

THE BIGGER PICTURE

HOW CHINESE ARCHITECTS ARE BLOWING OUR MINDS

THEY'VE CLONED AN AUSTRIAN TOWN, MADE REPLICAS OF THE WHITE HOUSE, CREATED AN EDIFICE IN THE SHAPE OF THREE GODS AND PUT UP A 57-STORY SKYSCRAPER IN 19 DAYS. BUT NOW CHINA'S HOMEGROWN VISIONARIES ARE DESIGNING A FUTURE THAT'S ENTIRELY ORIGINAL

BY LAUREN HO





PHOTOGRAPH: VECTOR ARCHITECTS

WITH ITS WHITE SCI-FI SWOOPS and swirls undulating continuously around a cluster of five enormous egg-shaped towers, the Galaxy Soho by Britain's Zaha Hadid Architects in Beijing is certainly a head-turner. Just down the road, the National Centre for the Performing Arts occupies a flash titanium and glass dome by French architect Paul Andreu, while nearby, Rem Koolhaas (Dutch) and Ole Scheeren's (German) design for the CCTV Headquarters looms ominously over the city, its contorted form framing an enormous void at its centre (to picture it, refer to its nickname: Big Underpants).

These bold buildings are just a few examples of the flamboyant architecture that has dominated the skyline of China's major cities in the past decade or so, potent symbols erected to evoke the country's globally ambitious and futuristic mindset. And it's not just in Beijing or Shanghai. China's second- and third-tier cities – places that were simple fishing villages a matter of decades ago and have now swelled to tens of millions of people – hired Western starchitects to dream up fantastical structures in a bid to get themselves noticed on the worldwide scene. And in the meantime, big names were more than happy to push the boundaries of design with extravagant visions that had little chance of being sanctioned in their home countries.

The speed of urbanisation is staggering. In the past 20 years, 350 million people have moved from the countryside to the 600 cities that now sprawl across China. But this hyper-development has also led to some serious quality-control issues: bizarre rotating teapot-shaped offices in Wuxi, a hotel designed to look like three deities in Hebei, and an 11-storey mobile phone in Kunming.

Recently, however, contemporary Chinese architecture is moving on; it is now referring inwards to itself

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rather than outside to others. Perhaps this rethink is a response to President Xi Jinping's 2014 speech, followed up with a 2016 State Council directive, to put an end to 'oversized, xenocentric and weird' buildings. Or perhaps it represents a rapid creative coming of age, but good – rather than grandstanding – design is now on the agenda and Chinese architects, once dismissed as imitators of their Western peers, are coming into their own.

'The past 15-20 years has been about speed and quantity,' explains Gong Dong, the founder and principal of Beijing-based Vector Architects, who previously worked with leading American teams at Richard Meier and Steven Holl. 'But now, we're slowing down and focusing more on quality. People have matured in terms of appreciating architecture.' One of China's most active young architects, Dong has a thoughtful philosophy that has produced such beauties as the Seashore Library, a considered, clean-lined space on the white sand of beach town Nandaihe, 150km east of Beijing. The cast-concrete building has a loose, abstract grid form, slotting together a double-height reading area (where pivoting glass doors open to uninterrupted front-row views of the Bohai Sea), a meditation space with a single horizontal window, an activity room for events and a bar. The austere lines of the serene structure both contrast and interact with its natural surroundings. 'Quality architecture will always generate an energy from its users,' Dong notes. 'It should stimulate the imagination so that people find their own creative ways to use the space.'

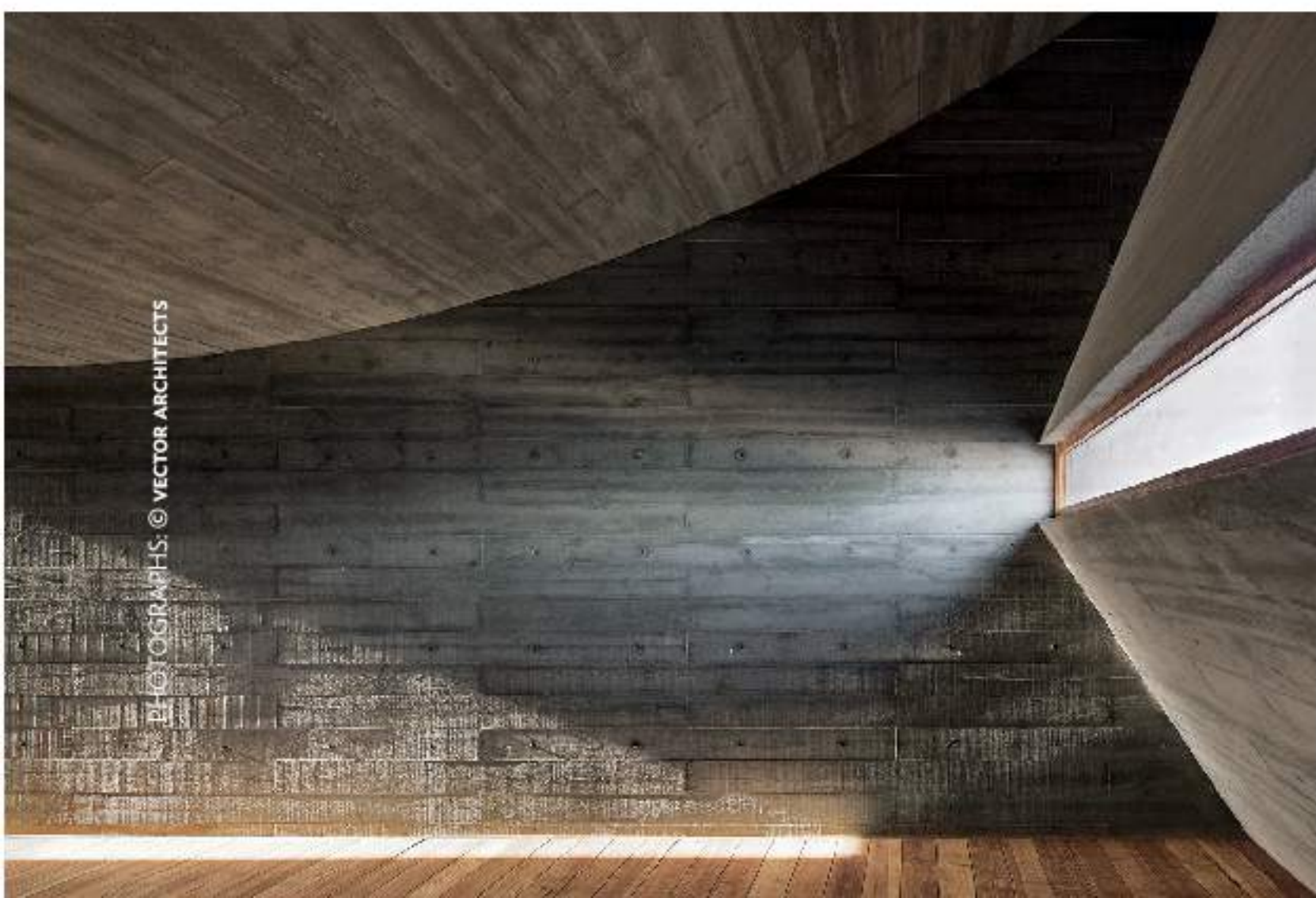
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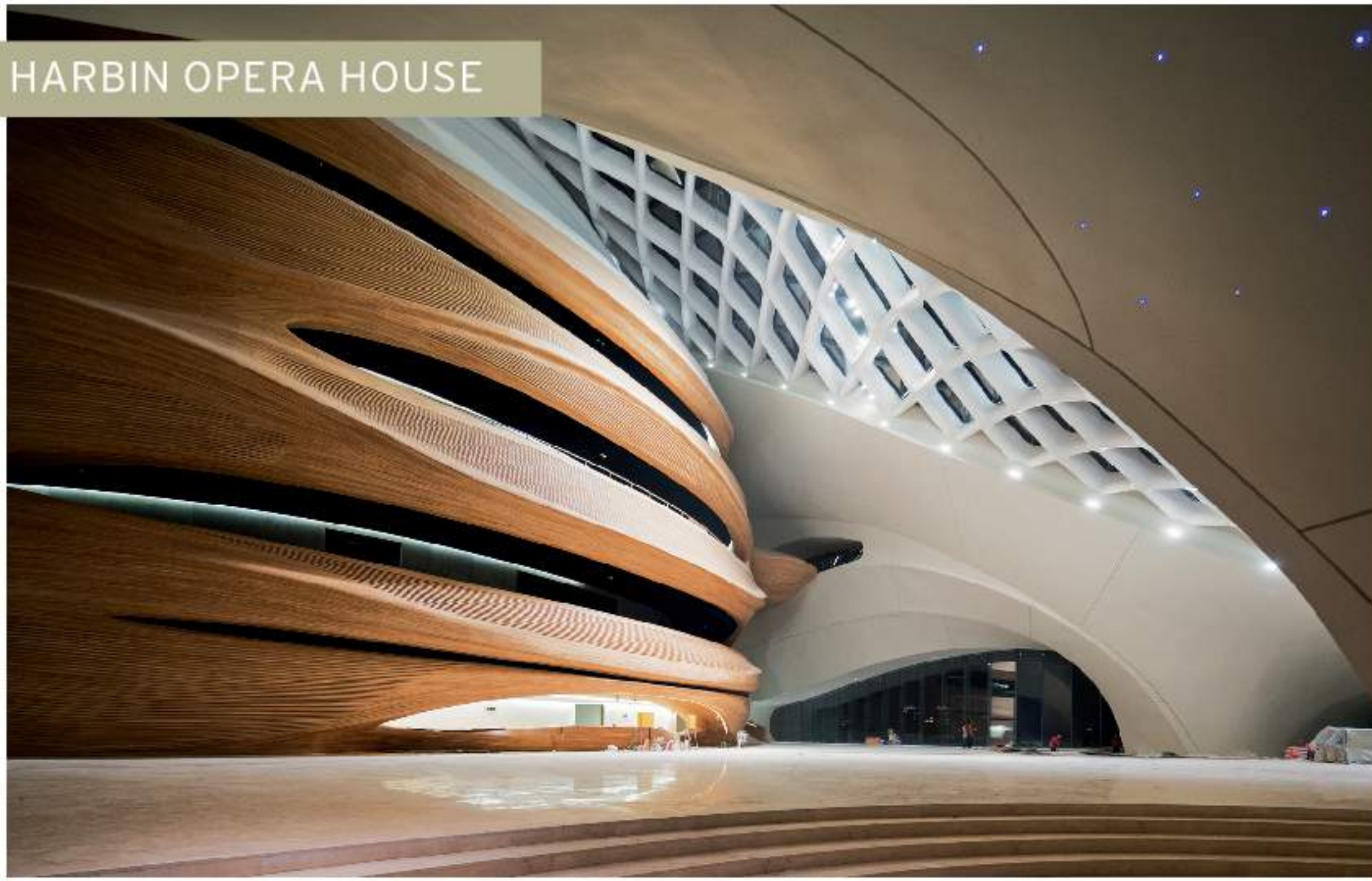
This is certainly true at Alila Yangshuo, a knockout hotel in a reimagined Sixties sugar mill to the north-west of Shanghai, surrounded by soaring karst mountains and the snaking Li River. Like the landscape, there's drama and stillness to the complex, where Dong has mixed the original industrial buildings – perfectly preserved Communist motivational slogans still painted on the brickwork – with a new, brutalist-style wing, the stark geometry and aesthetic of which serves as a point of continuity between old and new. Alongside the restoration of a heritage site, the sleek simplicity of the contemporary furniture by Chinese designers and the staggering collection of artwork – also all home-grown, from traditional paintings to modern sculptures – further highlights the country's changing attitude towards architecture and design. 'Things are slowing down,' Dong continues. 'People now have time to appreciate the value of the older buildings.'

Shanghai-based practice Neri&Hu has been at the forefront of this movement. Its stellar line-up of architecture, interior and product-design projects includes the perforated white cube of the Suzhou Chapel, and Shanghai's Design Republic Commune, a gallery, shop and event space in a former colonial police station. Its latest underpins the studio's ethos of 'new ways to look at history', with the opening of the 20-room Tsingpu Retreat, also in Yangzhou. Here, the designers have riffed on the traditional layouts of *hutong* houses, the wooden buildings set on myriad alleyways, creating a peaceful framework of courtyard spaces and decorative pools between repurposed warehouses and low-slung new buildings built from reclaimed grey brick.

The most prominent name to challenge China's obsession with scale, and the shiny and new, is Hangzhou-based architect



HARBIN OPERA HOUSE



Wang Shu, who became the first Chinese citizen to win the Pritzker Prize – architecture’s most prestigious award – in 2012. Shu, who works with his wife Lu Wenyu at their Amateur Architecture Studio, instead champions a more sensitive creative vision rooted in Chinese history and culture, and focuses on working slowly using ancient handicrafts. His Ningbo Historic Museum, for example, recycles materials from nearby villages demolished to make way for new developments, to create an almost fortress-like building, whose exterior is a patchwork of fresh cast-concrete sections, and salvaged bricks and tiles packed together using a traditional technique called *wapan*.

Pritzker isn’t the only Western institution to take note of Chinese architects: this year, in collaboration with London’s Serpentine Galleries, Beijing has launched its inaugural Serpentine Pavilion. Designed by Chengdu-based Jiakun Architects, the curved, cantilevered shelter is, the architects say, ‘a physical representation of the traditional pursuit of *junzi*’, a philosophical term often translated as ‘gentleman’ or, more loosely, ‘culturedness’ – one of the ethics of Confucianism.

THE ROLE OF WILDERNESS IN A RAPIDLY URBANISING ENVIRONMENT IS BEING EXPLORED IN RADICALLY DIFFERENT WAYS

Another emerging architect is Han Wenqiang. The founder of Beijing-based Archstudio has been making waves for his innovative designs – such as the farmhouse on the outskirts of the city of Tangshan, made with timber and seemingly floating above the ground on concrete platforms – which are inspired by China’s past. Best-known for transforming Beijing’s old *hutong* houses into offices, cafés and private residences, such as his Twisting Courtyard, Wenqiang says it is the Waterside Buddhist Shrine he

is most proud of. A sanctuary in the countryside of Heibei, the building is carved into a grassy mound, exhibiting the harmony between the artificial and the natural. ‘The inspiration came

from the grottos used for ancient Buddhist practices,’ explains Wenqiang. ‘And the design was influenced by the trees on the site.’ Nature is key in all of Wenqiang’s designs, as the architect strives to reshape city life.

The role of the wilderness in a rapidly urbanising landscape is an idea explored in a radically different way by one of China’s best-known architects. Ma Yansong is the founder of global firm MAD, which now has bases in Beijing, Los Angeles, New York

TWISTING COURTYARD, BEIJING




CHAOYANG PARK PLAZA, BEIJING



and Rome. He continues to diligently transform the Chinese skyline with dramatic, organic designs that are often compared to those of the late Zaha Hadid, the architect's mentor. He frequently cites nature as his biggest inspiration, and his most notable works include Beijing's Chaoyang Park Plaza, a sinuous mountain-like skyscraper, and the biomorphic Harbin Opera House, its shimmering white aluminium exterior and flowing design emulating a snow dune, whipped up in the untamed outskirts of this northern city at the gateway to Russia. In the same city, his Chinese Wood Sculpture Museum is a twisted, fluid,

PERHAPS THIS RETHINK IS A RESPONSE TO THE DIRECTIVE PUTTING AN END TO THE 'OVERSIZED, XENOCENTRIC AND WEIRD'

polished-steel structure that mirrors its surrounding and reflects the changing light like an icicle. Coming soon is a star-shaped design centre for fashion group Xinhee; and the curvilinear Nanjing Zendai Himalayas Center, a complex of skyscrapers that will rise and fall like rolling hills, and based on Chinese *shan shui*-style landscape paintings. The six towers, with weaving and swooping corridors, surround a village-like collection of low-slung houses at its centre.

This second, or even third, wave of architects might be making their mark, but as Dong says: 'China is still moving towards seeking its architectural identity. I don't believe that one architect or building can represent the national aesthetic. It takes time, but I think we're on the way.' 

PHOTOGRAPH: IWAN BAAH