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hutong

Concepts for architecture criticism: A comparison between the Western and Chinese approach, based on the writings of François Jullien.
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Concepts for architecture criticism:
A study on the value of contemporary
interventions in Beijing's hutongs,
generalized through the framework
of the scriptures of François Jullien

Abstract

Beijing's historical city centre has been the victim of uncontrolled proliferation and marginalization for decades, its old and traditional neighbourhoods threatened to be demolished. In recent years, however, architecture firms, designers and architecture schools alike, have succeeded in raising awareness on this issue. These last named have tried to reinstate the long lost value of these ancient dwellings and alleyways, called hutong, by designing and refurbishing still existing hutongs, as to show the quality of life that can be acquired with minimal effort and with respect towards the historic fabric of China's capital city. These interventions are, logically, praised for their social and historical relevance. But what about their inherent, architectural qualities? In this dissertation, I discuss five cases of contemporary, architectural interventions in these hutongs, to find out what defines their value, and how we can link it to pre-modern

Chinese concepts like dynamic harmony, centrality, blandness, potentiality, propensity ... Throughout those five cases, some themes will recur, and will be the intermediate step to go from specific cases to general remarks. The theoretical account is based on François Jullien's writings, and should glue my general remarks from the intermediate phase together, in order to come to a conclusion on the non-social significance of these interventions.

Key words.

Hutong

Architectural
intervention

François Jullien

Intrinsic value

Criticism

Extended Abstract

The dissertation is divided in three main chapters: cases, themes and theory. In the first part, five cases will be analysed and criticized on their intrinsic value and significance. Every case starts with a citation of a part of the description made by either the architecture firm itself, or by a well known third party, like Divisare for example. Each of these description is primarily focussed on social significance. In the comments I provide on the cases, however, intrinsic qualities such as the use of materiality in a clever and efficient way, are much more importance. Efficacy here does not refer to an external measure like money, time or material-economic factors. It refers to a clever use of the available resources the architects and designers have, and how they put these conditions to their advantage. To give an example, the way in which ZAO/standardarchitecture manipulate in-situ cast concrete in the first two cases is of utmost subtlety and results in a meaningful contribution to the ensemble.

There is a combination of both rigid and fluid traits. First, the planks from the form-work are clearly visible, making the finish look rough and rock-like. On the other hand, however, there is the impression that the surface finish of the concrete is a reminder of that very same form-work. The fact that the concrete has taken the shape of its container, means it has behaved like a fluid: only fluids take the shape of the thing in which it is contained.

So by leaving the identity of the form-work visible in the surface finish, we can almost smell the former fluid state of the concrete. Other elements like the way the rains falls on those concrete surfaces, or how it reflects the rock-elements we commonly see in traditional Chinese garden designs and landscape paintings., contribute to a meaningful whole.

It is elements like these that drew my attention, and I analyse all the cases in a similar manner in chapter one. Chapter two has everything to do with taking a step back, and analysing my comments that analysed the cases. In the comments, some themes are present throughout the five cases, themes like materiality (crafts), multi-functionality, aesthetics ... The example about the use of concrete definitely belongs to the materiality, or the importance of crafts. Some themes recur, and not just coincidentally.

Traditional Chinese architecture was actually different from how we see architecture nowadays: it was a craft, in stead of something in between craft and art. It was completely part of the cosmos we live in. This material-oriented value of architecture – where the significance is based on the skill of the maker – is one of the reasons why the theme of craft keeps occurring. So these themes do not only tell something about my comments, they also originate from some historical and cultural background.

That background is described and laid out by François Jullien, a French sinologist and philosopher, whose works focus on 'the good artefact' and the process of making, in a very theoretical manner. It is through that theoretical account that we can calibrate the comments and themes that were present in the first two chapters. Hence, the third chapter is one about handling the writings of François Jullien. To continue on the example of the concrete surface finish designed by ZAO/standardarchitecture, it can be described through François Jullien's *La propension des choses* (The propensity of things). Therein he talks about the importance of clever use of circumstances, as to limit external force or energy needed to achieve something. *A true general only wins 'easy' battles.*[1]

Extended Abstract

Deze scriptie is verdeeld in drie delen: gevalstudies, thema's en theorie. In het eerste deel worden vijf gevalstudies uiteengezet, waarbij deze geanalyseerd en bekritiseerd worden op hun intrinsieke waarde. Elke gevalstudie start met een beschrijving van ofwel het architectuurbureau zelf, ofwel van een bekende derde partij, zoals bijvoorbeeld Divisare. Opmerkelijk is dat elk van deze cases gericht is op het maatschappelijk belang, eerder dan op de intrinsieke waarde van deze gevalstudies – iets waar ik in mijn commentaar meer zal bij stilstaan. Het gaat dan, bijvoorbeeld, om het materiaalgebruik en de daaruit voortkomende efficiëntie en effecten. Deze efficiëntie staat echter niet in verband met buitenstaande maatstaven zoals geld, tijd of materiaal-economische factoren. Het slaat op het kennen van de situatie en het slimme gebruik van de gegeven situatie en haar randcondities. Om

een voorbeeld te geven, kunnen we verwijzen naar de subtiele manier waarop ZAO/standardarchitecture in-situ gestort beton inzet. Er ontstaat een interessant spel tussen vloeibaar en vast. Eerst en vooral geeft de zichtbare afdruk van de planken in het beton het betonoppervlak een ruwe en steenachtige uitstraling. Aan de andere kant is er ook sprake van een reminiscentie aan de vloeibare staat van het beton. De identiteit van de planken blijft zichtbaar, en het beton insinueert dus haar voormalige huls. Op die manier is het beton een referentie naar het vloeibare: enkel een vloeistof neemt de vorm aan van het vat waarin het zich bevindt. Door die bepaalde keuze voor de afwerking van het betonoppervlak is er dus sprake van een combinatie van vast en vloeibaar door een en dezelfde bekistingtechniek. Deze manier van afwerken wordt verder benadrukt door andere elementen, zoals de manier waarop regenwater het oppervlak bevlekt, of zoals de manier waarop het beton een deel uitmaakt van een verwijzing naar traditionele Chinese tuinarchitectuur en landschapsschilderijen.

Elementen zoals deze trekken de aandacht, en alle gevalstudies worden op dergelijke manier geanalyseerd. Bij hoofdstuk twee is het nodig het grotere plaatje in acht te nemen. Ik becommentarieer ditmaal mijn commentaar over

de gevalstudies, waarbij steeds terugkerende thema's komen bovendrijven, zoals materialiteit (ambacht), multifunctionaliteit, esthetiek ... Het gegeven voorbeeld over de afwerking van het beton door ZAO/standardarchitecture behoort zeker tot de eerste categorie. Meerdere thema's komen dus terug doorheen de gevalstudies, en dat feit is geenszins toevallig te noemen. Traditionele Chinese architectuur had namelijk een ander statuut dan architectuur zoals we dat nu kennen. Het was een ambacht, eerder dan een mediatie tussen ambacht en kunst. Het was volledig en enkel aanwezig in de kosmos waar wij ons in bevinden. Deze materiaal-georiënteerde waarde – waar de bekwaamheid van de ambachtsman de geluktheid van architectuur bepaalde – is een van de redenen waarom het thema van ambacht meermaals wederkeert. Deze thema's vertellen daarenboven niet enkel iets over de gevalstudies, maar hinten ook naar een historische achtergrond.

Hiervoor halen we de mosterd bij François Jullien, een Frans sinoloog en filosoof, wiens boeken handelen over het goede artefact en het proces van het maken in China (en Europa). Hierdoor kunnen de bevindingen uit voorgaande twee hoofdstukken gekalibreerd worden. Om terug te komen op het gegeven voorbeeld, kan de omgang met het beton kan worden met wat François

Jullien vertelt in zijn *La propension des choses*. Hij behandelt onder meer de manier waarop men met een gegeven omgeving om zou moeten gaan. Op die manier kan men de nodige energie, moeite en kracht beperken tot het strikte minimum. *Een waar strateeg gaat enkel 'eenvoudig' te winnen veldslagen aan.*[2]

Preface

The Chinese culture has ever been of interest to me: the language, its rich architecture and its history. As a small child, I used to develop my own secret writing system, based on Chinese writings. Many a year later, the curiosity for that – fundamentally different and yet, strangely familiar – culture hasn't ceased to follow me. As a master student in *Science of Engineering: Architecture* at the University of Ghent, I want to have an as broad an understanding as I can possibly acquire. Apart from Construction Engineering, Technical Installations in Buildings ... I desired a more humane addition to my study. This desire gained ground when following the courses of Professor Dr. Bart Verschaffel and Professor Dr. Bart Vandenabeele, the former introducing architecture theory, the latter unravelling the complexity of the never-ending search for Beauty by philosophical giants like Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche ... In addition to these courses, I started studying the Chinese language on my own. Since that

moment on, I have been searching for ways to reconcile my interest for Chinese culture, architecture and the accounts of European philosophers on behalf of Beauty. My study in China is one of those attempts, as is this dissertation, trying to be that reconciliation. A year before I went studying in Shanghai, I had gone to Beijing to live for ten days in a renovated hutong building, and – of course – to see China's capital's most famous monuments. I immediately felt a certain appeal towards the way people lived in still existing hutong areas. Although highly marginalized and in bad shape, the community and its maze of alleyways struck me. There was some sort of convenience or suitability of those neighbourhoods. Hence, in this dissertation, I want to grasp the opportunity to elaborate on some of the contemporary renovations (or refurbishments) designed by contemporary architecture firms like ZAO/standardarchitecture, Wonder Architects and others, and see in what way we can distil some themes out of those cases. The last step should be one based on François Jullien's writings, where the trends discovered in the cases lead to a significant whole when explaining it through François Jullien's writings. European examples or theories will be contrasted to Jullien's theoretical account, as opposing illustrations serve as clarification. I believe that learning about another culture and its architecture does not only broaden one's knowledge about that culture and architecture, but makes one aware of one's own background, and makes one appreciate it.

Introduction

In recent years, Beijing's notorious hutongs have gained international attention. The small alleyways defined by even smaller dwellings were once considered by the government as cancerous proliferation that needed to be sanitized and should make way for massive building projects and speculation. However, this act of clearing out large parts of Beijing's historical centre was halted last decade, due to a growing interest in the almost organic structure of these hutong-slums. Architecture firms from all over China and Europe have since then tried to reinstate their long lost splendour, in an attempt to highlight their value and create a more harmonious way of living. Contemporary designs are mostly a combination of creating a clean living atmosphere and the addition of basic amenities – I had the luxury of having running water and a toilet during my stay in one of Beijing's hutongs.

So one can say that the attention is twofold: first there is the interesting succession of small spaces and alleyways, making hutong neighbourhoods really adjusted to human scale. Second, there is the ongoing rapid growth of Beijing's citizens, and a desperate cry for qualitative living spaces. Providing traditional and decayed hutongs with modern functionalities, like

running water and private toilets, should allow the urban tissue to adapt to higher population density without losing precious relics from the past. Hutongs – in Chinese referred to as 鬍同 [hútóng]* – are housing complexes consisting of courtyard surrounded on all four sides by housing units. Every ensemble of housing units belonged to one – sometimes quite puissant – family. These dwellings are based on the typology of 四閤院 [sìhéyuàn], a rectangular, walled plan-form with one or more courtyards. According to Confucian decorum, every family member had their own place in the complex, just like they had their own place and duty within the family[3] . These courtyard houses were often designed according to 風水 [fēng shuǐ] principles[4] , and served to accommodate a certain balance in energy. Orientation, access to sunlight, shadow, rainwater drainage, colour schemes, doors … were all made to attain a favourable ensemble which would bring good fortune. However, due to the focus on national industry and the attempt of the government to create a social, industrial superpower, there was a shortage in funding for financing residential projects. In combination with a financial crisis, people were obliged to give up their former spacious living quarters, and Beijing's 鬍同 [hútóng] residents needed to live with several families in one courtyard house. Through the years, people built their own extensions

to their part of the 四閤院 [sìhéyuàn] as to accommodate a cooking place, washing place etc. After decades of organic growth of buildings, the spacious living quarters quickly turned into marginalized slums.

After demolishing a lot of Beijing's historical 鬍同 [hútóng], to make room for huge architectural projects to house hundreds of families at once, the government altered their strategy: they appointed some of the remaining 鬍同 [hútóng] areas as protected national heritage**. Architecture firms like ZAO/standardarchitecture and Wonder Architects, Archstudio and Vector Architects have tried to solve this social and architectural quest. Mostly, those projects are described and valued through their social relevance. However, this does not solve the first part of the interest for 鬍同 [hútóng]: the insertion of contemporary architecture in a historic, pre-modern context itself is very interesting to me. How do these projects react to that fundamentally different surrounding – to buildings that were built in a time when architecture was still considered solely as part of the cosmos, as a craft – and in what way can one describe these contemporary designs according to a pre-modern artefact-logic? These questions act on the alteration of the statute of architecture from pre-modern to contemporary China.***
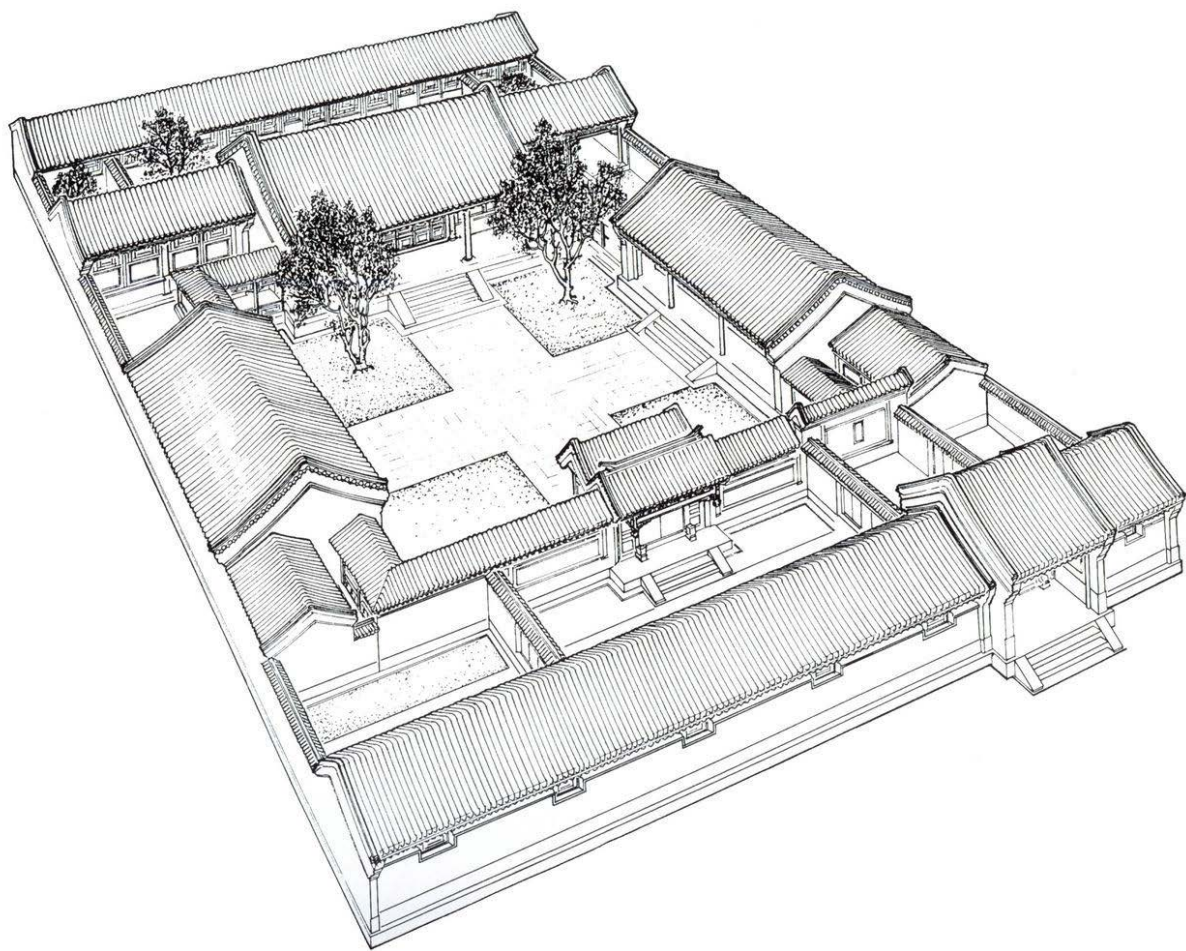
To come to a comprehensible argumentation, I want to start by analysing five cases, each of them having some new elements to add to the discussion. The next phase is one in which we need to see the full picture, and find recurring themes on which the analysis is based . Lastly, there is a need for identifying the underlying themes we discussed, and place them in a theoretical framework that should allow us to unify the particular cases. This framework will be provided by the writings of François Jullien, whose works are all about Chinese culture, civilization and philosophy.

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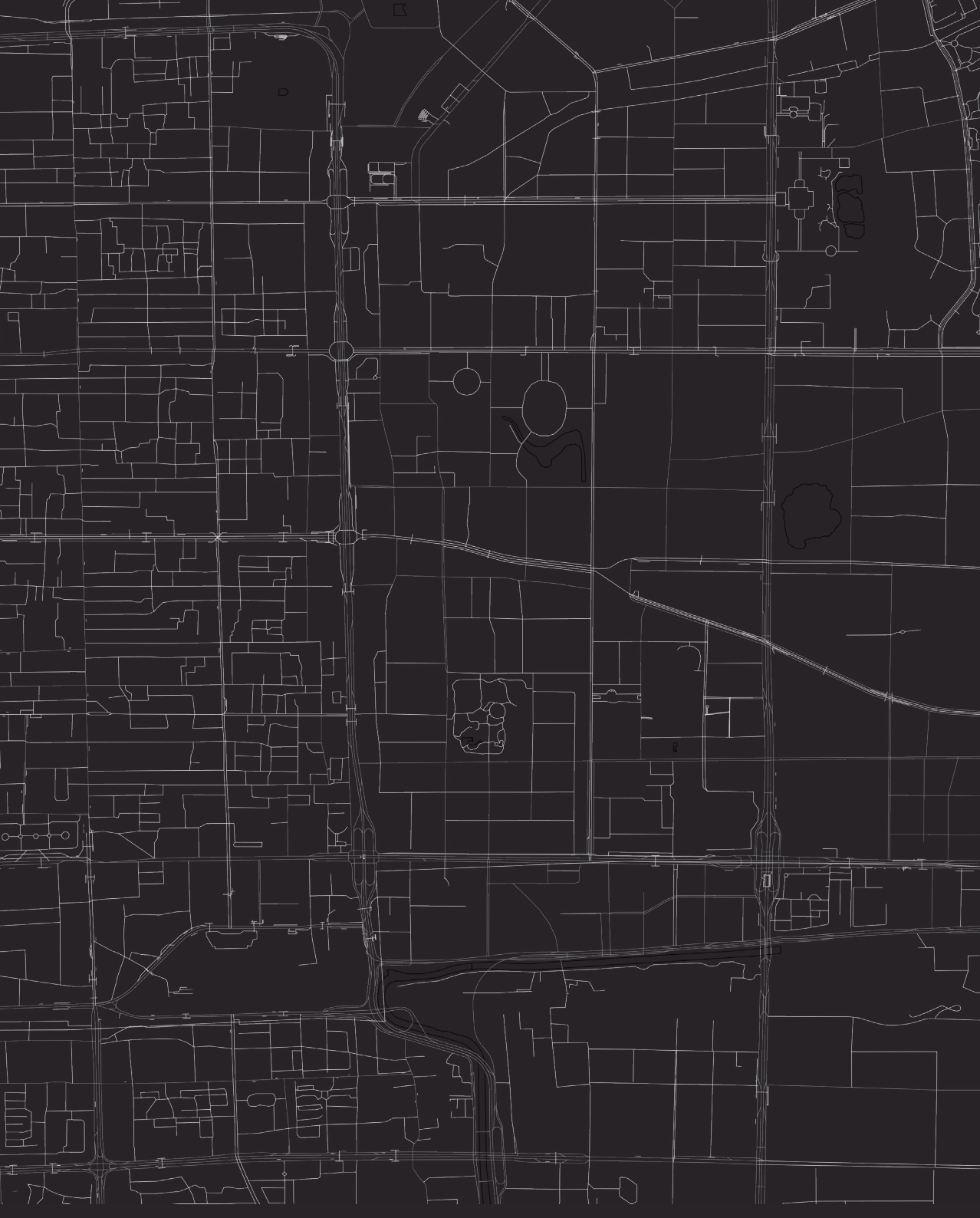
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Co - living Courtyard
ZAO/standardarchitecture

Description.

By ZAO/
standardarchitecture

This project further explores a sustainable renewal strategy for the urban fabric in the Baitasi historical area in an extremely subtle way. It aims to transform a 150 m² courtyard in a shared space for two households with the insertion of a prefabricated service core in the 80 m² main apartment and an 8 m² "Mini House" underneath the pitched roof. The boundary of the courtyard is clearly defined by its dated brick walls. By reinforcing them with a 9 cm thick casting concrete mixed with Chinese ink, and extending the roof structure to create integral roof scenery, we intended to give the courtyard enclosure and unity, refurbishing it instead of rebuilding it. The 3.5 m² service core, facilitated with kitchen, bathroom, laundry and storage, and the prefabricated "Mini House", a completely independent fully equipped living unit, provide amenities largely lacking in hutongs.[5]

Picture 5.
Location. The project is located in the North-West part of central Beijing.

Let us first consider the general constellation. The addition made – basically an in-situ cast fourth wall with entrance and workshop space made in concrete – is one with a most elementary approach. However, it is more than just a 'fourth wall': there is a certain tension palpable. The sturdy and stable impression of the U-shaped, existing remains of the original house complex gets an opponent. The placing of the concrete entrance portal, with the addition of a small patio right in front of the entrance gate, not only refers to the non-central entrances of the original 鬍同 [hútóng], but also plays with the small opening between the project and its neighbouring houses. The S-shaped (if one uses some imagination) nature and almost invisible inclination of the left wall (small deviation on a 90° angle) of the concrete addition gives a certain feel of dynamics, without the form actually being dramatic, curved, or overly-expressing. This impression of tension between the robust existing parts and the 'fluid' concrete addition, is of a very subtle and suggestive kind. It seemingly refers to the writing of a character. When done well (i.e. to take both written and blanc into account, movement, the handling of the brush…), the character evokes a kind of dynamism, as if the movement and energy of the calligrapher are still inside the character. This dynamism is the product of a balancing tension between the empty and

the full, the horizontal and vertical, the speed and pause... In a way, one could interpret this as a metaphor for the entrance-addition of the Co-living Courtyard of ZAO/Standardarchitecture: the concrete addition fills the gap between the existing 鬍同 [hútóng], playing with both full and empty. The choice to insert a mini-patio in front of the door and to retreat the roof and floor as to 'make way' for the courtyard itself, is one of utmost subtlety. 張軻 [Zhāng Kē], leading architect in this project, suggests in this way that both empty and full need to be taken into account. If, let us say, the concrete addition would be trapezoidal in plan, without small patio and retreat on the side of the courtyard, there would be no such kind of dynamics. So, a subtle change in form can evoke something that goes beyond the mere object. It is thus not a mere formal decision, but one of importance for balance. As it also happens, the entrance portal is a peculiar place for a 四閤院 [sìhéyuàn], being both about access and enclosing. The entrance door and the patio in front of it, with a wall limiting the view from outside to inside and vice versa, articulate this difference. The entrance door, when designed in the right way, also displays signs of some kind of efficacy.[6] The hinge is a small item, and makes it possible (working on the propensity of its characteristics) to close and open a certain space through the littlest effort.

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C   C

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6   7

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5

B   E   A
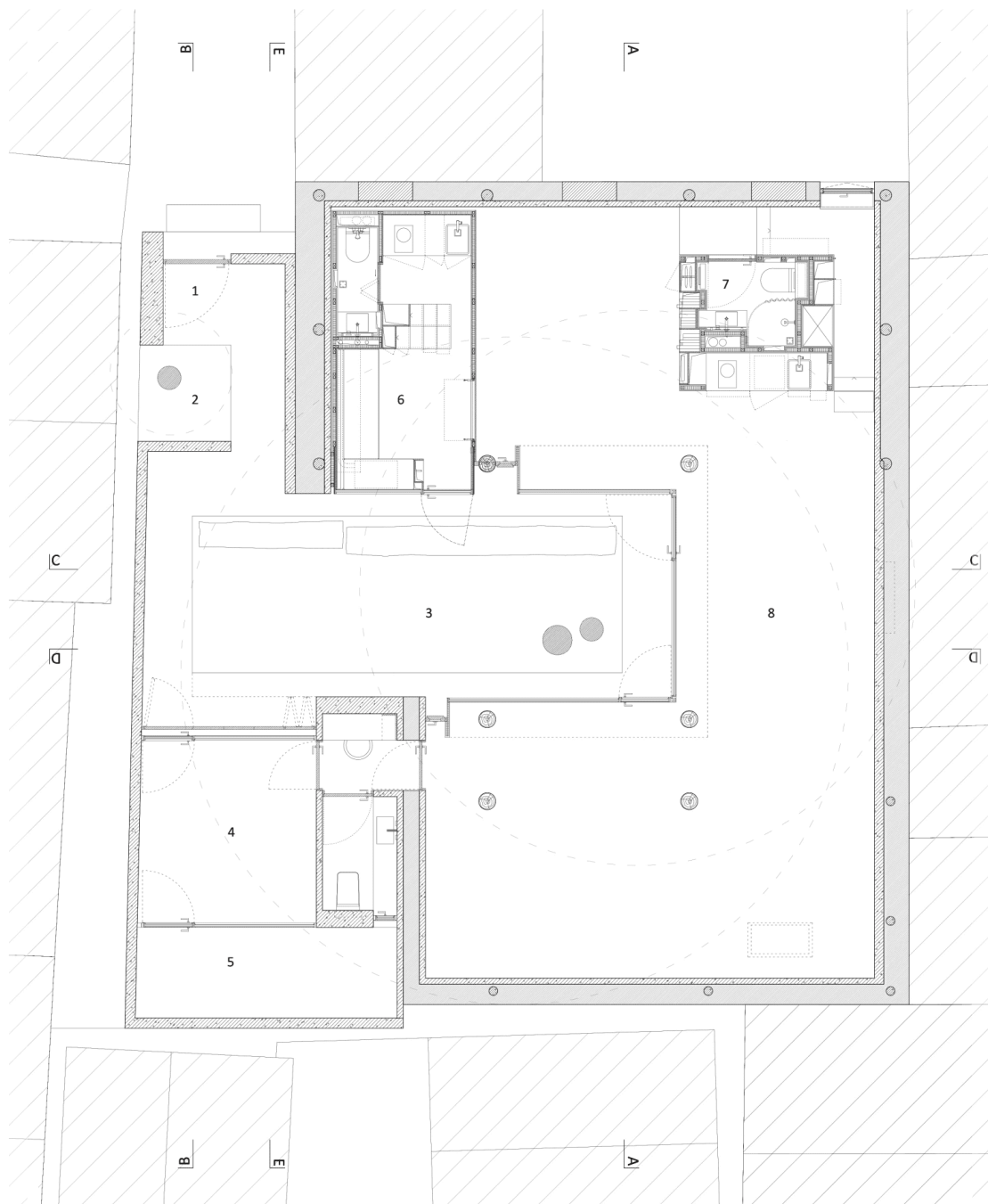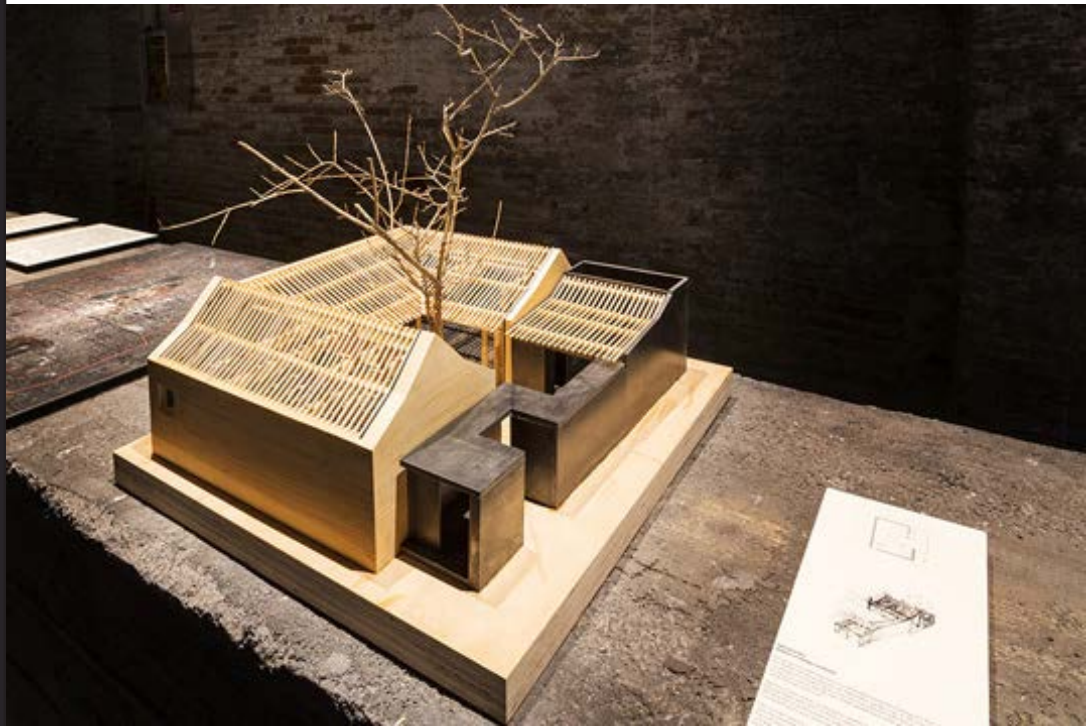
Picture 7.

Model.

By playing with the surrounding of this door, the location of the small patio and the visual blocking (without completely inhibiting visual relation), the design reacts to the inclination of the gate in both open and closed state[7]. The concrete porch thus provides a suitable answer for both open and closed state. This, in my opinion, enhances the dynamic nature and adaptability

of the portal, magnifying the adaptability of the ensemble. In addition, it is also related to the Chinese concept of harmony, dynamically reacting to changing situations (open door - closed door), to maintaining an ever-renewing balance. Next, I want to take a closer look at the materiality of the co-living courtyard. What intrigues me, is the choice of roughly cast concrete

Picture 8.
Entrance portal with patio. Neighbouring unit on the right.

The use of wooden planks as form-work, of course, has its implications on the impression we get from it. Concrete is, before the hydration-process and after mixing, a fluid. By working with such a form-work as seen in the image above, traces of that fluid state remain perceptible. The seams of the planks of the form-work are visible, and here and there one can see some dripping of the concrete, suggesting this former fluid state. After hydration, however, concrete loses its fluid character and becomes firm, hard, impenetrable. This state is the current state of the concrete of the entrance portal, and also gives a certain rough impression. Hence, we have a combination of fluid and rigid traits, both expressed through one and the same form. One could say that the desired effect can only by achieved successfully when knowing how to manipulate the inclination (propensity) of things, or more specific, the inclination of concrete. It is through its former fluid state that the hardened result can still suggest it, through a strategic choice of form-work, here wooden planks. Furthermore, Picture 8 displays a quite poetic phenomenon: the way rainwater falls and interacts with the meanwhile hardened concrete: the pattern the rain creates through the horizontal (rather than vertical) seams, makes the concrete walls as a kind of canvas, displaying both the hard surface that was once fluid, and the fluid that stains

the former-fluid concrete. The water temporarily establishes a reminiscent image of the fluid state of the concrete, taking the constant change between fluid and rigid to the next level (just like the Chinese conception of balance and harmony). A play of opposites is what we also see in Chinese landscape paintings, where one plays with visible and invisible, showing and not-showing. It gives the Chinese artefact a powerful dynamic force and evocative power.

Picture 9.
View towards entrance. Notice the brick wall sandwiched between two walls of concrete.

Moreover, if we look at the description given by ZAO/standardarchitecture, the concrete walls against the existing brick walls were made to reinforce the existing fabric. This clever strategy is, again, in accordance with the intrinsic value and inclination of concrete, for if one wants to make an existing brick wall stronger, using concrete will enable one to get the best adherence between brick and concrete, resulting in a successful thickening of the wall, architectonically speaking. In other words, 張軻[Zhāng Kē]'s choice for concrete incorporates the exploitation of the inclination of concrete to become hard (after hydration). The fluid character before hardening allows the concrete to adhere to the brickwork, while after hardening, the wall is strong and sturdy. This intervention is one of minimal effort (less form-work to make, because the brick wall becomes the fourth surface of the form-work, and much less intensive than using a screwed-on steel reinforcement structure or rebuilding the whole wall) with maximal effectiveness. In short, efficacy at its best.

Next, I want to elaborate on the design of the courtyard itself. In traditional Chinese garden design, there are some basic principles to take into account. First, in pre-modern times, Chinese gardens were made for rich people to escape the fuzz of city-life. The garden should thus be

an objectification of an ideal landscape, serene and pure, as depicted, for example, by Chinese painters like 倪瓚 [Ní Zàn] (See Picture 11). In these traditional Chinese landscape paintings, the combination of certain elements evoke certain feelings or ideas. These elements usually are trees, rocks, water, mountains and humans (or human interference). Every element has its own implications. Since mountains are to grand to reconstruct in garden designs, rocks or stones are used as a representation of those mountains. So the most important features are water, stone and vegetation, in combination with buildings. The only, seemingly missing element in the courtyard of this case is water. However, the gravel on the floor could very well be the representation (or rather suggestion) of water. In Japan, where in some parts water in a garden was difficult to come by, one would use sand or gravel as an alternative. These gardens, called *karesansui*, are well-known in the West as zen-gardens. Picture 12 shows a Japanese example in Kyoto. Although there are differences in Japanese and Chinese garden design, it fits in the logic that there is no water in the immediate surrounding of the Co-living Courtyard.

Picture 10.
Courtyard with all elements important for Chinese garden design: vegetation, "water", rock.

Picture 11.
倪瓚 [Ní Zàn], Six Gentlemen. Paintings like these served as design tool to make garden designs in ancient China.

To continue, the seam created between the lower level of the centre of the courtyard and the higher threshold made in concrete, has in some way a floating impression. If one should imagine the seam to be non-existent, the lower and upper part of the courtyard would be as if they were one piece, with a depression or pit in its centre (filled with gravel). It would have a completely different impression, so this seam is of vital importance. Hence, the floating character of the threshold could be a sign of the suggestion that the gravel would remind us of water, completing the vegetation-water-rock series, where the tree is the vegetation, the rough concrete the rock (or also the water, because of its dubious water-rock nature), the gravel the water. All the arguments just discussed fit together, so I tend to see this courtyard as a representation of a Chinese garden, and in turn, an ideal Chinese landscape, established in an effective, illusive and effortless way. It is not a literal and mere object-oriented relation between signifier and signification, but rather an undefined one, where the properties of the material and the impression that arises from the use of materiality, are key, and not the form itself. The last feature of this project I want to highlight, is the interior of the U-shaped, refurbished part. Picture 13, 14 and 15 graphically explain it.

We already talked about the way the concrete is treated (form-work, surface finish...), but here the texture of the surface becomes important again, yet in a different way than in the entrance portal we discussed earlier. In Picture 13, one can see that there is a rigid grid of beams and columns. The roof has a very uniform and repetitive secondary structure, which, in my opinion, stresses the rigidity of the wooden parts, being refurbished existing elements. The wall going around the whole premises, however rigid in physical strength,

generates yet again a certain tension, due to opposites mingling together in one and the same form. First of all, the walls horizontal lines and placing, introduce a kind of embracing and encircling motion. In Picture 14 and 15 the wall seems to flow behind the corner, without its form dramatically expressing motion. But then, in Picture 13 we see that the concrete wall actually bears the loads of the roof transmitted by the wooden beams. In that sense, the motion-evoking character of the wall is counterbalanced by the rigidity of 'bearing loads'. This creates a very subtle and almost unnoticeable tension between two opposites. The impression of movement is of course influenced by the point of view and the perspective (two quite European terms we commonly see in classical and Renaissance architecture), ever changing the impression of motion. This constant change relates to a certain conception of Chinese harmony. I need to stress, however, that what I just mentioned is also closely related to the European approach of perspective. It is in my opinion that the perspective in European Renaissance (e.g. The use of perspective in the garden design and architecture of the château at Versailles, France.) is anchored in fixed focal points and symmetry axes. The difference thus lies in the fact that perspective is only part of the story:

Picture 13.

Interior of existing part, with courtyard on the left.

Picture 14.

Interior of existing part, looking at the service - core. The effect of movement of the concrete surface, in combination with the bearing-load-function of it.

Picture 15.

View into one of the

functional cores..

perspective emphasizes visual order, symmetry ... and can – in European perspective – only be enjoyed when located on a central point from which everything seems absolutely perfect. In this project, however, we do not rely on visual order like symmetry or a focal point, to be able to feel this tension. It changes constantly according to the emphasising effect of perspective, while in Europe, the effect (i.e. absolute beauty that pleases the eye and mind) of the absolute Beauty (there is no non-absolute beauty) can only be felt on those focal points or axes. As to conclude the first project, one should consider this project of utmost subtlety, and hence, *good* architecture.*

Children's Library and Art Centre

ZAO/standardarchitecture

Description.

By ZAO/
standardarchitecture

Cha'er hutong is a quiet spot among the busy Dashilar area. The #8 Cha'er Hutong courtyard is a typical "Da-Za-Yuan" – big messy courtyard – once occupied by over a dozen families. Over the past fifty years, each family built a small add-on kitchen in the courtyard. These add-on structures are usually considered as urban scrap and all of them have been wiped out with the renovation practices during the past years. Different from the conventional redevelopment strategies, by redesigning, renovating and reusing the add-on structures in the hutong courtyards, the project allows Beijing citizens and the government to see new and sustainable possibilities for how to put our messy additions to good use. Maybe they can be recognized as cultural relics and critical layers of recent Beijing's hutong life rather than things that should be erased entirely.[8]

Floor Plan. On the
right side of the
central courtyard,
is the library, in the
lower left corner
is the polyvalent
room, classrooms
are scattered across
the premises, and
one teachers' room
in the right part
of the ensemble.
In the centre of
the courtyard are
some volumes
with amenities and
small roof-terrace
used for drama and
presentations by
children.
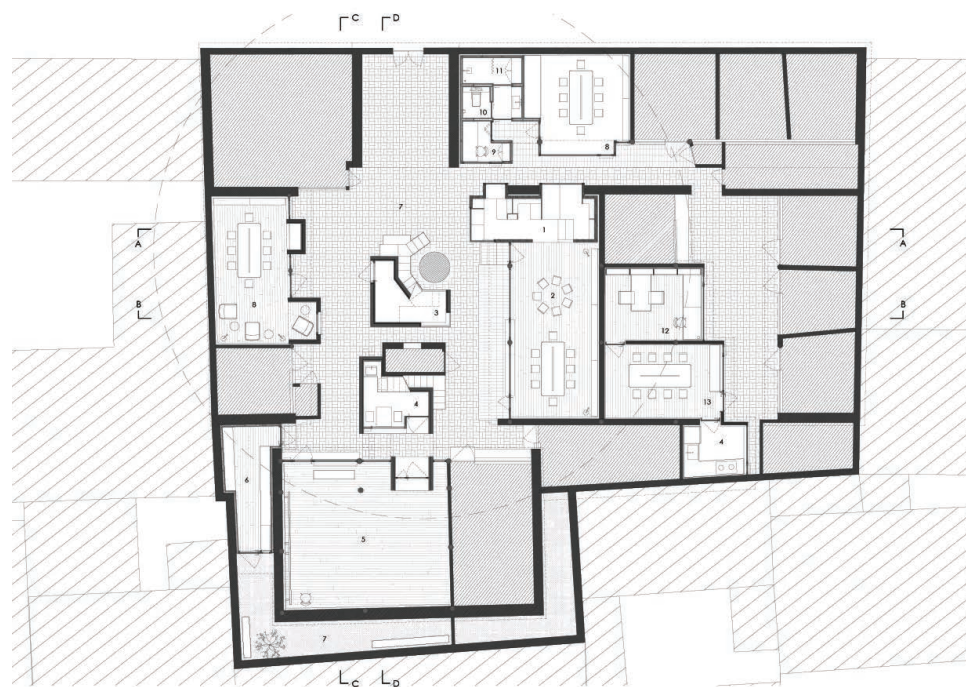
GROUND FLOOR PLAN
1. Library 2. Reading room 3. Pavilion 4. Kitchen 5.Dancing classroom/Multi-funtion room 6. Locker room
7. Courtyard 8.Art classroom 9. Guard room 10. Toilet 11. Bathroom 12. Office 13. Meeting room

0　1　2m

This project significantly differs from the Co-living Courtyard, because its courtyard is of a different scale and organisation. Here, one notices the more fragmented nature of the proliferation of the 鬍同 [hútóng]. The space between the existent buildings is more than just a rectangular courtyard, there are also alleyways inside the 鬍同 [hútóng] itself. Since there is more room, there is no need to seek balancing tension in

a tightly defined space. ZAO/standardarchitecture has taken the freedom to insert volumes themselves, so the tension is created in a different way – tension between inserted volumes rather than tension between existing volumes. Let us first take a look at the most central element in the courtyard: the tree. Chenyang Li talks in his *The Confucian philosophy of harmony* about the conception of harmony according to Confucius. Although Confucius philosophy is rooted in Daoism, it also departs from it. Chenyang Li stresses the importance of difference, tension, change, in-uniformity* and sometimes opposing (extreme) factors cancelling out on another, to come to the state of harmony and balance. In trying to explain these aspects, he refers to the example of the four seasons. The four seasons are all different from one another (no uniformity), but still succeed one another without discontinuity. They are in an ever changing balance, shifting from warm and humid to cold and dry. Winter is not a deviation from the centre, but a way of obtaining and maintaining it. Harmony is mostly achieved through tension between opponents, between summer and winter, or spring and autumn. But nature, although in constant change, never deviates from the balance it embodies.[9] In a straightforward fashion, this constant fluctuation is made present through the presence of this giant tree, located in the centre of the courtyard.

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In-uniformity does not inhibit harmony, nor does in-uniformity do. There is, however, a certain degree of tension acquirable when the whole consists of several, different parts, like a musical chord.

In contrast to the rather small one we saw in the previous project, this one has a more direct influence on the architecture that is scattered around it. The roof of the volumes built around the trunk of the tree are all accessible through a staircase. It is this roof that caught my attention. By elevating the courtyard and installing a roof terrace on the roof of the small volumes, encapsulated in the canopy of the tree, there is a place of complete shadow in the hot summer (when the leaves of trees are still there), whilst in the cold winter, one can enjoy the light of the low sun, because the elevation makes one able to look over the enclosed courtyard. In autumn, the tree sheds its leaves, as to not block the sunlight in winter (see Picture 26). The propensity of this terrace under the tree is as simple as that, and is as strong as can be, through small intervention and high efficacy. Dynamics show itself through the exploitation of the potentiality of, in this case, a tree and terrace. Picture 18 shows the tree and the terrace directly underneath it. To continue on focussing on the volumes in the centre of the courtyard, we move on the space 'created' around it. Being placed in the centre of the courtyard, these two volumes have two tendencies. One is to separate one space from another, like a wall. The other is to form a centre on its own in a joining fashion, by defining the space around it.

Picture 18.

Three pictures of the central courtyard with added volumes around the tree.

Picture 19.
Roofless Model.

A centre has a central attractive force, meaning that it relates different, surrounding elements to itself and each other. So here we see there is also an inclination of such volumes (placed in a centre) to relate and link. Both are, again, generated from the same object, incorporating opposites in a non-exclusive way. It can both separate and join together, without one overruling the other. The central volume inhibits visual contact from the two classrooms on the left and right of the courtyard (on the plan), while in itself being a place for playing or reading. The strength and intensity of the evocative force of an artefact does certainly not need the most intensive intervention. A playground is enough. If ZAO/standardarchitecture would have placed a wall in the centre of the courtyard, to inhibit visual relation between classrooms, the effect (separation) and form would be too direct, leaving no room for other possibilities. Herein lies the seed for blandness: to not define or fixate, because then possibilities and potential will diminish. So it is not necessarily a blandness of formal language, but more a blandness in arrangement: a wall is intrinsically a dividing element, even without taking a specific situation into account, a volume has multiple possibilities, leaving room for interpretation and change, and not defining the space irrevocably.

If we take a look at the in-the-existing-fabric-inserted volume of the library, the sharp-eyed individual can spot the following, also shown by Picture 23.

Picture 20.

Inserted concrete volume in existing, refurbished fabric.

It is important in this dissertation, when talking about the form of Chinese roofs, to distinguish differences in curved roofs. In contrast to the dramatic and bombastic curved roof of one of the pavilions in the Temple of the Eight Immortals (Picture 21), there is the subtle roof of another in the very same complex (Picture 22), a roof where the curvature is almost invisible. Let it be clear that, in my opinion, the latter is more efficient than the former. The bigger the curvature of the roof – further emphasized through small statues placed on the outer corner of the roofs – the more a roof needs to be divided in horizontal fractions, to be able to get a curved whole built out of straight beams. The more horizontal divisions in the roof, the more fragmented the inner structure of the roof shall be, as to be able to support both ends of every fraction. A small curvature not only makes the tension suggestive and therefore stronger (instead of a more dramatic), but also makes it easier for one to build the roof. An interestingly dubious whole acquired through less effort makes more use of the quality of the wood: it does not naturally curl in drastic fashion. Also, when the curvature remains more suggestive, it does not define nor clarify, but plays with curved and non-curved, and by so doing, evokes intense harmony.* If applying this conclusion to the Children's library and art centre by ZAO/

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The word "intense" suggests a presence of tension. Intense harmony is an ideal, where tension and balance are both incorporated in the ensemble. Intensive harmony would refer to the energy one needs to put into the whole to attain a certain state. Because this energy is like a constant struggle with nature's tendency, it is not considered harmonious at all. A contradictio interminis.

standardarchitecture, we see that there is just a slight curvature of the concrete inserted volume, while the original roof is solely curved slightly at the backside. Yet the curvature is also made at the front side of the concrete volume.

This gives rise to a certain tension between straight-original and curved-'duplicate', where the concrete is the duplicate and the (straight) real roof is its container. The former, with its light curvature, refers more to the formal typology of the curved Chinese roof. The tension of adapting to a real Chinese roof (in this case, however, straight) and the expression of the representational character of the roof of the volume (referring to the typology of the Chinese roof), gives the constellation a certain dynamic, between conformity and non-conformity and significance versus signifier. (See Picture 23) I think the remark about the roof form made in the above is more complementary than essential. Much more significant is the seeming motion of the inserted volume of the library in the existing fabric. Concrete, as explained in the previous project, is both fluid and rigid. This dichotomy is effectively expressed through the roughness of the form-work (the same as the previous example). Concrete, before hydration, adapts to the form of its container. Its container after hydration and removing of the form-work,

Picture 21.

One of the buildings in the Temple of the Eight Immortals. This roof is more formally expressive, rather than suggestive.

Picture 22.

Temple of the Eight Immortals. The curvature of the roof is almost invisible, but still palpable. The contrast with the straight roof ridge makes it more clear.

63

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however, seems to be the form of the original Chinese house that encapsulates the concrete volume, but its real container was the wooden form-work. The opposition between fluid and rigid is subtly suggested through almost following the form of the house as container, and to emphasise the curve of the roof. I think the combination of these facts is the key to the effect.* In addition, the use of Chinese ink as a means to get an expressive surface finish, without the effort of having to ornate the surface with, for example, paint, is using the propensity of concrete in a clever way. If parts of the surface crumbles due to damage or cracks, the ink patterns are still visible, because they are mingled all the way through the concrete, like a marble cake. Furthermore, replacing a part of the water with ink, is putting a subtle emphasis on the former fluid state of the rigid concrete, because the pattern the ink leaves throughout the concrete has a certain fluid impression. Hence, the library volume is a sophisticated and yet simple and effortless way of playing with opposites and create a tension that still leads to a certain balance (between 陰 [yīn] and 陽 [yáng], where the former is the fluid, formless and negative energy, and the latter the rigid, definite and positive energy). As to conclude, I want to bring together the remarks on the library and the two volumes in the courtyard (around the tree) with amenities and small

interior space. They work in an opposite way: the one is sturdy and defines a certain fluidity of space around it (as shown perfectly by children who play in, run around and climb on these volumes, see Picture 25 and 26), the other behaving like clay inside a rigid form. The latter is of course the library we just discussed. While the rigid volumes of the courtyard have a rigid materiality (brick as a solid and hard material, with very inflexible characteristics: the dimensions of the façade needs to conform to the dimensions of the brick, and the roughness of the bricks' texture and the seams in between express that rigidity, that 陽 [yáng]) and fluid

space-intervening qualities, the inserted library is made of both rigid and fluid materiality and form (concrete as both fluid and hard), encapsulated in a rigid case (which is the existing fabric of the buildings in the 鬍同 [hútóng]).

Taking everything into consideration – movement, a constantly returning tension between fluid and rigid, subtle choice of materiality, the building and designing process that takes the intrinsic qualities of the elements they works with into account ... – I think it is appropriate to say that the Children's Library and Art Centre by ZAO/standardarchitecture is a design of utmost expressiveness through harmony of form, function and materials. Intense rather than intensive.

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Picture 24.

Inserted volume of the library on the outside, with visible ink stains.

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Hutong Residence Design
Wonder Architects

Description.

By Designboom

Tasked with rethinking the boundaries and expanding the possibilities of this forgotten architecture, wonder architects' aim was to produce a space which was light, airy, and modern. Using the framework provided by the traditional structure, they redesigned the layout of the suite into different units before reconstructing each one to suit their contemporary vision. The new construction creates such extreme contrast to the original one that visitors are led into a spatial adventure. The once communal courtyard is transformed into a private residence, meanwhile one vertical space is split into multiples, twisting the counterpoint relationship between space and landscape, public and private. By using white as a predominant colour they mark their influence, creating a white canvas backdrop bringing the space into a pure state.[10]

Picture 28.

Axonometry.
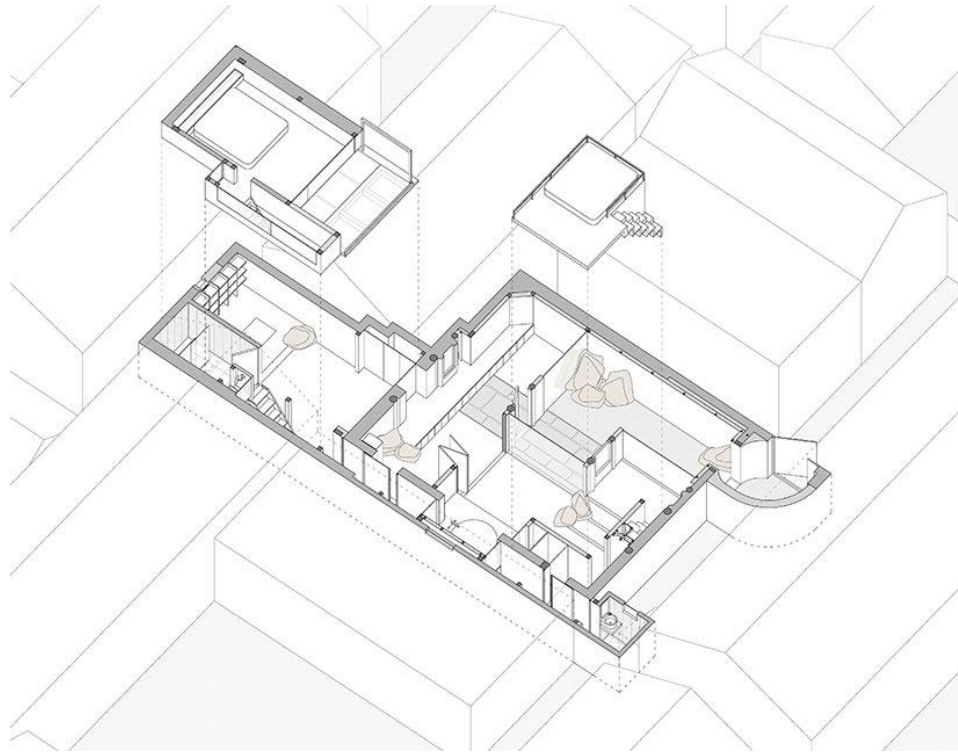
In contrast to the refurbishments of ZAO/standardarchitecture – where brickwork and concrete were the most present materials and textures, next to the existing wooden structure – this project by Wonder Architects displays white as a main theme. As a very recently finished project (2017), it is a good opportunity to talk about the whiteness of contemporary architecture. Is it really a "pure" colour, showcasing *nothingness* to accentuate textures of the *somethings* around it? Is it closely related to the use of the blanc

space between strokes on a piece of paper that has been written on by a skilled calligrapher, to come to a kind of harmonizing tension that relates all parts to each other and create a certain dynamic whole? As one can see in Picture 29 and 30, there is a certain expressiveness at play, something that is *out-of-the-boring*. There is a compositional force at bay, where the placement of rock-formations – seemingly referring to the stone elements in Chinese landscape paintings – and the constantly changing shadow of the eaves of the roof are dancing on the wall, as a certain ever-changing canvas. In considering the choice of the white surfaces, there is an overlap with the concepts of the approach of Chinese craftsmen and, for example, landscape painters or calligraphers. However, these similarities do not come without disregarding some of the other principles from ancient China. The first question that arises, is whether or not the use of white, like sterile surfaces, really creates a pureness to which other elements like stone, brick and wood, form a contrast. Is this pureness some way of attaining some atmosphere that is like a reminiscence of blandness in Chinese painting, and a way of trying to be more perceptible for that which is without savouring? I think the answer is twofold. First of all, one can indeed say that there is a focus on the brick and stone because of the absence of distractive colour. In

that way, one becomes more aware of the less-expressive. One could make the metaphor of a series of glasses of different wines, and a series of glasses filled with different kinds of water, and only one glass filled with a most subtly tasting wine. It is clear that one will become far more perceptible to the taste of that one wine – however bland the taste might be – in contrast to the glasses of water, than the differences in taste of a series of wines. In a way, one might identify the use of white walls as the different glasses of water, while the wood, stone and brickwork are the glass of wine. The over-elaborate ornate eaves of the Forbidden City in Beijing are, then, an example of the different glasses of wine, one taste prevailing over the other. (See Picture 31) Furthermore, not only the textures become more focused on, but also features like the shadow cast upon the white outer wall is a phenomenon otherwise overthrown by the texture of the wall. The shadow of the roof on the wall, framed by a window as seen in Picture 29, is like the frame-like windows in a traditional Chinese garden. These windows were like paintings, and changed with every change of season and weather. Hence, this constellation keeps me thinking about that quite extraordinary use of window as a frame and context as a changing painting. In this project, only the shadow (certain kind of 陰 [yīn]) dances, whilst stone and gravel, 陽 [yáng], are immobile.

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Picture 31.

Eaves of one of the pavilions on the central axis of the Forbidden City in Beijing. The colour scheme and symbols all have a specific meaning, and is in accordance with the practice of Feng Shui.

This ever-changing ensemble, without much purely formal expressiveness – but still with a certain expressive force – is in my perception something alluding on the concept of neutrality and of blandness. In addition, the use of the sun as the sole changing factor is a certain reference to a constant harmonizing process between night and day, cool and hot, bright and dark ... The natural movement as a ceaseless maintaining of balance and centre.

The architects used only a wall to create this kind of play, moving something without movement or having to move things (like making a small pond with a small waterfall, driven by an electrical pump, to have a certain moving element in the courtyard). A hint of propensity can be felt, palpable through the clever use of the sun as moving factor, only having to build a wall – which is also used as border between the residence and the public space – to capture it.

Picture 32.
The use of white plains accentuates the textures of the stone, rough brickwork and the grains of the wooden structure.

However, caution must be exercised before coming to a conclusion yet. As mentioned in the introduction of this case, the question about the purity of the white surfaces remains. The first interpretation assumed it to be true, that the white of the walls indeed contribute to the blandness, and *expressive-less expressiveness* of the place: accentuating textures of other materials without directly accentuating them. I think, in contrast to the hutong-projects by ZAO/standardarchitecture, this refurbishment is more a renovation – from *renouveler* in French, to renew – and thus has the tendency to express certain stylistic features. And indeed, if one takes a look at the images of the project of Wonder Architects, there is a constant recurring presence of an expression of a distinctive formal language. Of course, a design project should have a consequent formal language, but the chosen formal language in this residence is omnipresent, and is almost the main feature of the design, rather than an underlying system. The white walls now become a formal force, expressive through its lightness. White walls are like panes of glass: the first impression is an impression of emptiness, that nothing is expressed or visible. The glass is see-through, the white wall colourless. Yet, the clearest glass has reflections, the whitest wall has colour. The white colour is not a result of not-colouring, but of painting,

covering and savouring. The white paint does not make the wall disappear. Hence, the formal logic that is behind the use of an all-white interior (with some important exceptions of brick, wood ...) cannot possibly be one of un-seasoning. It is not suggestive, playing with the visibility of a wall, but a purely formal and visual trait that pleases the eye. As an old Chinese man once said to me on one of my travels through China, colour is pleasing to the eye, not the heart.* And through the argumentation above, we must consider white as a colour. It thus is not pure, but purely formal. So while first, the choice of white was linked to dynamism and blandness, here it is closely related to the western phenomenon of a search for style, based on formal motives. As a remark before we come to a conclusion, the white interior also seems like a search for absolute serenity and beauty. This beauty is not expressed through proportion systems like those of Leon Battista Alberti and consorts, but through the creation of a sterile, isolated environment, stripped from stains and visual imperfections. Only the sun in the courtyard is something that can be related to the changing balance of the cosmos around, all else is muted. Hence, to some extent, it reminds me of the Greek δυναμις [dunamis], where the actuality that comes from the potentiality and the skill of the craftsman is like an arrow in a bull's eye: a fixed goal, with no tolerance for

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The recurring
presence of a body
of stylistic elements,
like the white colour
and the stones. Every
stain on the white
wall will disrupt the
beauty of the design.

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An improvised
opposition of horror
vacui, where spots,
stains and every kind
of accidentality is
avoided

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This is in line with
traditional Chinese
architecture, where
walls were also purely
dividing elements
and non-structural.

deviation or change. Therefore, the pictures do not give a proper view on the design as a dwelling: in the pictures, no household items are visible. This is a symptom of the *horror maculae*.* Depicting this dwelling when inhabited will show a completely other scenario, where living itself will destroy the absolute image the architects designed. The pictures of ZAO/standardarchitecture, au contraire, do show their design when used: the children and activities displayed even emphasize the strength and meaning of the design. Comparing this example to the Children's Library and Art Centre by ZAO/standardarchitecture thus makes my point all the more clear. The project from Wonder Architects consists of an existing wooden structure, like a rigid structure, and fill-in panels and walls that are like the matrix within the rigid wooden structure. The walls thus are non-structural, and used as mere separative elements.** As discussed in Case 2, the dividing elements in the courtyard were not only dividing, but also joining. They visually and spatially divide the different classrooms and interior spaces from one another, but also have a pulling force: children play around them, in them, on them ... They incorporate more than one formal decision in their form, but go beyond it, seeking a certain harmony between the two opposites they both incorporate.

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The white walls in the design of Wonder Architects do not have the same force. Also, by mixing Chinese ink in the concrete, ZAO/standardarchitecture made use of the propensity of concrete, attaining a far more expressive effect without the choices that have expressiveness as a goal in itself, which we can see in the case of Wonder Architect's hutong design (the water in the ink also contributes to the hydration process of the concrete). The latter needed to specially add elements like stone to get an expressive ensemble, while in the previous case of the Children's Library and Art Centre, the concrete and the form-work already embodied the texture of that kind of stone in itself.

As to conclude, it is clear that the efficacy (and thus the exploitation of propensity) is of a superior quality in the two cases of hutong-designs by ZAO/standardarchitecture, and they contribute immensely to the meaning of their designs by allowing us to describe and appreciate those designs based on the Chinese concepts like (changing) harmony, blandness and centrality.

Twisted Courtyard
Archstudio

Description.

By De Zeen

Intended primarily for use as a residence or hostel, the various spaces surrounding the courtyard can also be rented for public events, meetings or parties. A traditional gated entrance leads to a passage that connects with the central courtyard, which provides a public space viewed as a continuation of the city. The various private and public rooms are arranged around the courtyard, which extends into the building at either end to form the internal floors of a dining space and reception area. The design aims at getting rid of the solemn and stereotyped impression given by Siheyuan, and creating an open and active living atmosphere. Based on the existing layout of the courtyard, the undulating floor is used to connect indoor and outdoor spaces of different height. The sense of a continuous flow from outside to inside is enhanced by the way the grey-brick paving curves upwards over walls and roofs to create a seamless link between different parts of the building.[11]

As the configuration of the four buildings (四閤院 [sìhéyuàn]) does not dictate the architectural program (private or public), it can be used as either public space or as private housing unit. The boundary between private and public is thus quite absent in this project. The 'absence of boundaries' can also be taken quite literally here: one immediately notices a very dubious relation between inside and outside. The use of brickwork (in combination with concrete to keep it upright) as an undulating path throughout the design is a real eye-catcher. The choice of materiality of this eye-catcher is to be focused on. The brickwork – or tiles – is a familiar sight in Beijing. The grey rectangular bricks are often used in the façades of 鬍同 [hútóng], and have almost become a hallmark. The use of this type of brick on the floor however, is something new. If one envisages a normal brick wall, one needs to take into account that the thickness of the brick – the side of the bricks that is not visible when looking straight at a wall – is greater than the shortest visible side of the brick. This has to do with the strength and horizontal stiffness. An increasing thickness of the bricks result in a thicker wall, and makes it unlikely to topple over, for example, due to high wind loads. If we, now, consider a floor finish made of stones (like bricks or tiles), the thickness of the surface is also of much importance. The thickness of the stones or brick on the floor increases its
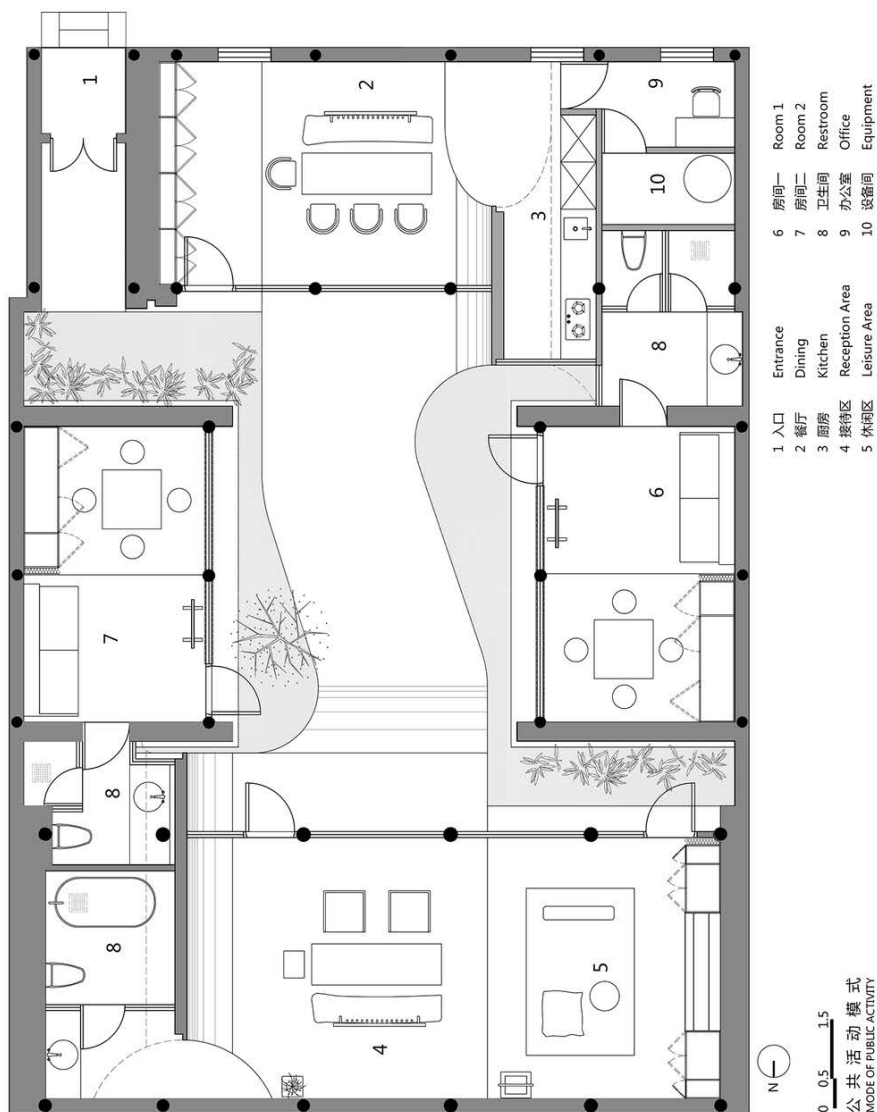
Picture 35.

Floor plan with four buildings on all four sides of the courtyard. Each pair of opposite buildings is mirrored. One notices the hiding of the amenities in the upper right and lower left corner, underneath the undulating brick surface.

Legend (rotated):

1 入口 Entrance
2 餐厅 Dining
3 厨房 Kitchen
4 接待区 Reception Area
5 休闲区 Leisure Area

6 房间一 Room 1
7 房间二 Room 2
8 卫生间 Restroom
9 办公室 Office
10 设备间 Equipment

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ability to resist tensional stresses as a result of uneven soil. However, when having a soft and compressible soil, tiles should be used with a bigger surface (and low thickness), as to limit pushing bricks locally into the ground due to a low contact surface and in turn a higher pressure on the soft soil. In this case, the soil is not soft, because it is most likely covered with concrete. An in-situ cast concrete slab may be flat, but can have a rough finish, which can lead to concentrations of tensional forces when only a part of the tiles are in contact with the concrete (due to local bumps). Bricks with a greater thickness should be used, as to limit the amount of imperfections a brick has to deal with when laying on the rough concrete surface. So even though the concrete covering of the soil may be even, it is almost never smooth. Through physical considerations, one should use a kind of brick with a higher thickness than the smallest visible side of that brick. If we look at the explanation for both floor and wall, we come to the conclusion that, in this case, the thickness of the surface is of the utmost importance. Because the floor gradually becomes a wall, there is no need to turn or rotate the brick as to maintain a maximum building-material-efficiency. In other words, Archstudio clearly used the intrinsic behaviour of the brick and its applications for wall and floor. The not-having-to-turn-bricks on the (vague)

point where floor becomes wall, results in an absent material boundary between floor and wall, and no loss of efficacy due to purely aesthetic choices. So both aesthetics and the clever and efficient use of materials form an intertwined whole, highlighting the continuity and flow of the project's eye-catcher.

Picture 36.
View from interior space. It shows a subtle play of boundaries. The window frames are – as it were – pressed between the columns, highlighting the dubiousness of inside and outside.

A second element that further emphasizes an interest in *boundarylessness*, is the boundary of the façade. There are four buildings, in which each pair of opposing buildings shows formal similarities. Instead of using a façade structure

that forms a screen in front of the building structure (so the wooden columns are completely inside), Archstudio chose to use the inter-columnar space and filled it with windows. In addition, the façade underneath the undulating surface is set forward, as to make the border even more elusive. The finesse of the borders of the window and it frame not only gives the constellation a certain cleanness, but also exerts a visual tension. It is almost as if the glass panes are forcibly pushed in place, and are under pressure due to the tight fitting frame formed by the wooden columns. There 'dynamics' originate that 'push' the columns away, as to stress the relation with the courtyard.

If we would consider frame-less windows, the visual tension would not be there, because it would seem as if the glass is stretched/strung from one column to the next, rather than pushed between them. Although discarding the window frames would objectively lead to a more transparent surface, the tension that seems to compress the columns have a certain dynamic feeling, as if not only the users, but also the façade itself wants to have a most undisturbed relation with the outside. The visual tension as a result of the use of window frames is quite modest, but palpable nonetheless. (see Picture 36) As a third, and related to the first remark about the continuation of floor

into wall, there is the fact of flow. The very visual relation with the courtyard (and the opposite building due to the use of the windows we just talked about) enables the beholder to see the slab of bricks (and reinforced concrete for stability) as a flowing continuum. Herein lies a powerful duality. The first one is the slab as 'a slab made of stone'. The curvature of the wall insinuates it is some kind of stiff carpet that is curved and curled in a certain manner. This interpretation is a product of the materiality: bricks are rigid. But, one can also see it as a reference to water. Then the curved walls are like falling water, and the curving form of the boundary between brickwork and white gravel further suggest that fluidity, as if there were a pond in the courtyard. So an object – that undulating slab – can evoke the impression of both solid and fluid. There was a similar dichotomy in the cases of ZAO/standardarchitecture, where the use and manipulation of the concrete referred to both the fluid and rigid state of concrete (before and after hydration). I have to remark that the dichotomy in both cases of ZAO/standardarchitecture is more subtle and less dependable on outer form.

Going a bit further on the reason why the form of the brick gives a fluid impression, we see the 'why' is twofold. First, there are the curves as a

reference to water. We know that water flows and does not have a definite form. There is, however, some mimicking relation based on outer form. Water does not need to flow in a curved line to be fluid, and in most cases, water will just run down in a straight fashion, because then there is the least friction.*   However, there is to be taken into account that its form can also refer to a river, with its meandering contours. This obviously is a mere formal representation. Secondly, there is the feature of the brick's surface finish. At night, these bricks show a smooth and almost reflective surface, creating a multifaceted whole, which reminds me of the glistening of the surface of a river lit either by sunlight or moonlight. Here, however, the glistening is not formally referring to a river itself, but works like it. (See Picture 34)

Something quite familiar about this project is the use of white walls. In contrast to previous example – that of Wonder Architect's – the use of white is tempered and only covers some of the internal walls, not all of them. In previous case, there was to be made something visually clear, a difference between old and new. Here, there is no clear dichotomy between old and new, and thus I deem the white walls as a suggestive boundary between inside and outside. The white colour comes from underneath the

undulating slab, as if the outer skin was peeled off, and the tender interior appears. It is as if the white is used as a sole suggestion of boundary, to compensate the complete lack of boundary established by the façade. Although I do not think we need to interpret the use of white solely as a way of trying to attain a certain expressionlessness, some parts do show a tendency to use white as neutrality. The pictures taken by the architecture office already gives away the emptiness white should embody: The interiors are depicted as being composition of carefully placed household items. No tolerance allowed. In showing the kitchen amenities, seen in Picture 34, the photographer allowed people on the picture. One can feel that these spaces still work well when used, not just when contemplated. Using white as a visual purifier does not allow day to day life and household items.**

Now turning back to the opposite pair of buildings with the wooden screen, I want to elaborate on the use of those blinds. Although the pattern they form is very regular and straight in form, they add interesting dynamics and tension to the interior and exterior. First of all, the opacity of the façade changes from the point of view of the occupant. Different perspectives alter the relation between the place where one is standing

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Also, white walls do not stay white. Spots, cracks, peeling paint ... will stain the wall eventually, and it will then loose some of its former, purifying glory.

and the interior or exterior. Secondly, there is the effect of constant moving shadows. The interior is designed in such a way that the shadow lines of the wooden slats can be in line with some interior elements (like the bed or couch). From a particular moment, the sunlight can enter the room through the wooden slats, and vanishes again at some point later that day. When the sunlight first enters the room, a small deviation between shadow lines and the lineaments of the interior must give a certain tension, and when followed by the only moment of the day when the shadow is perfectly perpendicular to the façade itself, in turn followed by an – again – gradually increasing inclination, there is a certain dynamic play between architecture and sunlight. In addition, the speed with which one moves along the exterior façade (slow, fast or halted) also influences the opacity of the façade. As a last remark, when looking at the window blinds from the outside, there is a subtle insinuation of moving water. Chinese roof structures and roof tiles have ever been of importance to the value of a building. Gutter-less roofs were constructed, and eaves designed in such a way, as to acquire a most interesting spectacle: strings of water droplets (Evelyn Lip calls them strings of pearls, and pearls are considered 陰 [yīn][12]). So the drainage of water is a result of the chosen roof tiles (in this case linear drainage-

Picture 37.

The white colour emerges from behind the undulating surface, insinuating a certain 'inside'. People do not harm the seeming harmony that the constellation creates

Picture 38.

The composition of the picture clearly visualizes the duality suggested through colour and emphasized through the presence of the lifted brick-surface.

Picture 39.

De-tension due to
the alignment of
the shadow with the
furniture results in a
serene atmosphere.
However, constantly
changing, the effect
goes away and makes
room for bolder
patterns
Also the curved
constellation of the
roof contributes to a
certain dynamic play
between straight,
aligned, curved and
visibility.

tiles to guide the water towards the eaves of the roof, where it drips down from carefully crafted and curved roof tiles, to influence the way in which the water falls). With some imagination, Picture 40 and 41 have a certain relation, where the vertical, slim wooden slats look like they are strings of water falling down when there is heavy rain. Furthermore, when it rains, the droplets, as seen in Picture 41, can also be there in the case of the Hybrid Courtyard, as an addition to the wooden blinds alluding on them. Movement is omnipresent in this project. There is some kind of tension to keep balance between fluid 陰 [yīn], rigid (陽 [yáng]), flowing, continuing and moving.

Picture 40.

The vertical blinds are like a series of strings of water pearls falling down from the gutter-less roof. A successful combination with the fluid character of the brick-surface.

Picture 41.

Raindrops of the Tofukoji Temple in Kyoto, Japan. Although it isn't a Chinese example, it beautifully shows the beauty of this phenomenon

Hybrid Courtyard

Vector Architects

Our site is typically called Zayuan in Chinese. Through its hybrid status, Zayuan incubates a sense of belonging and neighbourhood. In Courtyard Hybrid, while sense of privacy and domain can be achieved, most of the interfaces are designed with rotary operation in order to create more possibilities of space use. We aim to accommodate various functions such as exhibition, cultural event, academic seminar, office, café and living as well. By remaining the hybrid status of Zayuan, it attracts different kinds of users and stimulates even more potentials. We overhaul the North House for it was a registered property, and restore the pitched roof by reassembling its structure to maintain the traditional state of courtyard house. We replace original low-quality additions by two spatial installations with less sense of volume. The overall layout defines one large courtyard and two small ones: relationship among multiple functions is then clarified.[13]

The last case I selected because the project – in contrast to the previous two projects, from Wonder Architects and Archstudio – has a less formal allure: there is no direct, formal expressiveness like the choice of either colour or curvature. So in some way, it reminds me of the first two examples of ZAO/standardarchitecture, in which there is a higher subtlety when it comes to translating expression into expressiveness. The project has acquired a formal modesty without inducing boredom. Just like the use of white surfaces does not express 'nothingness', a rigid framework (陽 [yáng]) and rectangular character do not inhibit the ensemble to show a flowing character 陰 [yīn]. Let us first look at the issue of boundaries (between inside an outside). The general constellation, as we can see it in the floor plan, has a visual and schematic clarity: it is obvious that there are three 'insides': two on the left (top and bottom) and one long volume on the right – which is the refurbished building with a restored traditional Chinese roof. In between them, there are three 'outsides': the central courtyard, and two smaller patios between each added volume (on the left on the plan) and the main, existing building. In addition, but not of too much importance, there is the space between the buildings and the outer wall, mainly used for planting vegetation. However, if we take a look at the building itself, with its spatial properties, we
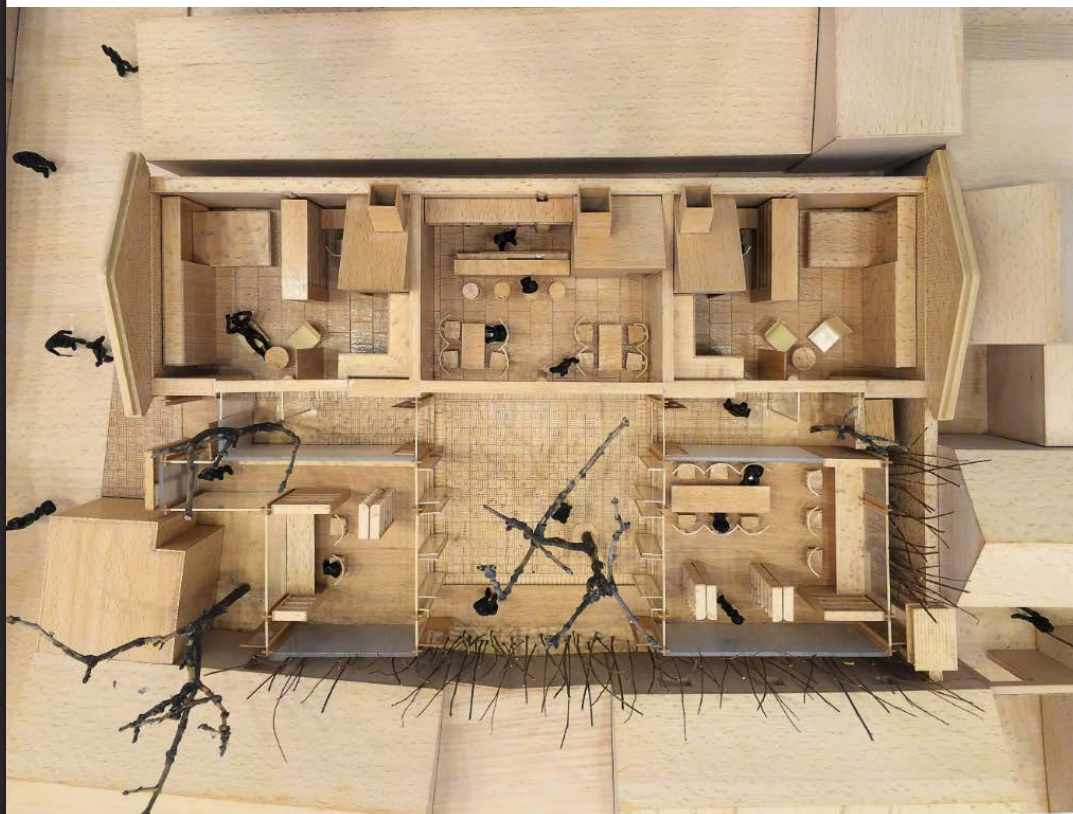
Picture 43.
Axonometry of
Hybrid Courtyard.

Picture 44.
Model . The
refurbished house
is on top of the
picture, the two
additions on the
lower left and right.

get a completely opposite impression. The multitude of doors that surround the central courtyard is one of those elements that – although in a highly logical and repetitive constellation – can cause a dubious effect. The choice

of the doors themselves, in combination with the way they move, grasp my attention. Picture 45 shows the situation in which all doors are opened. It is, suddenly, not all that easy to apprehend what separates inside from outside. Through the use of doors for both inside and outside, they articulate the space of the central courtyard (and the two smaller patios), but at the same time de-articulate them: the opaque doors give (or inhibit) access to the smaller patios, and they become part of the central courtyard when their doors are opened, influencing the atmosphere of the central courtyard. There is more. Because of the fact that the façade opens towards the outside, with the doors clearly influencing the otherwise serene state of the courtyard when everything is closed, that uncertainty about what is interior and what is not, grows to its full potential. If one would consider the same constellation, but only with doors that open inwards, then the separation between interior space and patio-space would remain clear. But, there still is some kind of system visible. Doors that separate interior from exterior are in se glass panels in a slim wooden framework. I think this decision, except for the fact that one also wants to have a visual relation between interior and courtyard, is a strategy to maintain a certain balance. When everything is closed, the different finishes of the doors tell what lies behind

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it, whilst in open conditions, it is a small reminiscence to the clarity from when the complete façade was closed. Also, the fact that there is a series of doors is important for the acquisition of those dynamics, and results in a certain balance between chaotic (open) and clear (closed). The question rises *where does the atmosphere change from chaotic to clear and vice versa?*. Picture 45 and 46 give an image of both extremes. The change from one impression to the other is connected to the amount of doors (and which ones) are opened, and if they are opened completely or just a bit. The series of doors thus are a way of implementing a gradual change. They are not only the reason of the change of the atmosphere of the courtyard from clear to unclear, but are also the elements which keep control of the gradation. The doors can inflict opposites, but in doing so always stay on the path of continuity (there is no sudden shift from clear and serene to disorder and chaos). Maintaining continuity and – at the same time– being the driving force for change is something close to a dynamic harmony. In contrast to the Twisted Courtyard by Archstudio, dynamics are attained through formless dynamics: the Twisted Courtyard used the flowing form, implying movement to emphasize continuity, while here the mere constellation of the façade evokes a certain vividness.*
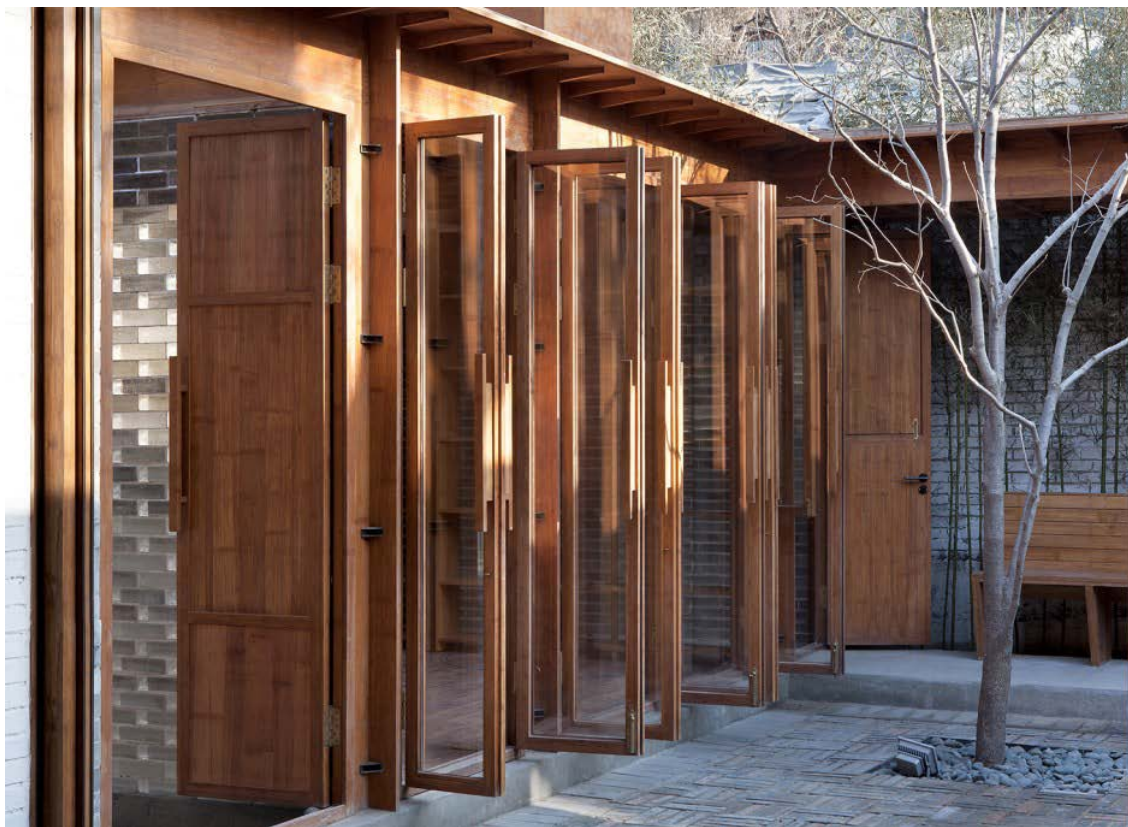
Picture 45. Open doors generate a confusing effect. The stylizes eaves are also visible, producing a dubious ensemble that both articulates and de-articulates.

The vividness of the courtyard is further stressed through the presence of prominent eaves. The stylistic eaves refer to the 'fifth façade' of Chinese roofs. Thus, everywhere where eaves are present, there should

be an interior behind. However, there are also protruding eaves above the doors that separate the small exterior patios from the central courtyard. In other words, the architects also use the element of the Chinese roof to blur our apprehension about what is outside and what is not. Furthermore, the use of opaque doors facilitates that blur: when closed, they look like volumes, and suggest interior space behind them in a more prominent fashion than the doors that enclose real interior space. To summarise what is said about the doors, we can say the following. Vector Architects cleverly use the potentiality of doors to open and close as a means to achieve dynamics (without dynamic forms), and set traditional Chinese elements to their advantage to create the ultimate dubious, elusive constellation that embodies both interior and exterior, open and closed, clarity and confusion. They thus use the intrinsic value and mechanism of the door in a clever way, acting on propensity rather than on direct form. As to further elaborate strategies to connect interior and courtyard in an effortless way, we should take a look at the main building. Picture 42 shows the view one has on the courtyard. However, a small but highly effective detail presents itself: the existing (or refurbished) column that is located in the middle of the window, hides a part of the window frame. In the Twisting

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Of course, this is not
true. As discussed,
white is an
expression in itself,
not a way of showing
nothings, or make
things invisible.

Courtyard, there was a tensional relation evoked by the presence of those window frames. There was a 'compression' exerted by the columns, and the columns themselves also looked as if they were under pressure. In the case of the Hybrid Courtyard, the façade is located in front of the internal construction, and makes it possible to partly hide the window frame behind the structure. If we, however, look from the outside into the main building, we see no column (or at least not on Picture 47). Here the window frame hides the column, and produces lightness, as if the Chinese roof does not need any columns there to remain upright. A clever constellation of columns and window frame to get a combination that is more than the sum of its parts. It is again a true mark of the use of less to create more. One could, for example, have designed a big window made out of one piece of glass, and painted the column white, as to make it "almost disappear"* . But one needs to paint the structure, and needs to install a bigger and heavier window, which in turn implies thicker window frames as to withstand the weight of the massive window. Moreover, the window would indeed have limited visual obstructions, but would also not be open-able. I think it is clear a constellation used in the project of Hybrid Courtyard does not inhibit a lot of potential (opening, closing, maximum vision ...) but retains maximal efficiency. (see Picture 46, 47 and 48)

As a small but important detail, one also sees in Picture 46 that the windows can be hidden in the walls, as to not limit the relation between inside and outside in any way. The small visible edges of the fixed framework create a certain suggestion of visually framing the courtyard.

Picture 49.
The two glazed brick walls differ in colour and lightness. The left one looks as if it were a typical hutong brick wall.

As a next to last commentary, we should look at the materiality of the two patios, more precisely to the translucent brickwork. When the lights in the rooms behind the wall (or should we call it a window?) are off, the wall

almost resembles the brick wall that is the hallmark of the Beijing's 鬍同 [hútóng]. The surface is a similar kind of grey and has a similar shine. But we should be cautious fixing this similarity. By moving from one point of view to the other, light from behind the wall comes through, and influences the hue and lightness of the wall. Also, the sunlight, when striking the surface of the glazed wall, reflects in such a way that the play of refraction, reflection and diffusion emphasizes the depth of the wall, a deepness (thickness) which the architects from the Twisted Courtyard also made use of when eliminating the boundary between wall and floor, as to not need to flip bricks when changing from wall to floor. There is a certain state between translucent and completely opaque, and that state constantly changes through the artificial lighting, the changing direction of the sunlight and the canopy of the trees in both patios. Also, one can assume that the position of the doors (opened, closed ...) will have some effect on the wall, which would be most visible from the inside. The wall, to a certain extent, re-conciliates the dichotomy of interior and exterior, where both artificial lighting and daylight are in constant relation and mingle with one another: the clearest light influences the colour and lightness of the wall the most. Because the intensity of sunlight is influenced by the angle, weather ... and the intensity

of artificial light by the occupants, there will be a constant alteration between the boundary conditions on both sides of the wall according to the time of day (among other factors). But in any case, those walls are a summation of both sides (interior and exterior), and thus change constantly. As an embodiment of both outside and inside, they complement the doors, but the process of change is different between the glazed wall and the opening/closing of the facade. Where the facade needs to be moved, the glazed wall automatically changes due to the change of its surroundings. So the dynamical power of the wall is more passively induced than the effect of the doors (the effect of the doors is in some way also indirect, because one opens a door mostly to go through it, not necessarily to change the atmosphere. Putting on the light to change the colour of that glazed walls has no point at all, it is an extra that – although it is an extra – has a significant effect on the whole, because of the ease of the generation of the effect).

I want to end this case with a short remark on the multi-functionality of the organization of the space. In this case, the rather unfixed architectural program (house, café ...) embodies a view of the designers to keep the value of the building intact over a longer period of time. We see the same tendency

to do this in the case of the Twisted Courtyard: the space can be both used as a house, or as public space. And indeed, one can imagine the spaces shown in the picture to adapt to both functions. These two cases, thus, incorporate a similar idea, but they acquire it in a different way. Where the Hybrid Courtyard uses an adaptable membrane between interior and the exterior (with a series of doors), in combination with the quite standard sized rooms, the Twisted Courtyard uses its expressive curving path to hide the household-specific amenities behind it, as to not fix the room as living space. Hence, in the fifth case, the architecture itself clearly expresses this adaptability, while in the Twisted Courtyard it is indirect, and is founded on the idea of hiding, rather than showing (also the furniture of the bedroom can be hid in the closet).

The fact of the 'standard sized rooms' is important. Very large or very small rooms automatically inhibit the use of a wide range of programs. 'Standard' sized rooms are more tolerable, because they tend to adhere to a certain middle, and occupy a central position between the extremes of large and small. This centrality thus does not limit, but generates possibilities, and serves as a variable centre: the form may be fixed, but in one situation, it can be rather big, whilst in another it can be quite small (for example: a small

library or a large living space). Its nature is not automatically one of fitness, but because of its regularity, it tends to be a harmonizing factor: adapting to what it needs to house, and the atmosphere of the program adapting to its form.
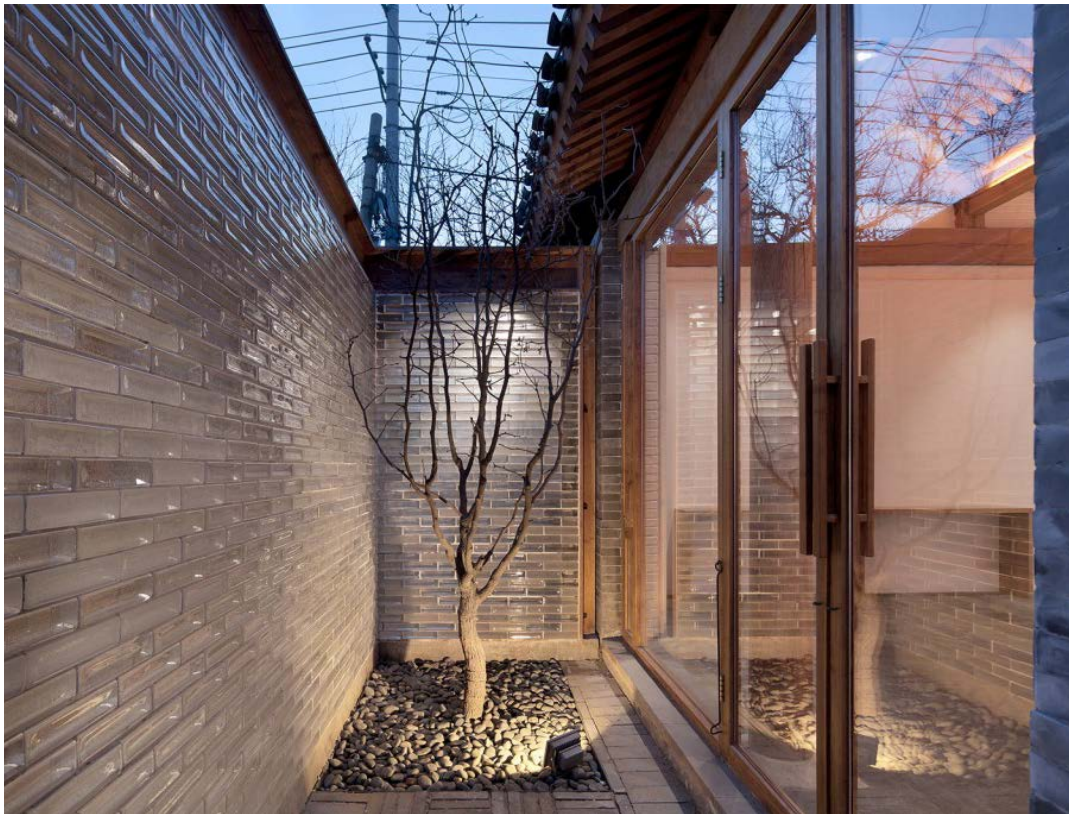
Picture 50.
The brick wall acquires a deepness through refraction, reflection and diffusion of both artificial and natural light. The colour on top is more blue, while at the bottom it has a warm grey hue.

themes

In this chapter, we need to take a few steps back and focus on the bigger picture, on the continuous lines throughout the cases. What topics float on the surface? What glasses did we use to look at those cases and what vocabulary did we consult to describe them? As to discover potential underlying significations that could lead us to a thorough understanding of this very contemporary and quite new architectural practice, we should attempt to de-concretize the commentaries I gave.

In general, there are three main themes that recur: craftsmanship (in contrast to planological design), intrinsic value (opposite to relation with surrounding) and aesthetic expression. All three of them are a means of adding value and significance to one's design. First, we will discuss the manipulation of materials in relation to their materialistic behaviour, and the handling of elements like doors, window frames and columns. Secondly, when considering the intrinsic value, we ought to search for the elements that have to do with symbolism and representation, and how things are related either to itself or to its surrounding. As third part, we have to cover the aesthetics, choices that have to do with some formal expressiveness to enhance the impression rather than form it. As the last part, we will focus on the issue of multi-functionality.

The value of crafts
in 鬍同 [hútóng]

As one could have noticed whilst reading the cases, I regularly refer to the value of the choice and implementation of certain materials. The particular way in which ZAO/standardarchitecture manipulate their concrete surfaces to induce a dynamic play between fluid and rigid, is one of the more impressive examples. The *interestingness* of the projects partly is a product of the handling of the concrete. Although not visible on the plan or sections – except for a mark or hatch that suggest concrete is used, but those documents do not express the value of the craftsmanship – it is an important factor that influences the design in its entirety. Replacing that feature with something else – by let us say, ceramic tiles – would be most unfavourable. Loss of power is in that case inevitable.

But there is more to crafts than only the precise and specific handling of materials. As already mentioned, a particular use of door, windows, window frames, columns ... results in an equally interesting composition. The comment in the last case, Hybrid Courtyard by Vector Architects, about the doors is a good example. Not exactly the use of materiality of the doors (although the opacity of the surface of the door also has some impact on the effect generated), but rather the way in which they are implemented, makes all the difference. A series of doors opening outwards (so a choice of rotating hinges instead of sliding mechanisms) creates an interesting effect that is undetectable when viewed in section or plan: the architecture needs to be present to be able to appreciate it, rather than to be imagined (which will be the case for aesthetic choices). So what kind of implementations does the prevailing importance of crafts have on the statute of this kind of architecture? These cases all embody some view on historical context and fabric. The intervention on ancient building typologies shows the view of designers and architects on how to maintain and handle this type of old architecture. Now, it is a bit dangerous to just use the word 'architecture' here. Chinese traditional architecture has, in fact, a different approach in relation to Western architecture. While Western architecture has a difficult relation

with both art and crafts – it is somewhere in between – Chinese architecture is in no way related to art. Hence, one can understand that the value of these interventions is automatically and instinctively felt through the manipulation of materials and elements in architecture that are in se a craft (like the process of making a door is considered a craft, but it is part of a whole that is more than craftsmanship alone). Yet again, we need to be cautious however. Even though traditional Chinese architecture is basically a craft, it does not mean that the intervention on Chinese traditional architecture is also automatically a craft. One can buy or make a crafty vase, but afterwards paint something on it. Depending on the quality of what is painted, the vase can suddenly step out of its usefulness and become a mere contemplative piece of art. So in a similar fashion, an intervention on 鬍同 [hútóng] can also become more than just an artefact made by a craftsman. So the reader should already be able to sense that the crafty nature of the traditional 鬍同 [hútóng] and the new architectural intervention will be something that is to be understood by both. Now we arrive at the address of the contemporary Chinese architecture. The introduction of architecture as a mingling of both crafts and art in China is a result of Western influences. So it is through the West that China adapted the Western conception of architecture. Because of this

fairly new switch from pre-modern Chinese architecture as a craft, to contemporary Chinese architecture as a vague concoction of art and crafts, architectural interventions like those of the 鬍同 [hútóng] in Beijing gain in significance. These cases are, in a way, an instrument to discover the relation between contemporary, traditional, art and craft. The *newness* of architecture as conceived by the Europeans was the reason why modern and contemporary Chinese architects have tried to link the new conception of architecture to Chinese precedents. So these contemporary designs for Beijing's 鬍同 [hútóng] are an objectification of the 'meeting in the middle' of Chinese contemporary and pre-modern architecture. In addition to what I just mentioned, an important question remains to be answered: does this conception of architecture influences the way in which we should describe (good) architecture? Amongst all the comments I gave on the cases in the previous chapter, not one time did I mention the word 'beautiful'.* All comments were, in some way, directed to a kind of appropriateness or efficiency. For example, in the case of the Hybrid Courtyard, where the column and window frame that hid one another, I judged it to be an appropriate thing to do when emphasizing the relation between the interior and the courtyard, and a strategy that solves two

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Only once to describe the scenic effect of water dripping down the eaves of traditional Chinese roofs, at the end of case four.

problems at once (hiding the window frame while keeping the ability to open it, and the presence of the column that is muted through the positioning of the fixed window frame). It does not feel appropriate to judge it on its visual beauty, yet how beautiful is not the ensemble we see in Picture 45 and 46. Also, the way in which ZAO/standardarchitecture handle the concrete surfaces in both of their cases, I described as being of an extreme subtlety, rather than of an unmatchable beauty. Words like harmonious, dynamic, interesting ... are to be used. So this qualitative description lacking the notion of Beauty as we know and use it in Europe immensely influences the way one ought to understand, appreciate and describe these designs. As a post scriptum, there is one interesting fact I want to shed light on before going to the representational value. We often use the term 'traditional' when we speak about pre-modern Chinese architecture. However, it is folly to talk about traditional European architecture. Maybe the use of 'traditional' inherently imposes a certain 'before': before Chinese modern – or contemporary – architecture, there was something else, and that 'something else' is separated from the present by a switch, a discontinuity in conception. And that discontinuity is the imposing of a to-China-foreign architecture conception: architecture as more than a craft.

The intrinsic value

As many well-informed Europeans will know, traditional Chinese architecture and art have everything to do with symbolism. The most widespread system of symbolic value is that of 風水 [fēng shuǐ]. It is a complex body of rules to determine "auspicious" sites to build on, which colour schemes to use, symbols to depict... to attain a significant ensemble submerged in symbolic meaning. Apart from the specific rules themselves, I think it is pertinent to stress some aspects. 風水 [fēng shuǐ] is a system based on the natural flowing of 氣 [qì], the earth's energy currents. These currents are of vital importance, as they influence all that is, and form the basis of the cosmos. 陰 [yīn] and 陽 [yáng] are the negative and positive energy forces respectively. They are both needed and form an ever-changing balance, resulting in a dynamic

cosmos. So 風水 [fēng shuǐ] is essentially a system that prescribes a good relation to one's environment. Architecture, as part of the cosmos, is also part of these currents, and that is why 風水 [fēng shuǐ] is so widely used on pre-modern Chinese architecture: 風水 [fēng shuǐ] is an instrument to relate men and their buildings (that is to say crafts) to the natural surroundings. The clever use of the sun and the canopy of the tree in the second case we discussed, by designing an elevated terrace, is one of the elements that can relate to a residue of that 'harmonious' relation with one's surroundings. The architecture and nature seamlessly connect in an enhancing movement.*

The 四合院 [sìhéyuàn] typology, as we already saw in the introduction of this dissertation, is based on these principles of attaining a harmonious relation with nature. As Beijing's 衚衕 [hútóng] were not build in nature, but in the city centre, certain favourable site elements are lacking (the perfect positioning for a building is on a hill, with a river or lake at the foot of that hill, among a multitude of other criteria). So these 衚衕 [hútóng] needed to complement the environment as a compensation, to remain in balance with nature. So it is clear that traditional Chinese architecture is, in contrast to Chinese landscape paintings, calligraphy or other traditional arts, part of the

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It does not really matter if it is strictly according to 風水 [fēng shuǐ] rules, maybe it is just a representation of that relation 風水 [fēng shuǐ] enacts with the environment?

same cosmos as we are, whilst the arts I just mentioned have their own cosmos. However, due to the change of the conception of architecture to something that is closer to an art (but still not equal to an art), the analogy between the cases of the 鬍同 [hútóng] and Chinese art can still prove valuable. Both, for example, do not represent something according to a relation of form: The distant mountains painted by 倪瓚 [Ní Zàn] in his *Six Gentlemen* (See Picture 11) do not refer to any existing mountain formation in the Huangshan area* or elsewhere. The painting does not mimic formal features of existing nature, but works like them, in a manner similar to life. They form a living entity on their own. The only relation is one of symbolic meaning. The composition of lines do not look like, for example, a tree, but it gives the same impression: certain curves we can relate to the behaviour or allure of trees. The same can be said about the cases: in none of them , except the fourth, there is a falsifiable relation between the case and an exterior, existing object. So to some extent, contemporary architecture does not tell anything about something else, it stands on its own[14]. However, if we consider the undulating slab from Archstudio, it makes us think about a river, a kind of carpet, or both. The shining finish of the brickwork enhances the former interpretation. As stated in that very same case,

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Huangshan scenic area is a famous natural park with a very distinct kind of rock formations. A lot of Chinese landscape painters based their paintings on these scenes, but never reproduced parts of those mountains.

there is a formal relation to the element 'river' outside of the courtyard (in contrast to its glistening surface), which we could label as a formal representation. But, the glistening of the bricks are different: they do not have a formal similarity, but a similar effect, the effect of reflection. Yet, there is no message to convey about that river, other than the impression itself. No tales can be told, nor songs can be sung about the architectural form. However, we can sing or tell more extensively about the *impression* induced inside of us, by the architecture and its form (which stresses the importance of effect rather than form an Sich). The extensiveness of the commentary on those five cases serve as sufficient proof of that, I think.

Maybe, before moving on, let us try to remind the first case's courtyard. I talked about the fact that traditional Chinese garden design was based on Chinese landscape paintings. They both have certain key elements as to attain their value: vegetation, rocks, human interference and water. In addition, landscape painters frequently depict mountains, but since mountains do not fit in gardens, people needed to content themselves with rocks that symbolize mountains. The courtyard, however, is not a traditional Chinese garden. So there is yet another level present in this series of representation:

courtyard – Chinese gardens – Chinese paintings – landscapes. So in what way can we say this courtyard is a representation without formal and falsifiable relation to exterior objects? It is, as we all see, certainly not a traditional Chinese garden. It does not necessarily look like it, because only the elements themselves are present (or are represented by the *effect* something else. The gravel and the seam that separates the horizontal plane from the concrete slab, gives a floating impression, and thus alludes on the properties of water, but it does not look like water), and not the complete formal structure. The vagueness of the constellation actually inhibits a real relation to the outside, making the 'representation of a Chinese garden' more symbolic – stressing its own, intrinsic values instead of something else's – than mimetic (like the form of the undulating slab in case four). So even though it is made of the same kind of objects, in the same cosmos, with the same effect or significance, there is nothing more than a hint of similarity (between a Chinese garden and that courtyard of case one) in effect.

The comment I made in previous part of this section, about the fact that we can only describe these five cases (with the exception of the third, from Wonder Architects) through the use of qualitative adjectives (with the exception of

'beautiful'), is relevant. These descriptions are not solely used to describe the object itself, but also the effect that goes beyond, like the constellation of the doors in the last case (where the effect of continuity, gradation, clarity and chaos all contribute to a meaningful totality), or the contrast between both rigidity and fluidity the surface finish of the concrete addition in the first and second case evokes. So maybe the fact that these cases lend themselves to be described and valued according to the effect they imposed on people, can be the reason of why 'beautiful' is not useful. Moreover, I frequently use efficacy as a quality. It is the result of a thorough understanding of the materials, and is the basis for a high effect without much effort, like the use of the existing brick wall as the fourth side of the form-work for the concrete (in case one) to stabilize the brick wall. Efficiency, in other words, is the most important driver of effect, and it is mostly the effect that we valued in the cases. We often hear about the importance of efficacy in contemporary architecture. Driving forces behind architecture include money, time and the use of materials. They all rest on the concept of efficiency: more efficient architecture is better. But is this kind of efficiency we hear when talking about contemporary architecture the same as the kind we used when describing the cases of contemporary architectural interventions in Beijing's 鬍同

[hútóng]? I think not. The former interpretation focusses on the material efficiency, economic efficiency and time efficiency. However, they do not cover the interpretation of efficiency as the increased effect with similar means. If we consider two structures, both made with an equal amount of materials, equally expensive and taking equally long to build, there can still be a difference in *effect-efficiency*: the impression or expression the constellation has, depends on a totality of factors – including economics, materials and time – that can sometimes not be calculated solely in the currency of money or time. Let us walk back to the first two cases, both designed by ZAO/standardarchitecture. The concrete form-work could be made with bigger wooden planks or plates, as to limit the amount of work-hours needed to assemble (and to disassemble) the complete form-work.

So according to the time/money efficiency logic, the resulting architecture would be of a higher quality, due to its higher efficiency. However, the impression would not be the same, and it is mostly through the impression it evokes that the building obtains its significance. Efficiency in terms of time, money and use of materials, I would call relative efficiency: they are based on, and related to, an external measure (amount of money,

amount of time). The efficacy of evoking does not fully adhere to any of such external measures: it is more about the intrinsic value. So, in general, there is some relation to the surrounding, like a symbolic act stressing the importance of symbiosis, but mostly, the comments are about the architecture's inherent value, representation without a material subject...

The act of expressing

In contrast to the two previous themes, this theme is directed to aesthetic choices, choices where it is more appropriate to use the word *beautiful*. This theme is distilled from the third and forth case from the previous chapter. All of them include the deliberate use of white. What does this colour, apart from being a colour, tell us about the aspects the architects want to highlight? And what aspects do they insinuate to be valued? The questions tend to talk about taste. Taste in being a view an architect (or an architecture firm) wants to express, a certain form that is an embodiment of what the architects deem beautiful. In previous chapters, taste was not really a discussion. Instead of taste, we used cleverness, or the understanding of the use and handling of materials. Because the latter comprises crafts to some extent, it is rather unusual to describe them in terms of taste. So what does this obsession with white have to do with all of this? Before answering that, one should be weary: the use of white in the third case is not the same as the use of white in the fourth. Although

there are similarities in using the colour, their focus is different. Where the third one is of seeming tastelessness – expressing a certain nudity that does not feel as if it were an aesthetic choice, an uncoloured choice of non-expressing – the fourth carries a symbolic meaning (so it should be applicable to what we said in the part of "The intrinsic value"). White as a reference, or a means to blandness, is a tool commonly used nowadays. Probably the most common tool used throughout the ongoing series of contemporary interventions in Beijing's 鬍同 [hútóng], is the use of white. It does not only highlight itself, but also highlights the materials and things which places itself in contrast to. So on one hand , there is the impression that white is some kind of erasing colour: by painting a wall, we de-paint the materiality of the wall. Some people tend to adhere to the fashion of painting everything white, as to acquire a pure visual constellation of almost complete serenity. Some say this contemporary need for white is based on the interest that white leaves blanc – blanc in French means white – and thus focusses on contours rather than on objects. Indeed, if we put a white table against a white wall, the shadow of the table cast on the white wall will be much more prominent, than when both table and wall remained unpainted. The same, and more,

is shown in case three, where the use of white on the outer wall becomes the canvas for a changing painting, where the distinct shadow of the roof dances on the surface. In addition to the focus on shadow and lines, there is the effect white has on its surroundings. The roughness of the brick wall and the wooden structure becomes more objectified, as if our impression of that roughness of the brick aligns with the intrinsic value of the wall. Impressions are originated in ourselves, they are no feature of the material or object that induces the impression. However, because of the use of the white paint, the impression seems evoked through the paint instead of the mind. The visual implication of colour is used as a means of acquiring a certain aesthetics. It becomes a theme to delete all unnecessary object, and to only leave blanc that which needs to aesthetically express. White should help these items do their aesthetic duty, imposed by the architects and designers. However sceptical I may be about that interpretation of white, there is something true about it. In some way, it does seem to achieve its goal, making the unpainted materials more expressing without manipulating them. So to some extent, it is true that the use of white is achieving blandness. Blandness as in visual implications: we become more sensible for less visually dramatic seasoning. But: isn't the act of spraying everything white from top to bottom a dramatic

act in itself, only not with the directness of the effect we would expect with dramatic acts of aesthetic expression? Because, if we would paint everything on this multicoloured earth white, I think we can agree that that act is one of drastic intentions, and not to be mistaken by not-expressing. Adding non-expression is an expression in itself, and therefore a *contradictio interminis.** Another way of interpreting the use of white, is as a reference to something else. Case four from Archstudio is a case that shows it all the clearer: the white appears from underneath the brick slab, as if its outsideness is peeled off and an inside nudity shows itself. There is, yet again, the use of the word 'nude'. In this case, we can take it quite literally. The white colour refers in a metaphorical manner to interior, like a pale Greek beauty slowly undressing herself. Then the question remains: why white? Orange would have worked out just the same, providing contrast to the other architectural elements as to keep a visual clarity between inside and outside. Then, there may be something to do with what I just said, that white is the one colour that has the magical power of erasing identity and applying conformity. Orange is orange, and completely stands out in every way possible: bright, light, saturation ... White has the same capacity of standing out, but has no hue and is completely desaturated. There is some

false impression of self-affirmation: when orange is chosen, there should be a list of reasons why it should be that hue, that lightness, or even 'why orange' all together. With white, saturation is seemingly absent, and lightness maximal. Extremes have a certain affirming power, whereas a choice of a particular position somewhere in between needs more explanation. Hence, there is some absoluteness about white which makes it aesthetically self-affirming, and thus more fit to either express or try to not-express. In Chinese landscape painting and calligraphy, the blanc of the paper and what is covered in ink is equally important, a true master should be able to paint both, without actually painting the blanc of the paper (see cover). He needs to turn it in his advantage. In European landscape paintings, 'nothing' was also painted, like the colour of the sky, or the colour of the water (even though water is not really blue, in European tradition it is often painted blue). The linguistic confusion about the English blanc and the French blanc is the perfect example. The former means 'to not define', the latter refers to the colour. If we now pose ourselves the question 'what if white was not used in case three or four?', then we get to the reason of this third theme of aesthetics: concrete, brick and wood are materials with an intrinsic value, and manipulating them in a certain way emphasizes that materiality, and therefore, gains significance

through craft. White does not have that, it is an extra layer that covers. This addition cannot be something else than aesthetic. Referring back to the issue of the Chinese painting, the blanc emphasizes the black (and vice versa) just as the white paint emphasizes the brickwork, wood ... So there is some relation between Chinese painting and these cases, but that similarity remains very dubious, since the interpretation of the colour white can vary. Next to the argumentation about the paint, there is the element of the pictures of the architecture itself. In the cases of ZAO/standardarchitecture, there are children playing in the courtyard, emphasizing the notion of movement around a rigid volume. The architecture in use shows its quality. However, less trivial actions are allowed in the fourth case of Archstudio: only a few people eating should not stain the quality of the architecture. In the third case, however, the pictures are depicting in some kind of perfect state, eliminating all accidentalities like household items and excess furniture. This gives away the aesthetic 'plan' the architects imagined, in which deviations would diminish the value of the whole.

The act of defining

In the last two cases, Archstudio and Vector Architects both express their intention to design spaces that are not defined, as to not limit the possibility of use (the former stated that the project can be both public space and a private household, the latter either a private household or a café or ...). But does this fear for limiting possibilities actually pivots around undefining? I think, when an architect designs a multi-purpose room – in other words to define a room that is adaptable to more than one function – he or she needs to define without too much limitations. A multi-purpose room is still something different than a purposeless room, the latter being a room lacking of definition. There should be a rigid framework in which a comprehensible whole is created, and in that whole there is room for alterations without loss of significance. The same holds true for Chinese landscape paintings. Even though their value is one of vagueness, blandness and suggestions, there ought to be a certain referential framework which allows the viewer to

understand what to see, but does not allow the viewer to see easily. It retains a vagueness in a certain clear constellation: one knows what elements (trees, mountains...) to expect when contemplating a Chinese landscape painting. Without that referential framework, the painting could be anything, or nothing at all. There needs to be some certainty, and when that certainty is established, one can start to make it dubious. So, also for composing a multi-purpose room, designing a rigid framework is needed, and that framework inherently loses all kinds of opportunities. If looking at the scale and organization of the Hybrid Courtyard, the buildings can either be used as a spacious living space, or as a bar/lounge as described by Divisare. But it would be absurd to consider using the space as a prison or elephant shelter.* So although it tolerates different uses, it does not necessarily mean its capacity increases *ad infinitum*, being able to absorb all architectural programs. Despite the fact that Chinese landscape painting and multi-purpose rooms have some process in common, the final possibilities are less limited in paintings, as the functionality of possible architectural programs is more spatially dictating than visible constellations in paintings. Then there was also the remark on the mediating task the multi-purpose space needs to exercise. Even though the program may not be perfectly suitable for the

space, both form and program tend to adapt to each other, attaining a varying harmony every time the building changes function or owner. This search for adaptation and fitness is a process that is also influenced by the extent in which the multi-purpose rooms are designed. This adaptation in both architecture elements (e.g. the series of doors forming an adaptable screen) and strategies (e.g. the choice to hide certain particular functionalities), in combination with an allowing scale of the building, influences the value of a building.

theory

As to discard the accidentalities and specificity of the comments given in the cases, it was necessary to not look at every case in particular, but to generalize our views and critics, and to see what themes proved to be important when judging the cases. That act of trying to find the underlying topics was a first step to understanding the contemporary designs in Beijing's 鬍同 [hútóng] in general. However, there still remains to be seen what these general themes and conclusions discussed in chapter two have in common, how they connect in a manner that is deeper than mere coincidences. In other words, we need to link the findings from previous chapters to a framework, something that would allow us to fully understand, and evaluate, the interventions in the historical fabric of Beijing. Without doing so, the point of generalizing has no point. Only when my remarks and comments are fitted in a greater whole, there is meaning in doing all of this. As the title of this chapter

graciously gives away, the source I want to use to connect my argumentations to a theoretical framework will be the writings of François Jullien. François Jullien is a French philosopher and sinologist, whose work pivots around the good artefact, and the process of making it, drenched in a philosophical background. He should provide the perfect game rules to affirm (or reject) what we have discussed until now. To be more specific, there are five books on which I will base this chapter: *Éloge de la fadeur*, *Cette étrange idée du beau*, *La propension des choses*, *La grande image n'a pas de forme* and *La valeur allusive*. Translated into English, one gets *In praise of blandness*, *This strange idea of the beautiful*, *The propensity of things*, *The great picture does not have a form* and *The allusive value**. *Éloge de la fadeur* covers the issue of blandness and taste, and is about the non-seasoning of artefacts as to give them meaning – something completely opposite according to European conceptions of taste and expressing. *Cette étrange idée du beau* works on the absoluteness of the (European) concept of beauty and on describing good artefacts. The third book, *La propension des choses*, is all about the importance of efficacy and exploiting potentiality to gain significance. The next, *La grande image n'a pas de forme* discusses the apprehension of form, defining and showing (mainly) in Chinese pictorial tradition (more

147

specifically in Chinese landscape paintings). The last one covers a wide range of aspects, but mainly focusses on poetry and its cultural background (how it is made, explaining the process of creating ...). Although I highly essentialize the content of these works, they provide an extensive basis for understanding artefacts in China (and Europe). To enrich this theoretical chapter, I will occasionally refer to accounts that describe the European conceptions, like Roger Scruton's *The Aesthetics of Architecture*. I believe briefly explaining opposing views and traditions only illustrate the opposed even better. At the end of this character, we should be able to see why certain themes recurred when discussing the five interventions in Beijing's 鬍同 [hútóng], and hopefully to apply it to other projects in or outside Beijing.

Blandness

Éloge de la fadeur, François Jullien.

Before I start to discuss the Chinese concept of blandness, I want to note the following. The concept of blandness is, in European languages and tradition, a misfit. It almost always attracts a negative connotation, no matter which word we want to use to describe it: blandness, insipidity, faintness, tasteless, dimness ... All of them automatically give the impression they should be used to describe a negative trait. I think this negativity towards this concept may be caused due to a monopoly on taste and expression in European architectural tradition. Blandness in Europe thus does not refer to a highly praised quality. It is a mark of the European divination of expression. If some building or artefact does not express or is not expressive, then there was no point in making it, and it could be labelled as worthless. Expression and worth are thus intricately intertwined: expressionless becomes – in some way – worthless.

According to the Kunstgeschichte*, says Roger Scruton, *every work of art* (and in turn architecture) *of a period must derive its significance from the same underlying spirit or idea. (...) if one building manifests the spirit of its epoch, so do all the other buildings of its time: in which case, where lies the difference between the good and the bad examples? (...) Only buildings that are considered of good quality will express its Zeitgeist. Bad architecture or art should therefore be inexpressive.*[15]   Even though Roger Scruton rejects the logic of the *Kunstgeschichte*, it remains part of the European tradition, and serves as a good illustration of the opposite conception of blandness. So it should be logical – according to the *Kunstgeschichte* – that, if something is bland, it does not express – or even more bluntly stated – lacks the power to express. So how does blandness actually become a quality in Chinese tradition? Daoism, as one of the principal religions in China – and also one of the oldest, if not the oldest – paves the way for the concept of blandness. In Daoism, as François Jullien describes it in his *Éloge de la fadeur*, one needs to focus on the base of everything that is. The objectification of things does not matter, they are a mere incarnation. Every act of incarnation is an act which blurs: to incarnate, or to objectify, is to fix one's state. For example, if we plant an acorn, and tend to all its needs like providing fertile

soil, water, warmth and sunlight, we would expect the acorn to gradually become a tree. Since the tree is still not there, and the process of becoming is not yet finished, there are still some uncertainties: how big will it be, will it be a strong one, how high will it get ... these uncertainties, however negative the word 'uncertainty' can sound, are the symptoms of potential. It is because the acorn has not yet become a tree, that its form is not yet defined, and it can still grow to whatever size we can imagine it to grow. In other words, the lack of the objectification of that tree is the seed for a variety of potentialities that have not yet been excluded by the tree's actualization (we already hear an echo of Aristotle's theory of potentiality and actualization, but we will talk about that in the part of *Propensity*). So according to the religion, there is a loss in potentiality when there is an increase in actuality: when the tree is a tree, it cannot suddenly become a different one, a tree becomes *that* tree. In a similar fashion, when we make art or design a building, we need to be cautious. An artefact retains much of its potentiality when there is a lack of the tendency to define. But the difficulty is that the process of creating embodies the process of objectification: we cannot wish to build a building if we do not use any materials to build it. We can't possibly make a painting, if there is no object that serves as the body of

the painting. The only thing we can do , is to limit the process of incarnation. When painting, we can choose to either cover the complete canvas, or to only use some brush strokes as to not be guilty of painting too much, of defining too much, so the painting loses the majority of its spiritual meaning. Hence, the concept of blandness should be practiced by artists, as to define as little as possible, but still just enough to spark one's imagination. One notices that the concept of blandness thus has an intimate relation to not-defining.

To better illustrate – or define – the concept of blandness, let us contemplate 郭熙 [Guō xī]'s *Early Spring* (Picture 51). As a Chinese landscape painting, painted according to the technique of ink-and-wash, we should consider the following. First of all, such kind of paintings are painted only with black ink and a brush. In other words, anything that is not black, is therefore not painted. We see some elements that are common in these kind of paintings: the presence of water, mountains, vegetation, rocks and sometimes a hint of human interference. Every elements has its own implications on the impression the whole evokes. Take the mountain formation for example. We see the mountain disappear at some points, it is not fully rendered. Not fully depicting the mountain without destroying
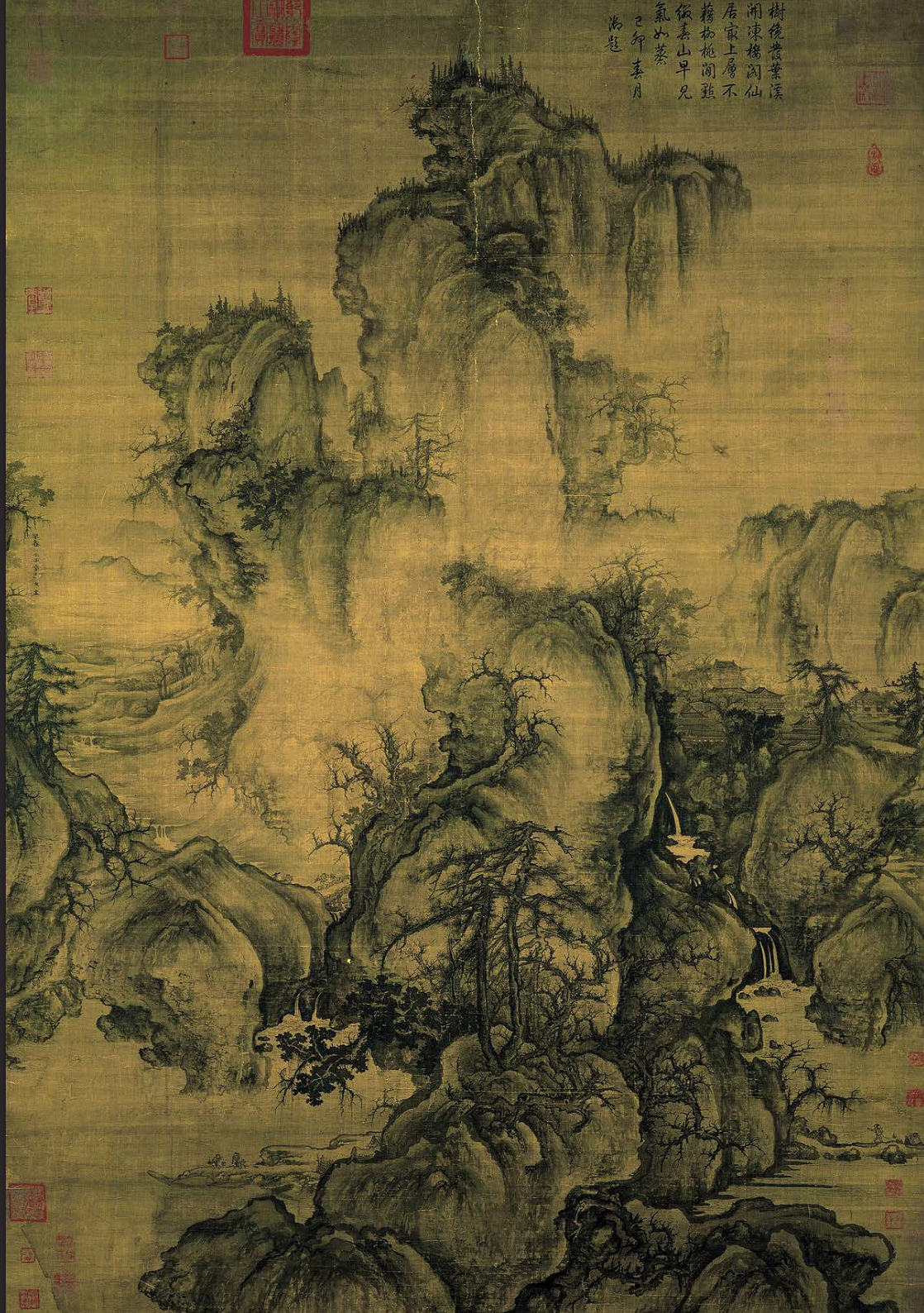
the identity of the element makes the image stronger. It implies a certain distance, height and mystery, as if there is some fog arising in front of the mountains (like the effect of a real mountain, instead of the mere realistic sight of a real mountain). So, by not painting the complete mountain, Guo Xi succeeds in emphasizing the force of the mountain through not-painting it. To use François Jullien's words: *peindre, c'est aussi dépeindre.*[16]   Not only the painted, but also the emptiness in between needs to be taken into account. They are both equally important, and when balanced, reinforce one another, creating a more expressive ensemble without directly expressing. *Le son le plus intense n'est pas le son le plus intensif.* [17] In general, just like the not fully rendered mountain reinforces its own significance, artefacts that are not completely defined – and thus leaving room for interpretation – can still express their meaning. Whilst it should be clear that blandness can still lead to expressiveness through the symbiosis of both definite and indefinite[18] , this is diametrically opposite to the Western apprehension of blandness and expression. As already mentioned, blandness is often misinterpreted as a lack of expression, a lack of taste. There is a term in French that can serve as a good opposition to blandness: *le bon goût.* It is an 18th century term introduced by intellectuals

like Claude Perrault – a French architect and physician – to serve as an alternative for the perfect and absolute system of proportions[19] , established and elaborated by Leon Battista Alberti, among other renaissance architects. Whilst Alberti believed in a proportional system based on a natural order and best felt through music and musical proportions, Perrault pleaded for a more personal interpretation of that beauty-system, posing that there is a certain perfection, but tolerances do not necessarily destroy the beauty of the ensemble (in contrast to Alberti's apprehension, where the littlest deviation results in a dissonant whole, just like when an amateur plays the violin and fails in producing the correct notes to form a consonant harmony, resulting in ugliness). What does *le bon goût*, then, embody?

Le goût, dit l'Auteur de la Lettre, est un sentiment naturel qui tient à l'âme, & qui est indépendant de toutes les sciences qu'on peut acquérir, le goût n'est autre chose qu'un certain rapport qui se trouve entre l'esprit & les objets qu'on lui présente; enfin le bon goût est le premier mouvement, ou pour ainsi dire une espèce d'instinct de la droite raison qui l'entraîne avec rapidité, & qui la conduit plus sûrement que tous les raisonnements qu'elle pourrait faire.[20]

So the term refers to a personal reason and instinct, that should enable the artist who possesses that instinct to select the right elements and design them in such a way as to attain an artefact – or building – which has a certain expressive force. This instinct is like an innate sensitivity for that which is beautiful, a predisposition to expressing one's taste. According to *l'Académie Royal de Paris*[21], when one desired to know which things express good taste, one needed to look at what kind of things the more intelligent individuals – whose intelligence was proven through their works and merits – deem pleasant.[22]   This matches the interpretation of *le bon goût* by Claude Perrault: it is something that matures through knowledge and experience, and is different from the taste we all humans share (closely related to what Roger Scruton would call 'primitive aesthetic taste'[23] , an aesthetic feeling that is innate and we all share, even though judgment based on that taste can vary from person to person, like preferring red over green) and replaces Alberti's exactness with a more personal, individual and contextual content; the good taste is the accomplishment of an individual, and is linked to his experience, knowledge and judgment. In short, expressiveness in Europe results through the expressing of good taste, which is partly linked to personal factors. Also, when we deem a certain building to be beautiful, and

thus judge it to be good architecture, we feel the need to affirm our judgment through argumentation, dixit Roger Scruton. Judgment is a culmination of what we are as a person, and *it is a result of our entire Weltanschauung.*[24] So it ought to be clear that blandness and expression of taste (both used to attain an expressive whole) are complete opposites. In Europe, expression of good taste in architecture and artefacts has been the vehicle for charging one's work with significance. Michelangelo's vestibule would never have enjoyed such attention as it does, if its proportions and ornamentation wouldn't have been so expressive: the visual spectacle created through the placement of columns and ornaments are a product of his *giudizio dell'occhio*, a term that describes the capability of Michelangelo to acquire a meaningful whole without needing to base his work on certain rules of proportions. In other words, the vestibule is a mark of his outstanding architectural taste and the expression of that taste. But what about blandness, what does it provide us, except for the fact that through it, we are able to preserve potential much clearer? Because of the fact that certain artefacts are bland, they enable both creator and beholder to lift their perceptive abilities to a higher level. It is not through dramatic architecture loaded with someone's taste (like an autograph) that one

trains one's sensibility, but when it is difficult to perceive the significance, one learns to look for small nuances to understand it. We do not achieve a refined taste when we drink different wines all full of flavours and with a strong taste, but when we need to discern different tastes of, for example, different brands of water. Water is like the basal taste, the basal quality[25] , undimmed and unclouded. Only by learning to taste the taste of water, our mind and senses are sharper than the sharpest knife. Only then will we be able to understand that which is without taste, that which is unseasoned. It is this acquisition of extremely subtle sensibility that is of utmost importance. 倪瓚 [Ní Zàn], for example, painted the same kind of landscape throughout his life, trying to reach a more bland result than the previous[26] (Picture 11). Paintings like the *Six Gentlemen* do not show great formal seasoning, nor are they a personal autograph of taste, but a serene and subtle constellation. But what about the architecture discussed in the five cases? What if a Chinese architect – like Vector Architects seem to do in the case of the Hybrid Courtyard – were to design a room? Should the design of a room also conform to the rules of blandness, namely that the room should be as indefinite as possible? I think there are two answers to the possible implementation of blandness in architecture: the visual and the structural. The former is about the aesthetic

expression, the latter about spatial defining. Aesthetic expression we shortly mentioned in the third part of the previous chapter. There we talked about the use of white, and if there are similarities between the effect of the white colour on its surrounding in architecture and the effect of leaving bare and undefined, as described by François Jullien. We found out that there was indeed a similarity in effect, that we became more alert for what was unpainted, like the rough brickwork or the wood with the visible grains in the third case (of Wonder Architects). Without the use of white, these textures would perhaps not have had the same expressiveness. That expressiveness is, then, not acquired through the highlighting of the textures themselves (by manipulating them), but by trying to soften the distractions from elsewhere. There was, however, caution to be exercised. Painting white may be able to stress other unpainted things, like placing glasses of water next to one filled with wine to stress that one glass of wine (the wine here being interpreted as the wood, brickwork ...), but it falsely provokes the act of not defining. We discussed the difference between *blanc* in French and blanc in English. The former being the white paint, the latter being the unpainted. If we look to it that way, the paint becomes the vehicle of expression, rather than the absence of it. Hence there is a difference in architecture and, for example, the

art of painting. Blandness in the latter is partly the product of not defining the blanc of the paper, of considering the unpainted as equally powerful as the painted. Unpainted architectural elements, like the wood and bricks, are not particularly bland. Unpainted, they have a visual presence. Painted, they form a defined element that lifts the expression of other elements. This difference is mainly because architecture is still, in some way, part of the cosmos. Yet it has acquired some sort of surplus, something more than its mere object and surrounding (in contrast to a craft, like Chinese traditional architecture is), but the tie between architecture and its mass remains uncut. This could explain why the relation between blandness and architecture is partially true, and partially contradictory. But even though there might be a visual difference in defining and blandness in architecture and painting, there still remains the fact that, although using white as an instrument for defining, it can enhance the expressiveness of the bare materials without making the materials themselves (or a shadow on the wall) more visible. We become more aware of subtle things like the shadow on the outer wall that constantly changes throughout the day (depicted in Picture 29). A second interpretation of blandness had to do with the spatial defining. Architecture needs to form a comprehensible framework in which architectural

programs can fit. If there is no framework, there is nothing to fit into, and therefore it is difficult to speak about architecture altogether. The same holds true for the art of painting: the painter needs to form a comprehensible constellation (a tree on the painting should behave like a tree, etc.) as to be able to not define inside of that framework, and attain a meaningful ensemble. If we look back at the fifth case, the existing, refurbished volume did not exhibit a certain specificity about architecture: no fixed furniture or walls could give away what the room ought to be used for. Although it is certainly not the same aspect of blandness as in painting, it is certainly a similar one: the act of undefining limits limitations, evokes different potentialities. As a last addition to this matter, I want to talk about the matter of character. Next to *le bon goût*, there was the term *caractère*. *Caractère* – or character – was the effect, the identity a certain building could have. It refers to the expressiveness of a building. In some way it escapes the purely formal, and has a certain interpretation to it. A Doric column expresses manliness because we feel it has resemblances with the structure of the male body or behaviour. This external relation is – because of its external character (context and behaviour) – linked to surrounding and culture. Character has everything to do with expression of nature, genus. In Western tradition the extent of

expression is linked to the amount of character. If a certain object does not express a quality in a certain way, no character will be felt and the object contemplated will be insignificant*. According to the *Kunstgeschichte*, as described by Roger Scruton, the bad architectural examples are inexpressive.[27] But, whilst in Europe character and expression are linked to expressiveness, in Chinese tradition it is not. According to François Jullien, a Chinese artefact can have significance and an expressive force (i.e. character), without needing to express something (genus, taste ...). Blandness, as discussed above, is the key to expressiveness without expression: *le son le plus intense n'est pas le son le plus intensif* .[28] I keep using this quote, because is embodies all the power of blandness in one sentence. So, does case three have some kind of expressive force without expressing? I think not. White, as discussed, is a very penetrating act of expression. It is like a certain establishment of formal expression, of a style.

Caractère and conception of style are intertwined. This leads to an architectural conception which is concentrated around the experience of character.[29]

In that way, case three really does seem as if it is a formal expression leading to expressiveness. This is intrinsically different from real blandness described by François Jullien. As to conclude this part, I think the project of Wonder Architects does not really embody the true concept of blandness. It embodies an act of formal defining, and establishes some kind of theme. Yet, we need not forget the effect of the use of white. There was some effect that was similar to the effect of blandness: the use of white made us aware of the otherwise (potentially) overlooked wooden structure or brickwork. The project is like the formal deviation of blandness, it has some allures of expressing without directly dramatizing that which becomes more expressive, but in the process (the act of defining the texture of the walls and the formal logic that is present), the project departs from the notion of blandness. In general, architecture that feature white as a seeming absence of expression, is also not a true incorporation of blandness. It merely acquires a similar result.

Semblance

La grande image n'a pas de forme, François Jullien.

A next theme we discussed, was the theme about the intrinsic value and the symbolic relations these interventions have/suggest. As to fit the remarks on those cases in the framework established by François Jullien, we should focus on what he says about the act of representation and the relation between an object and its relation to the cosmos we are part of. The book of *La grande image n'a pas de forme* should lead us the way. Therein, he mentions the notion of *semblance* – from *ressembler* in French, 'to resemble' in English. *Ressembler*, or to resemble, is an act in which one's outer form has a visual tie with some other form: we can easily say that a son can resemble his father. This kind of relation is based on a formal echo, on *re-sembler*. It is a visual duplication (to some extent) whose relation is thus based on visual traits, in purely formal accordance. The same can be said about a realistic painting: if a depiction of a tree is resembling a real

tree, that representation will be – in such a realistic painting – based on outer form, and therefore will be a resemblance rather than a semblance. So what, then, is *semblance*? Logically, it is a relation, a similarity, which does not incorporate the visual echo. Hence, the prefix 're-' can be omitted. But how does this relation work? As a Chinese notion, it is based on Chinese metaphysics and the apprehension of reality, and more specifically, on the concept of 氣 [qi]. It means wind or breath, and is considered the earth's energy. The currents of energy that the Chinese call 氣 [qi], are in effect the same as breath or wind: we cannot see the winds, but by its effect[30]. Just like the leaves of trees are animated and rustle in the wind, the 氣 [qi] is the energy that is the driving force behind all that is. And in turn, everything that is, changes constantly, so the 氣 [qi] is the condition of existence of change itself. I have already spoken about the conception of harmony in China, as explained by Chenyang Li in his *The Confucian philosophy of harmony*. In contrast to the European interpretation of harmony – a rather fixed and absolute state – the Chinese apprehension is one of a constantly changing situation, in which the change of parts result in the change of the balance. An entity that can effortlessly absorb these changes, is called harmony. Hence, harmony can embody conflict, because conflict is a symptom of change: it starts at some point. When a system or surrounding is able to adapt to that,

it will be able to harvest a balance out of it, without necessarily needing to form a compromise or to inhibit conflict: conflict is a motor of change, and therefore can be of vital importance for Chinese balance and harmony. [31]

If we return to the concept of 氣 [qì] as being the basis for change – because it is the source for the earth's animation (like our breath is the source for our body being able to sustain itself and continuously renew its cellular structure to do so) – we can see that the presence of 氣 [qì] is indispensable if we want to talk about harmony. Since harmony is the act of constantly adapting and changing in accordance with an element in the ensemble that is changed, removing 氣 [qì] out of this process would be like one trying to start a motor without any gasoline. It is not possible. So, in short, 氣 [qì] is the basic animating force behind all change and life.

This 氣 [qì], described as energy, incorporates two opposites: the negative and the positive energy. The negative energy is called 陰 [yīn], the positive energy is called 陽 [yáng]. The negative energy is not to be confused with 'negative' as a connotative meaning. In other words, the negative energy is as important as the positive, and when these two are in balance, they create harmony.

Now, different elements in the cosmos refer to different kinds of energy. According to Feng Shui, for example, water is considered as 陰 [yīn], while the sun is 陽 [yáng]. Furthermore, these two types of energy also refer to, for example, fluid and rigid, dark and light ... They constitute the entirety of what is. If we follow François Jullien's explanation in his *La grande image n'a pas de forme*, where he mentions and elaborates on the Chinese system of trigrams and hexagrams, we learn that in the Book of Changes (易經 [Yìjīng]), the basis for Chinese metaphysics is laid out. It all starts with the division of the "whole" in 2 opposites: (- -) (division) and (–) (union). The divided lines represent the passive 陰 [yīn], the undivided line refers to the active 陽 [yáng] energy. Both are part of "the whole", which is a longer full line. The full line is hence divided in (- -) and (–). "The whole" is itself the product of the 道 [dào]. From the (- -) and (–) derive the trigrams, which are a combination of three, either 陰 [yīn] or 陽 [yáng], lines. Hexagrams are a combination of six lines, either 陰 [yīn] or 陽 [yáng]. It is logical that there are eight trigrams (three times two options, 陰 [yīn] or 陽 [yáng], so $2^3 = 8$) and in turn, 64 hexagrams ($2^3.2^3 = 64$) . These trigrams and hexagrams each are related to certain natural elements and certain qualities respectively[32] . So one can say that 陰 [yīn] and 陽 [yáng],

and in turn 氣 [qì], is a very important element in Chinese conception. But what does it have to do with creating artefacts, semblance or even architecture? François Jullien argues that, when producing an artefact, one does not need to show life, but work accordingly[33]. Hence, the relation between artefact and reality is one of *semblance*: the outer form is not important, but the energy it embodies is. A Chinese painter needs to look at the energy currents – *les lignes de vie[34]* – of a landscape, as to understand how it works, and then creates a landscape painting based on those certain movements/presence of 氣 [qì]. If we return to the notion of *semblance* as opposed to resemblance, 氣 [qì] is needed to explain the meaning of *semblance* in a more profound way. As discussed, resemblance is a relation based on outer form, like a portrait looks like its model: the relation – as Roger Scruton argues – is falsifiable, because we can see the differences and similarities between the representation and the represented[35]. If the represented object does not look like the representation, the representation has no value, and becomes false. *Semblance*, however, is not based on outer form, but on 氣 [qì]. The process of making through semblance requires the understanding of how life works, and how 氣 [qì] is an unmissable part in the constellation we call reality. We still haven't got to the point of specifically understanding how *semblance* is translated into

making a craft. Going back to *La grande image n'a pas de forme*, François Jullien uses the art of painting to explain it. First of all, a Chinese landscape paintings do not show (reality), but explain (abstract concepts)[36] . It is hence not a representation of something existing, of some real landscape. Secondly, the elements are not shown according to their visual resemblance: water does not look like water, but is depicted according to its behaviour and its 氣 [qì]. A tree does not really look like a real tree, but is an ensemble of lines that mimics a tree's behaviour and allures, rather than its purely outer form.

How does this argumentation align with architecture, and with the cases of contemporary interventions in Beijing's 鬍同 [hútóng] in specific? First and foremost, it is important to conceptualize the differences and similarities between architecture and the art of painting. This we must do, because François Jullien does not give away the applicability of his scriptures on architecture*. That is why , throughout this dissertation, we have to hold on to other kinds of artefacts, like the art of painting or calligraphy.

As I have mentioned a few times, traditional Chinese architecture is part of this cosmos, partly because of its material dependency (like all architectural

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At least not in one of the five books this dissertation covers..

171

products), partly because of its crafty nature (it did not have the ability to bear certain formless meanings or formless ends), while a Chinese painting is a cosmos of its own, retaining a *semblance* (i.e. some kind of symbolic) relation with the cosmos we live in. Contemporary Chinese architecture, however, seems to have a more than mere object-oriented significance: a crafty jug has no more significance than the way in which it allows the cup-bearer to poor wine or water into a glass or cup. In a similar manner, traditional Chinese architecture had significance in the way it harmonizes with the cosmos it is located in. Because of the modern switch of architecture in China, it becomes – according to what Roger Scruton says in his *The Aesthetics of Architecture* – more than a mere craft, it is somewhere in between art and craft[37] . Hence, we should be able to relate the effect of architecture and of painting to a certain degree. Of course, we cannot expect them to behave in an identical way, but at least, if the effects are similar, then there is a point in using François Jullien's descriptions of the effects of Chinese artefacts, on (contemporary) architecture. I think the relation between painting and architecture is different in Europe, because of the fact that representation through outer form is more present in European tradition. Since Roger Scruton argues that one of the reasons

that architecture is a misfit, is because it does not have the capacity to represent. It is an artefact that stands on its own[38] . Chinese paintings do not represent according to outer form, nor do they have an anecdotal meaning. Their value is connected to the extent in which they can evoke powerful impressions without needing to base on some message that is hidden inside of the painting. Hence, the contact surface between architecture and the art of painting in pre-modern China is greater than in Europe. So, if we consider the use of concrete and its specific surface finish in the first and second case (both by ZAO/standardarchitecture), there is something about it that we cannot solely trace back to the way in which a craft gets its significance: through the manipulation of the surface in that particular way as ZAO/standardarchitecture has done it, there is a certain effect of both fluid and rigid, the form becomes a reminiscence of the former fluid state of the concrete, and that effect, although it arises from a craft (the crafty way in which the materiality of the concrete has been handled, and the making and selecting of the right kind of form-work), its significance goes beyond the significance a mere craft can handle: the tensional effect between two opposite states, reminds me in some way of the effect in traditional Chinese landscape paintings between showing and

not-showing, between *peindre et de-peindre* [39]. The constant alteration between the impression of fluid and rigid is like the constant alteration between black and blanc (like a mountain gaining in evocative force because of it not being rendered completely, like in the painting of Guo Xi). So in that way, both contemporary Chinese architecture and traditional Chinese paintings have a different relation to the material reality (cosmos), but achieve a certain similar, meta-objective significance nonetheless, through a dubious and suggestive manipulation of the object of either architecture or painting. There is evocative force in both the first two cases by ZAO/standardarchitecture and the painting of Guo Xi (Early Spring). However, we need to be careful. Even though we can track down some similarities, there are certainly limitations to the resemblances in effect between architecture and the art of painting. There is, for example, the relation to the Chinese concept of 道 [dào]. In Daoism, there is one central something (and at the same time nothing) that is called 道 [dào]. It is the core value of the Daoist beliefs, and the goal of the man of virtue: To walk the path of virtue – or simply – the Way. But how does one walk this moral path of virtue? Blandness, (a certain kind of) centrality and harmony can lead us there. Chinese landscape paintings are one of the vehicles of

evoking the 道 [dào]. Suggestive paintings, playing between the continuous gradation between perceptible and imperceivable, between showing and not-showing, will show us the Way, and then one is able to understand it.[40] The 道 [dào] is actually not explainable, nor sensible. The founder of this religion, 老子 [Lǎozi], explains in the first chapter of 道德經 [Dàodéjīng][41] the meaning of 道 [dào]:

The Tao* that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao
The name that can be named is not the eternal name
The nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth

The named is the mother of myriad things
Thus, constantly free of desire
One observes its wonders
Constantly filled with desire
One observes its manifestations

These two emerge together but differ in name
The unity is said to be the mystery
Mystery of mysteries, the door to all wonders.[42]

This is as close to an explanation as one can get about the 道 [dào]. Here, again, the implicitness of the Chinese tradition of thinking becomes clear. We cannot explain it. The only way to express it, is not through language (because language is based on signifiers that needs to express the signification, it is unsuitable because of its dependability on definement), but in something that *implies* its value, the art of painting, for example.

However, detecting the 道 [dào] itself should prove to be quite difficult. It is difficult to search for a thing that is indescribable. Hence, we should look to point out the aspects that lead to the 道 [dào], like harmony (related to the surrounding of 氣 [qì], 陰 [yīn] and 陽 [yáng]), centrality (balance) and blandness. As discussed in the earlier part, blandness in architecture is quite difficult, and there is only a similar effect, rather than the identical process as it occurs in Chinese landscape paintings. So understanding the 道 [dào] through architecture becomes, in my opinion, quite impossible. This is, then, also a difference between architecture and the art of painting on this matter.

Going back to *semblance*, there is one more thing I want to discuss before moving on to the next part of François Jullien's writings: the reference of the courtyard of

the first case to traditional Chinese gardens. I said that, because of the presence of vegetation (a tree), stone (concrete), and the symbolic presence of water (the gravel and the seam between the gravel and the concrete threshold that insinuates a floating constellation), there is a reference to the designing practise of traditional Chinese gardens, which have the same elements as I just mentioned (but real water in stead of a symbolic reference to water).

A Chinese garden and the courtyard of case 1 are both located in the same cosmos, and have similar materials. Can one, in this case, also talk about *semblance* then? I think one could. There is, first of all, no representational value based on the resemblance of outer form: the courtyard is a garden, but it is far from looking like a traditional Chinese garden like, for example, the *Humble Administrator's Garden* in Suzhou. Furthermore, there is no real water present, and the use of the gravel and concrete allude on the *behaviour* of water (the concrete threshold with the seam between gravel and concrete gives a floating effect) rather than on its 'flowing form'. This is no purely formal interpretation of water, since there is no illusion of water. The presence of water, which forms the key to the *semblance* in the first hutong case – without water, the relation between courtyard and Chinese traditional garden design

Picture 52.

View in the Humble Administrator's Garden, the most famous garden in Suzhou. Vegetation, rocks, water and architecture are the most important aspects of a Chinese garden.

would be quite far-fetched – escapes the mere objective reality. In that sense, the relation between the courtyard and a traditional Chinese garden is based on the underlying pattern and structure, on the behaviour and allures (of water for example) … Hence, I think it is just to talk about *semblance*, since the similarities between painting and reality are similar to the relation between the courtyard as a symbol for the elements of Chinese traditional gardens.

So, in general, I think the contemporary interventions in Beijing's 鬍同 [hútóng] discussed in this dissertation are linked to the notion

of *semblance*. The remarks I made on the effect and the references these cases embodied through form, materiality or constellation all prove to be examples of some kind of *semblance* (except case four), as discussed by François Jullien in his *La grande image n'a pas de forme.*

Picture 53.
Courtyard of
Case 1, by ZAO/
standardarchitecture

Propension

La propension des choses, François Jullien.
Cette étrange idée du beau, François Jullien.
La valeur allusive, François Jullien.

Propension, in English called propensity, is the key element in the process of creation in China (and ancient Greek as well). It refers to the natural aptitude of things, their inherent capacities and tendencies to become something else. This 'becoming' according to its natural tendency is part of the Great Process of the World. It plays with opportunities and potentiality. In a similar way, there is the Greek conception of δυναμις [dunamis] – translated as power, potential, energy[43] . In an Aristotelian interpretation of the term, one needs to consider the system of potentiality and actualization according to the Greek philosopher. Nature is a combination of things that are constantly changing. This change is based on potentiality: an egg has the potential of becoming a chicken. The egg's potentiality is becoming a chicken, while the chicken is the actualized form of that actualization process. However, things are different for artefacts. An acorn has the natural

potential of becoming a tree, but a tree does not have the natural potential of becoming a chair. There is some kind of force that needs to be added to turn a tree into a chair. Δυναμις [dunamis] is that driving force, accommodated by the artist or craftsman, to make something into a different actualization than its natural one. So both Chinese and European (more correctly, the Greek) cultures have a notion related to potential. It is not really the notion an Sich, but rather the way it is conducted, that will prove different.

Both the Greek and the Chinese approach, thus, are making use of a certain inherent potentiality, to mould the given situation or material into an artefact. The big difference is how. According to Greek insight, the actualization is like an end. The craftsman or architect manipulates the tendency of materials to become a product whose features seem like they resulted through a natural process of actualization (with a certain ease, and without cramps). The process of making ends when the arrow hits the target, when the actualization is complete. So in some way, there is an (ideal) image of the actualization. The Chinese process of making differs in a small – but significant – degree from the Greek approach. The potentiality is equally important, but the goal is not fixed[44] . Like the conception of harmony, the conception of the end of the making-process is different. Where the Western apprehension of harmony is

one of anchored perfection, to which every kind of deviation or change is an enemy, the Chinese harmony is one of constant variation. The implementation of a certain unchangeable viewpoint to which the actual artefact needs to conform, is inherently connected to the envisioning of a certain favourable state: it is a mentality that is to some extent more goal-oriented, or as Scruton describes it, as a means to an end[45] (το τελος [to telos], meaning 'end').

I mentioned in the explanation of blandness that the European tradition was based on the expressiveness, so it should be reasonable to surmise that the act of envisioning will reveal itself in the final product. In other words, the architecture will be an expression of those views from whence the design originated. It is necessary to note that architecture here – although like the other fine arts, can be (and mostly is) an expression of the taste of the creator – is once more the outsider: where the poet expresses feelings in a very personal and private way (the process of writing and reading poetry is almost always on one's own), the architect is bound to an errand of public nature[46] (because experiencing architecture is almost never a lonesome experience). Architecture needs to create the face of public space , therefore it cannot rely on the expression of purely individual feelings or views. The taste with which

an architect designs a building is a taste that is based on more than only personal ideals and beliefs. But architecture is still subject to individuality and subjectivity, to the extent in which the architect chooses to express this or that.

Going back and continuing on the envisioning of an idea, and the 'means to an end', Scruton provides the following. If one considers a functional approach to architecture, that is to say, to see architecture as a tool, and use it accordingly, architecture is a means, it is a means to whatever function the architecture needs to house. The building in question is a mere shell of its function. If this is architecture, then it would be impossible to look for its beauty and significance through the notion of propension or the Greek principle of δυναμις [dunamis], since completely functional things can be described purely by their functional productivity, rather than inherent efficacy*. Functional productivity is a relative term that relates the value of the architecture to some kind of measure or criterion. But then, Roger Scruton discards the functionalist view of architecture, since it is simply a vehicle for essentializing, and does not cover architecture in all its aspects. Roger Scruton continues, trying to describe the opposite: the ends. Paintings, statues … are products that do not serve any other goal.

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The difference here lays in the fact that functional efficacy is based on an absolute measuring unit: the productivity the building facilitates is in relation to time, not in relation to itself.

It is unreasonable to imagine a large-sized painting functioning as a door, to keep the cold from getting inside, or for any other absurd purpose. Art products are simply not made for use, they do not belong in daily life, they belong in a different cosmos , and have a certain value that isolates them from other utilitarian objects. Architecture, however, does not exclusively belong to either of them. The distinction between art and craft – where the artist knows what he does but does not know the result until it is done, and the craftsman has a certain goal in mind, and does everything to achieve it – leads to a dead end, since architecture seems to be an almost ineffable combination of the two. The primary aim of art is expression, and that distinguishes it from crafts. Scruton continues: *Expression is not, therefore, an activity whose goal can be defined prior to its achievement.*[47]   Hence, architecture is in some way – and only partly – an end in se . So in that case, the theory of δυναμις [dunamis] is relevant to architecture. The design process involves in some way the envisioning of an end (not the functionality as an end, but the building itself), and thus, trying to achieve that goal. And in that 'trying' lurks the conception of an external drive, a force that is not innate in the given situation or object, but still according to the *propension des choses*, and to put it in one's advantage. The tactics of trying

to exploit the present (constantly changing) advantages, the potentialities of what is already there, is of vital importance in pre-modern China.

The explanation about potentiality, actualization and the process of creating adheres to what is stated above, in that sense that 氣 [qì] is the natural energy, and actions need be in accordance with its currents. In other words, the 氣 [qì] is the energy/potentiality of things, and one needs to act accordingly, hence one should act on some thing's potentiality or inclination. This is the exact meaning of the *propension des choses*, as François Jullien describes it. 氣 [qì] , as the earth's energy, is constantly moving but invisible, like the wind blowing through the leaves of trees. 風水 [fēng shuǐ] for example, is based on this 氣 [qì]. One should take into account that the auspicious properties of a 鬍同 [hútóng] are also defined by the currents of 氣 [qì] in the surroundings. But, those auspicious properties can change over time. Hence, δυναμις [dunamis] is different. It is focussed on a fixed situation, but can change from situation to situation.

As just discussed, the *propension* of things has to do with the 氣 [qì] of things. The former being the product of the latter. In addition, 勢

[shì] will prove to be of vital importance. It namely refers to the product or effect of the good utilization of propension. So, there is the given element of the order of the world (conceived as an ever-changing crowd of energy), there is the inclination of things that is a result of it, and there is the result of interference (of humans, and more specifically architects) that gives rise to the object being able to give a vivid impression.

I already mentioned the process of creation, either by humans or in nature. The process of creation embodies an incarnation: the created object is a product of the artist's creativity and attitude. In China, it is described as 文. The notion has to do everything with structure, patterns, systems... Naturally, not only one 文 exists. There is the 王文 [wáng wén], 天文 [tiān wén], 人文 [rén wén], 中文 [zhōng wén] ... In La valeur allusive , Jullien arranges the different categories of 文[wén]. 王文 [wáng wén] for example, refers to the Chinese emperor, who is the mediator between the heavens (天 [tiān]) and the earth (地 [dì]). A 王文[wáng wén] is thus a good monarch, meaning he acts according to the structure and fabric of nature (and of the people). The organizing superstructure of nature is called 天文 [tiān wén], referring to heaven and the gods, and 人文[rén wén] refers to the

structure we humans impose on nature and our surroundings. Accordingly, architecture is an example of 人文 [rén wén]. Learning about architecture is therefore essentially learning how to see architecture as based on the knowledge of those structures of the 人文 [rén wén] and 天文 [tiān wén].[48]

According to François Jullien, 文 [wén] is divisible in two parts: the internal structure/organization of things (referred to as the notion 理 [lǐ]) and the development process, which is about structuring and the process of the human artefact. As clarified in the findings above, we can state that potential is the key factor when talking about the creation of a certain object. And it is that potential that manifests itself through/according the 文 [wén] of the object in question. So the 文 [wén] is the exterior, the external product. More pointedly stated, 文 [wén] is the materialisation of 勢 [shì]: 勢 [shì] is the effect of the configuration (文 [wén]). *Le monde se montre en 文 [wén], le base de l'homme est 文 [wén]...* dixit François Jullien in his *La valeur allusive.* So we are an externalisation of the inner structure of nature, and in turn, the products we make are an externalisation of the human structure. As to illustrate it, I want to mention Leon Battista Alberti. In a search to affirm his belief of a proportional system based on exact dimensions, he

turns his gaze towards nature: nature is self-affirming, yet contains a variety of beautiful things that also range in shape, scale and colour, and therefore is the ultimate group of incarnations of the Idea of Beauty. Roughly stated, he uses music (and more specifically, the length of a snare in relation to its frequency) as a basis for the distillation. The proportional system found is one based on the internal organization of nature (so, in a sense related to the notion of 理 [lǐ] and 天文 [tiān wén]). His architecture, in turn, should be a manifestation (文 [wén]) of the human internal structure, and goes through the process of human creation (人文 [rén wén]). It's apparent that this Chinese theory is quite compatible with Alberti's views . The only thing that fails to really fit in the similarity, is the aspect of, and strong focus on, changing potentiality. The imposing of the architect's sense for what is right (or those of the building client) remains a core value of the Western European architectural design tradition.

So how can we apply the principles of *propension* to the contemporary architectural interventions made in Beijing's hutong? The manipulation of the concrete surface by ZAO/standardarchitecture is, yet again, a good example. As we have already discussed a few times throughout this dissertation,

contemporary Chinese architecture and traditional Chinese arts (like the art of painting), have a closer relationship than their equivalent counterparts in Europe. The certain use of concrete results in an certain effect that goes beyond the mere object, which distinguishes it from a mere artefact. The evocative force (both rigid and fluid) can be described as a result of the use of the potentiality of concrete to take the shape of its container before hydration, and to be able to resist high tension and forces (in compression, however) after hydration. In that way, the use of concrete walls that adhere to the existing brickwork as to reinforce it (in case 1) is a good example.

I think because of the fact that it is about the effect and about the materiality, there is again a similar behaviour between this kind of architectural interventions and François Jullien's argumentations illustrated through the art of painting, poetry ... Hence, we can say that the manipulation of materiality and the effect generated fits quite well in the theoretical framework. But what about the absolute versus the adapting nature of the end of the actualization process? It has everything to do with the conception of Beauty and the beautiful in Europe and China respectively (and with harmony, but we already discussed that briefly).

There are two types of *beauty-ness*: the beautiful and Beauty. The latter I write with capital. This is to express that it is a distilled, metaphysical concept, freed of all incarnate limitations. The other is an applicative form of that universal Beauty. It is related to things and their form: the beautiful possesses – or expresses – Beauty, and Beauty becomes a trait of the object found beautiful. So, even though the beautiful and Beauty are intricately related – because they are each other's reason for existence - they are still separated by the absolute dividing line between physics and metaphysics.[49]

In European tradition, Beauty is a monopolizing concept. It was (and still is) the quest of many a valorous theorists to try and define the concept of Beauty: how it works, why beauty pleases us, and – most importantly – what it is (Τι εστι το καλον;). Countless efforts have been made to try and define it, *but they either had to admit their ignorance, or had to throw themselves into scepticism. It has become clear that unity, form, colour, relations, parts, appropriateness... can be changed eternally without coming to any conclusions as to what combination is most beautiful nor distilling a theory of Beauty out of it.*[50] This tendency to define the concept of Beauty, to subtract the accidental from the whole to achieve an essence, is to define

the essence of Beauty. And since that essence is believed to be, as it were, the greatest common divisor of all that is beautiful, that essence is limiting. It loses substance and value through subtracting: to essentialize is to reduce[51].

Now, European Beauty is part of the world of the ideas (to state it like Plato). But François Jullien points out two traits inherent to the concept of Beauty that will prove it to be different. It is, first and foremost, a dividing concept. *... le Beau s'isole, se rapatrie, se purifie...* to quote Jullien. It is the essentializing that transposes the here to there , *... à tout neutraliser des déterminations possibles, que laissera-t-on finalement apparaître? Une 'beauté' qui sera désincarnée de tout, ne reposant en rien ...[52]* . So this absolute character of Beauty makes it an Sich, free of every relation, independent. If we try to relate it to something else, it becomes tarnished: incarnation is contamination. In addition, if we had not invented (or more correctly, were Plato not to have invented) the concept of Beauty, then it would be probable that Western Europe never would have had an understanding of Ideas as metaphysical concepts. So it is this separative nature of the concept of Beauty that leads us to think about the world of Ideas:

sans le beau, nous ne penserions même pas à ce monde idéel qui ne saurait lui-même être idéel (...) si nous n'en étions pas radicalement séparés. [53]

Furthermore, European Beauty is also a binding concept. It did not just make us 'aware' of this ideal world, but also made itself perceptible to us. Along these lines, it is indeed an exception, because it is the only idea that makes itself noticeable to some extent (and possesses the monopolizing feature). So, applied to architecture, the conception Alberti has of Beauty strokes with the Beauty as an isolated Idea, since he bases his proportioning systems on the self-affirming nature (i.e. frequencies and the length of snares). Basing himself on the natural order, is basing himself on the perceptible product of the Idea of Beauty itself. His architecture should thus be a similar, but man-made, incarnation of that Beauty. Only the correctly proportioned buildings express the notion of *concinnitas*, and thus, can be deemed to be an incarnation of that Idea, which he so desperately searches for.

As it is difficult to express the European concept of Beauty as an Idea in Chinese, how does one debate the beautiful? The way we look at something considered beautiful is largely influenced by our understanding and

attitude towards Beauty: if its form is attuned to its *inner-ness* or if it is an adequate or appropriate form, that is to say, something to be called decorous. In this case, because of its appropriate constellation in relation to its intrinsic value, we will appraise a trait of this object to be the trait of beauty (so the thing is not solely thought to be beautiful, but is beautiful), and thus, the object becomes an incarnation of that one Beauty.

It was, however, different from the Greek thinking – even though Plato is considered the father of metaphysics, and in turn, of the Idea of Beauty – where beauty meant much more than just visual decorum. It is best explained by the word καλοκαγαθια [kalokagathia], a contraction of 'καλος' [kalos], 'και' [kai] and 'αγαθος' [agathos], meaning 'beautiful', 'and' and 'good' respectively. So καλοκαγαθια [kalokagathia] has a wider range of possible interpretations and uses : the good and the visually beautiful are both factors that are related to Beauty. Consequently, the reign of visual aspects becomes less absolute, incorporating also the moral standards. An honourable man can therefore be found 'beautiful'. This is also the case in ancient China. The combination of the visually appealing and morality is aligned with the way in which one would describe a good (i.e. beautiful)

work of art. If we, once more, consider Chinese landscape paintings, the admiration for a certain painting that is found pleasing, is described not as beautiful, but as superior, vibrant, excellent...:

Il dit simplement que telle peinture est "supérieure" (...) ou que c'est "vivant" (...) ou que c'est "excellent" (...) ou que c'est "réussi" (...) Bref, ce champ sémantique reste divers, aucun terme n'y prédomine.[54]

It is clear that these terms do not necessarily relate to the visual. In pre-modern China, it was customary to describe the aptitude with which a piece of art was created and the spiritual dimension of it, rather than its formal qualities in se. The formal qualities lead us to something else here: to appreciate the skill of the painter and/or to understand its spiritual significance. As to conclude, we hear the echo of the general themes discussed in chapter 2, where I noted that I never used the word 'beautiful' to describe the contemporary architectural interventions in Beijing's hutongs. Only in the third case I used it, because the project looks like an isolated place in which a perfect composition between rock, white and wooden framework is designed. The pictures also gives away this search for a

perfect surrounding: no household items, nor inhabitants (except that one woman dressed in white) are allowed as to not spoil the acquired beauty. The other examples all made themselves describable based on other elements than that of Beauty. Hence, I think we can conclude that both fit into the theory laid out by François Jullien - even though the third case opposes the Chinese conception, it still fits inside the account of François Jullien of the European apprehension of Beauty. Also, the recurring focus on the effect of the use of materiality, rather than on the form itself, is in line with what François Jullien says about the value of Chinese traditional landscape paintings. The effect it has, its evocative force ... therein lays its true value. The same can be said for architectural interventions in Beijing's Hutong.

conclusion

Through analysing some of the contemporary interventions in Beijing's Hutongs, we discovered a different value than its mere social significance. By looking at these cases as a compromise, a common ground, between contemporary architecture and a traditional Chinese artefact (so looking at it as partly being a craft, taking into account the way in which its materials are manipulated, its evocative effect ... and partly an art), we now understand their intrinsic value, and we have learned to appreciate it. It is not by looking at the their planological system - as is often focussed on in contemporary architecture - or by considering an architectural 'concept', but we should look to the subtle things, like the use of structure and window frames that hide one another, that empower the evocative force of simple but effective architectural (and crafty) interventions. Throughout this dissertation we were looking for some basis as to explain what non-social significance these

architectural designs could have, and we found a lot of similarities between the cases of Beijing's hutongs and François Jullien's account, serving as a philosophical and cultural link, connecting all the specific remarks on the cases to the greater whole. The switch between traditional Chinese architecture as a craft, to contemporary Chinese architecture as something in between art and craft, allowed us to link our remarks on the cases (contemporary fibre in a traditional matrix) to the remarks of François Jullien about arts like traditional landscape paintings. Moreover, there was a similar relation between the different kinds of cosmos: whilst a traditional Chinese landscape painting is a cosmos on its own, working like the reality-cosmos, traditional Chinese architecture was something that was fully embedded in the reality-cosmos. Contemporary Chinese architecture is more than only of this reality-cosmos, because it can generate effects and impressions that go beyond the mere object and its use, yet these generated effect on the users and beholders is born out of that tie to materiality. This interesting relation between art, architecture and craft can only be empowered through François Jullien, whose work links it all together, and changes coincidences into general remarks. Without his writings, we would not be able to come to a comprehensible whole.

Even though there were some differences, like the use of white as a vehicle for expression (and seemingly inexpressive) these only make sense through the account of François Jullien. We could only identify differences and 'inconsistencies' because we handled François Jullien's works as a referential framework. Some remarks, like that of the use of white as a purifying potion, proved to be a symptom of these inconsistencies.

We also need to consider the fact that François Jullien did not cover architecture all that much, when talking about 'good artefacts' and the process of their creation. He thoroughly sought for the value and meaning of calligraphy, the art of painting, poetry, literature ... But only few times, he mentions something about buildings. Apart from some reference to some European stiles and the mentioning of Alberti, he only applied the theories to architecture once: on page 165 of *La propension des choses*, where he suggest the application of the notion of 勢 [shì] in the constellation of the roof of 'Chinese buildings'. A quite general remark, I believe.

In all, I hoped to discover the intrinsic meaning and value of these projects, in order to understand how these projects relate to their traditional context, and how they behave in it.

references

End notes

1   François Jullien, La propension des choses, p. 22

2   François Jullien, La propension des choses, p. 22

3   Annping Chin, Confucius : een leven tussen filosofie en politiek.

4   Based on Daoist concepts of flowing energy, positive and negative energy, and an ongoing adaptation to keep balance with nature. Architecture needed to conform to certain rules to be in harmony with nature. These rules are the 風水 [fēng shuǐ] principles.

5   http://www.standardarchitecture.cn/v2news/7887

6   Zhu Qi, Shi in Architecture: the Efficacy of Traditional Chinese Doors, p.96 -141

7   Certain positions (open, closed, half-open) all have their distinct meaning. Zhu Qi, Shi in Architecture: the Efficacy of Traditional Chinese Doors, p. 96 - 141

8   http://www.standardarchitecture.cn/v2news/7299

9   The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony, p.71-87

10   https://www.designboom.com/architecture/wonder-architects-hutong-beijing-02-12-2018/

11   https://www.dezeen.com/2017/06/09/twisting-courtyard-house-grey-brick-paving-connects-internal-external-spaces-architecture-residential-beijing-china-arch-studio/

12 The eaves of important buildings are often decorated with alternating dragons and pearls, dragons are 陽 [yáng], while the pearls are 陰 [yīn]. Evelyn Lip, Feng Shui environments of power: A study of Chinese architecture, p. 29

13 https://divisare.com/projects/348890-vector-architects-xia-zhi-courtyard-hybrid

14 Roger Scruton, The Aesthetics of Architecture, chapter 8

15 The aesthetics of architecture, p.53 - 54

16 Painting means also to not-paint, to take the blank of the paper, into account, and consider it as at least equally important as the strokes of the artist's brush. François Jullien, La grande image n'a pas de forme.

17 François Jullien, Éloge de la fadeur, p. 63

18 François Jullien, Éloge de la fadeur.

19 Claude Perrault, Ordonnance for the five kinds of columns after the method of the ancients, paragraph 49

20 Bouhours (1687), p381-382

21 Where Claude Perrault worked.

22 Académie, 1673.

23 Montesquieu writes in his Essai sur le goût, that there is a difference between natural taste, and acquired taste, the former I deem equivalent to Scruton's 'primitive aesthetic taste' that is the basis for primitive aesthetic judgement. He too, as well as Montesquieu point out the arbitrariness of this kind of taste.

24 Roger Scruton, The aesthetics of architecture, p105.

25 François Jullien, Éloge de la fadeur, cover.

26 François Jullien, Éloge de la fadeur, p. 31

27 Roger Scruton, The aesthetics of architecture, p.37 - 70

28 François Jullien, Éloge de la fadeur, p. 63

29 Maarten Delbeken, Cursus AT I, p. 104

30 François Jullien, La grande image n'a pas de forme, p. 74

31 Chengyang Li, The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony, p. 5- 87

32 Courses from Professor Dr. Sun Qi at Tongji University, Shanghai.

33 François Jullien, La grande image n'a pas de forme, p. 9

34   François Jullien, La propension des choses, p. 90 - 91

35   Roger Scruton, The Aesthetics of Architecture, p. 179 - 182

36   François Jullien, La grande image n'a pas de forme, p.43 - 47

37   Roger Scruton, The Aesthetics of Architecture, p. 5 - 8

38   Roger Scruton, The Aesthetics of Architecture, p. 183 - 184

39   François Jullien, La grande image n'a pas de forme, p. 61, 66

40   François Jullien, Éloge de la fadeur.

41   道 being inexplicable, 德 being virtue, 經 meaning to pass through.

42   http://www.taoism.net/ttc/chapters/chap01.htm translated by Derek Lin.

43   François Jullien, La propension des choses, p. 256

44   François Jullien, La grande image n'a pas de forme, p. 99 - 112

45   Roger Scruton, The Aesthetics of Architecture, p. 5 - 8

46   Roger Scruton, The Aesthetics of Architecture, p. 13 - 19

47   Roger Scruton, The Aesthetics of Architecture.

48   François Jullien, La valeur allusive, p. 19 - 56

49   François Jullien, Cette étrange idée du beau.

50   François Jullien, Cette étrange idée du beau.

51   Roger Scruton, The Aesthetics of Architecture, chapter 3

52   François Jullien, Cette étrange idée du beau, p. 38

53   François Jullien, Cette étrange idée du beau, p. 42

54   François Jullien, Cette étrange idée du beau, p. 30

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List of Pictures

Picture 15   http://www.standardarchitecture.cn/v2news/7887

Picture 16.   http://www.standardarchitecture.cn/v2news/7299
                      by Wang Ziling
Picture 17.   https://zao-standardarchitecture.divisare.pro/projects/327977-micro-
                      yuaner-cha-er-hutong-8-courtyard_childrens-library
                      by Zao/standardarchitecture
Picture 18.   http://www.standardarchitecture.cn/v2news/7299
                      Left to right: by Wang Ziling, Su Shengliang, Su Shengliang
Picture 19.   http://www.standardarchitecture.cn/v2news/7299
                      by Zao/standardarchitecture
Picture 20.   http://www.standardarchitecture.cn/v2news/7299
                      by Wang Ziling
Picture 21.   http://www.yanliang.gov.cn/en/traveling/50652.html
Picture 22.   https://www.tour-beijing.com/xian_attractions/ba_xian_an_
                      monastery.php
Picture 23.   http://www.dashilar.org/en/B/B2b/t814.html
                      by Zao/standardarchitecture
Picture 24.   https://zao-standardarchitecture.divisare.pro/projects/327977-micro-
                      yuaner-cha-er-hutong-8-courtyard_childrens-library
                      by Wang Ziling
Picture 25.   http://www.standardarchitecture.cn/v2news/7299
                      by Zao/standardarchitecture
Picture 26.   http://www.standardarchitecture.cn/v2news/7299
                      by Su Shengliang
Picture 27.   http://jianzhubang.com/weixin/45321
                      by Sun Haiting
Picture 28.   https://www.designboom.com/architecture/wonder-architects-hutong-
                      beijing-02-12-2018/
Picture 29.   https://www.designboom.com/architecture/wonder-architects-hutong-

	beijing-02-12-2018/
	by Sun Haiting
Picture 30.	https://www.designboom.com/architecture/wonder-architects-hutong-beijing-02-12-2018/
	by Sun Haiting
Picture 31.	By Sam Vanhee.
Picture 32.	https://www.designboom.com/architecture/wonder-architects-hutong-beijing-02-12-2018/
	by Sun Haiting
Picture 33.	https://www.designboom.com/architecture/wonder-architects-hutong-beijing-02-12-2018/
	by Sun Haiting
Picture 34.	http://archstudio.cn/case/2_0_288/
	By Wang Ning and Jin Weiqi
Picture 35.	http://archstudio.cn/case/2_0_288/
Picture 36.	http://archstudio.cn/case/2_0_288/
	By Wang Ning and Jin Weiqi
Picture 37.	http://archstudio.cn/case/2_0_288/
	By Wang Ning and Jin Weiqi
Picture 38.	http://archstudio.cn/case/2_0_288/
	By Wang Ning and Jin Weiqi
Picture 39.	http://archstudio.cn/case/2_0_288/
	By Wang Ning and Jin Weiqi
Picture 40.	http://archstudio.cn/case/2_0_288/
	By Wang Ning and Jin Weiqi
Picture 41.	http://www.exploration-online.com/2015/04/01/a-rainy-day-in-kyoto/
Picture 42.	http://www.vectorarchitects.com/m/index.php/project/detail/57
	By Xia Zhi
Picture 43.	http://www.vectorarchitects.com/m/index.php/project/detail/57
	By Xia Zhi

During the last few decades, Beijing's hutongs are threatened by decay and demolition. The uncontrolled proliferation has led to marginalization. Parts of these traditional neighbourhoods were being sanitized, as to make way for high-rise building projects. Immediate action was highly necessary. Chinese architects and designers have since then tried to revalidate these traditional gems, through refurbishing and renovating. These contemporary architectural interventions attracted much needed attention. Most of these projects are hence valued through their social significance. But what about their significance in relation to the premodern fabric these interventions act on? Five cases of different Chinese architecture firms will be discussed, as to find out their intrinsic value in relation to premodern Chinese conceptions, fitted into the theoretical framework laid out by François Jullien.