were previously inaccessible to humans. Take the silos, for example—they were once entirely enclosed, but now people need to be able to enter and explore them safely. This means that architects must strategically cut and modify these spaces. Heatherwick Studio, for instance, made bold cuts in the original cylindrical silos to transform previously enclosed areas into a vast open hall. This process of selectively opening up and reconfiguring spaces is crucial for the conversion of industrial heritage into an art museum.

WH: How did you find the optimal balance between meeting functional requirements and maximizing the visual and spatial impacts of the original structures?

LL: There is a Chinese idiom " 因地制宜 " which means tailoring solutions to specific given conditions. Among the original buildings was a 120-meter-long main workshop, which we repurposed as the public hall. This is similar to what was done at Tate Modern, where a massive space was converted into a grand entrance. Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds* was exhibited there. Though both spaces are long and linear, the key difference in the Tibet Art Museum is that its public space is suspended within the existing structure. We hung the public space from the original roof trusses, creating a floating effect. This elevated public space, offering a direct view of the mountains, is one of the highlights of the design.

Another key feature is the way in which we manipulated the original structure of the main factory building. The structure was over 60 years old, and all the existing components had severely deteriorated and required structural reinforcement. The most straightforward method would have been to increase the cross-sectional size of the original load-bearing columns, making them thicker to meet the new structural requirements. However, while functional, this approach would have erased the historical memory embedded in the original columns. We consulted with our structural advisor, ZHANG Zhun,





who proposed a damping lattice-column system. In simple terms, we left the original concrete columns intact and added steel structural columns beside them, connecting them through dampers. As a result, when you walk through the museum now, you see a juxtaposition of steel and concrete columns, making the structural reinforcement visible and legible. This solution met the structural performance requirements while maintaining the distinction between old and new.

This innovative structural approach was recognized internationally—this year (2024), the Tibet Art Museum was awarded the Structural Award from the Institution of Structural Engineers (IStructE) in the UK, validating the success of the design through acknowledgment from our peers worldwide.

WH: Remedial structural measures can also be an architectural strategy.

LL: Absolutely. In this building, I wanted to ensure that the distinction between old and new remains visible, allowing people to interpret the original history of the building. That's how this approach arose.

WH: What did you do with that long, tubular space you mentioned?

LL: That pipeline was transformed into a youth experience space. We cut various circular openings into the structure, and installed colored glass. When sunlight filters through, the interior becomes a vibrant, multicolored experience space.

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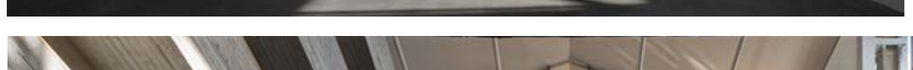


07 Central connection 08 Concrete mixing tank repurposed as an architectural component
09&10 The suspended structure 11 Overlooking from the hanging hall beneath the roof
12 The rotary kilns 13&14 Central Hall
15 Adaptive reuse of the cement factory: before and after

WH: How much of the original cement factory buildings and spaces were demolished, and how much was repurposed?

LL: We retained about 70% of the original buildings, with only a small portion demolished. The design reflects a layering of time—you can see a continuity of materials as well. Though we introduced new structures, the materials used in these additions were derived from the existing ones. For example, in the new sections, we used wood-formed concrete and weathered steel panels, both of which relate to the material identity of the original cement factory. Some of the smaller silos have been transformed into a bookstore, while another set of silos has been converted into a multimedia exhibition space. We also kept some of the funnel-shaped metal tanks, even though they no longer serve a practical function, as part of the visual memory of the site.

WH: They are sculptural.

LL: Yes, exactly, and unique as well. Some elements that obstructed spatial use were removed and then repurposed as outdoor environmental sculptures.

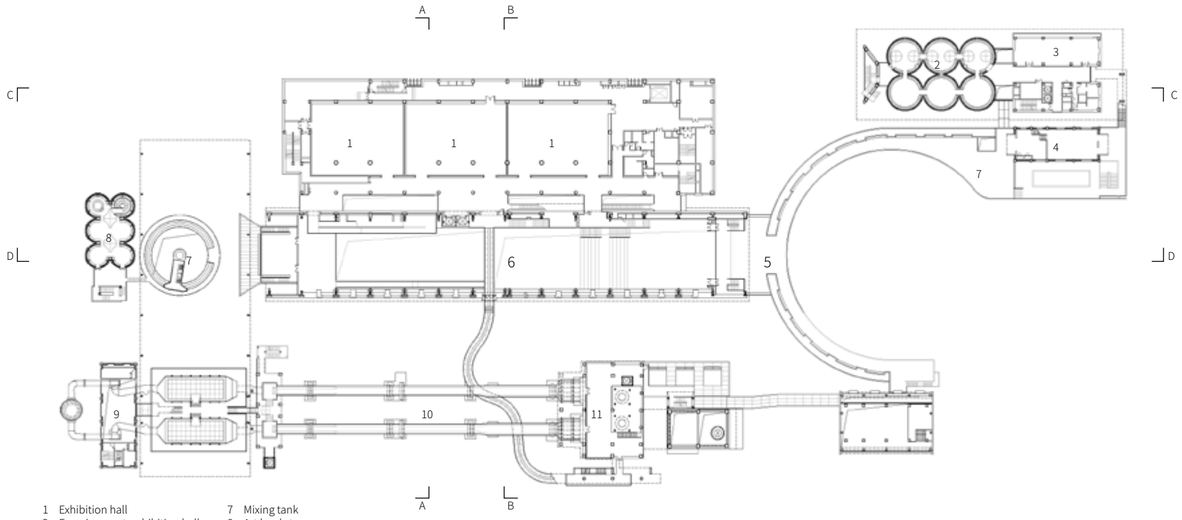
WH: The adaptive reuse of industrial heritage often entails an attitude toward patina. In China, the public has long preferred an aesthetic of newness. The appreciation of patina has only emerged in recent years, yet remains somewhat niche. In your design for the Tibet Art Museum, how did you evoke a sense of connection between visitors and the decaying remnants?

LL: If an old factory wall is deteriorated, my approach is predicated on its historical significance. If it were a cultural heritage site, I would consider restoring it. But since it's an industrial building, I did not see a need to restore it to its original state. It's already damaged, so rather than merely repairing it, my design introduces new elements into the existing decay—creating something that is neither damaged nor restored but transformed into a new state. That is my philosophy and design choice.

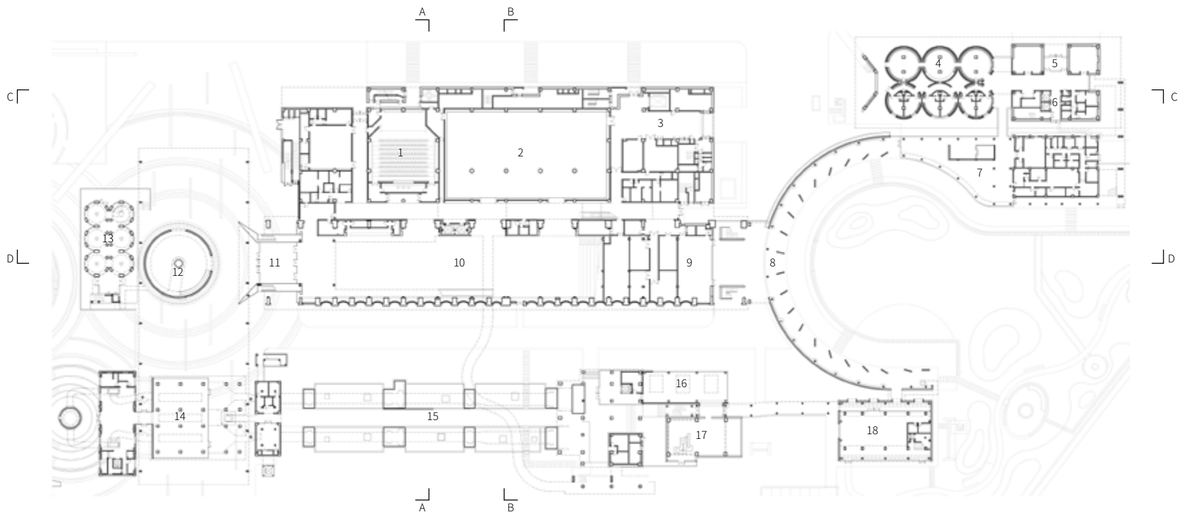
For some of the deteriorated walls in the Tibet Art Museum, I asked my assistants to find circular stainless-steel pieces of various sizes to embed into the cracks. Later, they told me that circular pieces were difficult to fabricate, so we decided to use triangular stainless-steel plates instead, embedding a variety of large and small triangles into the walls. Interestingly, I later saw many young visitors coming to take photos in front of this wall, making it a popular "check-in" spot. It seems that this new interpretation of decay resonated with them.

WH: The museum feels very much alive. Your architecture often presents a pure and refined appearance, but ultimately, it provides spaces in which life unfolds, revealing the warmth of human presence.

LL: In my younger years, I pursued idealized beauty in photographic representations of architecture. Now, I'm more focused on the experience of being on-site and allowing designs and buildings to evolve organically. This is especially crucial for large-scale architecture, where diverse sensory experiences and rich details are of great importance. With the adaptive reuse of industrial heritage, it's often hard to immediately discern the architect's design language. In the case of the Tibet Art Museum, beyond ensuring a clear distinction between old and new, my goal was to embed all elements within the timeline of the original cement factory—not as isolated interventions but seamlessly woven into the layers of time. I wanted to reconnect the spaces to the everyday rhythms of life, restoring that human warmth in the site.



1 Exhibition hall
2 Experienment exhibition hall
3 Interactive area
4 Factory history museum
5 Circular gallery
6 Central hall
7 Mixing tank
8 Art bookstore
9 Shop
10 Sculpture gallery
11 Experiment area



1 Lecture hall
2 Exhibition hall
3 Loading area
4 Experienment exhibition hall
5 Interactive area
6 Creative base
7 Security check
8 Mixing tank
9 Canteen
10 Circular gallery
11 Office
12 Central hall
13 Art bookstore
14 Shop
15 Sculpture gallery
16 Aesthetic education area
17 Artists' studio
18 Sculpture experiment area

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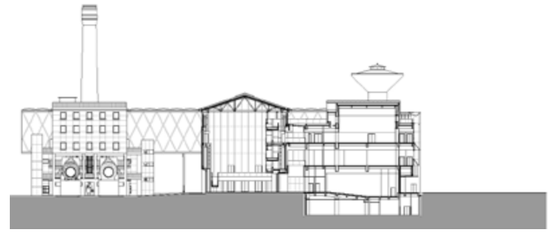
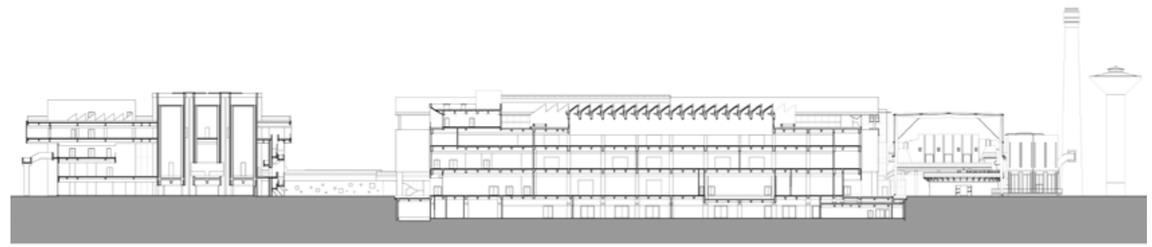
16 Second floor plan 17 Ground floor plan 18 Section A-A
19 Section B-B 20 Section C-C 21 Section D-D





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Taicang Art Museum

Location: Taicang, Jangsu
Area: 16,650 ㎡
Year: 2022

Swan Science Museum

Location: Rongcheng, Shandong
Area: 2,663 ㎡
Year: 2016

Sui–Tang Dynasties Grand Canal Cultural Museum

Location: Luoyang, Henan
Area: 32,986 ㎡
Year: 2022

Fei Xiaotong Memorial Hall of Kaixiangong Village

Location: Suzhou, Jiangsu
Area: 2,234 ㎡
Year: 2010

World Skill Museum

Location: Shanghai
Area: 20,205 ㎡
Year: 2022

Luoyang Museum

Location: Luoyang, henan
Area: 43,654 ㎡
Year: 2009

Memorial Hall of Chinese Laborers abroad at WW1

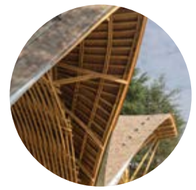
Location: Weihai, Shandong
Area: 2,335 ㎡
Year: 2017

Yujiashan Archaeological Museum

Location: Hangzhou, Zhejiang
Area: 26,633 ㎡
Year: 2025

Shandong Art Museum

Location: Jinan, Shandong
Area: 52,138 ㎡
Year: 2013



Bamboo Theater

Location: Huaihua, Hunan
Area: 2400 ㎡
Year: 2024