



*Former Chinese Academy of Art in Hangzhou*

## **THOUGHTS ON CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ARCHITECTURE:**

### **When the Monumental Becomes Decorative**

With regard to modern architecture, most foreign visitors to China might have a chance to see only “elitist” architecture that is sprawling in the major cities, and which consists either of creations by famous Western architects like Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid or Steven Holl, or of quick imitations of the “international style” without manifesting much input of originality. For some time, the so-called “Disneyland syndrome” has also

received attention: Chinese investors create more and more satellite towns featuring distinctly German, Italian, or Tudor architectural styles in equally distinctly Chinese environments. [1] In China, the general development of architecture, which had been crippled by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), is now overwhelmed by an economic boom that its outmoded institutional practices are often unable to handle. Catherine Cooke wrote about Russian architecture in the 1980s-1990s that Russian architects "had never been exposed to the kind of building practice which is required to produce subtly differentiated objects." [2] Similar things are true for Chinese architects. [3] As a consequence, they often seem to be lost in translating Western aesthetic forms for a Chinese public.

"Postmodernism" as the existential choice of grasping something of China's lost cultural identity might work for marginal architects like those practicing "critical regionalism" in the style of Wang Shu, who won the Pritzker architecture prize in 2012. In many other cases, however, creative architectural aesthetics seems to be blurred by sublimated ideas from a recent authoritarian past. I want to reflect upon an architecture that is more difficult to discover than fancy Shanghai skyscrapers and the Disneyland residences of the suburbs of major Chinese cities because it develops in the province. Over the last ten years, an architectural phenomenon that is difficult to classify has made its appearance in the shadow of international architectural competition and concerns mainly "semi-official" buildings like universities and museums but not official projects like government buildings. I will present two buildings (that are very different from each other) but that have come to my attention in Hangzhou, a provincial city two hours southwest of Shanghai.



*The arches are hidden behind bamboo grass.*

Like most major cities around Shanghai, Hangzhou, a city of 6.5 million inhabitants famous for its picturesque Westlake, has experienced a spectacular building boom, sporting the usual set of experimental skyscrapers with cut outs and pagoda roofs, as well as a dense net of flyovers that distinguish contemporary Chinese cities. The great dreams created by the 2008 Olympics also accelerated the building activities here. However, some more “elitist” projects stand out. The former Chinese Academy of Art, designed by Beijing-based architect Li Chengde in 2003, is a pleasant walk-in campus made of gray, ivy-clad bricks and blackened steel elements. In the interior there is a spacious garden featuring rocks, ponds, and Chinese-style bridges. The overall humanist impression of the Aalto-like environment might be marred only by the rather pompous design of the entrance.

Looking closer, however, the design is not just pompous but strange. A group of eight thin obelisk-like white granite pillars stand like needles in front of the stairs. On top of them, two heavy glass and steel roofs seem to be floating in the air. The small one hovers directly over the group of pillars while the other, which is of immense dimensions

and protruding, covers a large part of the entire entrance section. Further back, the assembly of pillars continues; some of the pillars are hidden behind bushy bamboos.

The syntax of this hidden monumentalism will most probably not be grasped at first sight. Everything seems to strive towards the construction of an arch though a "real arch" is more suggested than really built. A massive arch-like composition can only be discovered when looking backwards at the different elements from the inside. The architect seems to have done everything to elude the construction of a real massive arch by loosely combining horizontal and vertical elements. However, though attempting to neutralize the pompous character of a monumental design, the presence of a real arch would not be entirely avoided. Four tiny versions of an arch appear innocently and playfully right behind the pillar assembly. Ritually arranged in a circle, they seem to form their own, private space. Behind the stairway, a strangely floating inner court supported by thin pillars makes the vertical structures appear even more fragile. Square-shaped ornamentations on walls and lamps contribute to an alleviation of the monumental design. Further tentative "arches" can be found in the park in the form of "overstretched" pergolas.

The other building that I want to present is the Department of Architecture on the Zijingang Campus of Zhejiang University built by the Shanghai based architect Dai Fu Dong between 2002 and 2003. At first sight, nobody might suspect this building to contain classrooms and offices since it looks much more like an airport. It leans towards what Charles Jencks termed "Late-Modernism." Two ocean liner chimneys and peculiar long horizontal white marble rails that rise from the roof like rows of teeth give the whole complex a somewhat extraterrestrial appearance. There is also a protruding roof but this time it comes in an undulated shape, as if it is meant to represent the final splash of the waterfall inspired glass roof. The most peculiar item a small arch, which is, like in the case of the Chinese Academy of Arts, a miniature one standing rather forlorn and awkward twenty meters right to the tidal wave covering the main entrance. Its positioning in front of a huge cut-out niche in the glass front lets us suspect that this arch decorates a secondary entrance. But beware – there is no door.

Inside the building, we are confronted with similar devices of self-negating monumentalism. There are no symbols exposed in central places. Instead, the entrance hall is decorated with an imposing though semantically insignificant red square placed on the left side of one wall. The disproportionately low ceiling of one part of the hall creates a strange contrast with the rest of the glass hall, which is high and almost Gothic in appearance. The contrast is reinforced because through its unusual positioning, the square looks like crashing into the floor at any moment. The size and the weight of the square are "monumental."



*Small arches*

### **The Semantics of Monuments**

In the past, communist countries like China and the former Soviet Union insisted on monumental components in their national architecture. Stalinist architecture fused neoclassicism and neo-Muscovite elements and developed a distinctly archaic style of monumentality able to incorporate, for example, seventeenth century motives into skyscrapers or to evoke imperial palaces almost anywhere it wanted. Later, the Soviet monumental style became less formal and tended towards decoration: buildings could now be strewn with figures, most of which expressed the virtues of socialist endeavor.

Wherever monumentality appeared, it expressed a political truth, no matter if this was done by using formal or concrete elements. Monumentality always spoke or at least evoked, in a silent manner, those facts that the viewer was supposed to know about the subject. In other words, monumentality has always had a literal and metaphoric quality transmitting (most of the time) a historical or political content. This is also – or especially – true for Chinese monumental architecture. Chairman Mao transformed Beijing into a modern metropolis rife with monuments, public squares, exhibition halls, and

government offices that clearly bear monumental features. The “Great Hall of the People” is an interesting example of totalitarian architecture combining the features of an Egyptian temple with that of a Mussolinian palazzo (Simon Leys, *Ombres chinoises*, Laffont 1976, p. 51). Tiananmen Square itself became a monumental complex and a relic of the Maoist regime. Western styles were avoided, one of the reasons being that many Chinese saw as one of the failures of modern Western architects their incapacity “to produce monuments of any value” because technical expertise had thrived at the expense of the architecture’s soul. Even the Memorial Hall of Chairman Mao (completed in 1977) applied modern lines and materials but followed a classical concept. [4] When, in 1989, protesters erected a “statue of liberty”—modeled after the New York statue—on the square, the authorities destroyed it and replaced it with a seven meter high new statue representing a young woman holding a torch with both hands, bringing the total number of monuments on the square to seven.

It is true that monuments do not need to be political, but in that case the emphasis will still lie on permanence and the stability of certain structures. And even then, when the monument is deprived of any political content, monumentality will still be defined, in the words of Louis Kahn, as “a spiritual quality inherent in a structure which conveys the feeling of its eternity, [the feeling] that it cannot be added or changed.” [5]



*The building of the department of architecture, Zijingang campus of Hangzhou University*

The two Hangzhou buildings introduced above contain monumental elements but are no longer “monumental” if monumental is supposed to be, as WU Hung has said about the Tiananmen design, “objectified in manner, permanent in construction, static in form, geometric in shape, grandiose on scale.” [6] Conventional monumental architecture speaks mainly through these elements because, as its monumental discourse is supposed to dominate our understanding, few other items are allowed to speak. It is true that also in Western democracies, monumentality has been submitted to tricks and devices of deception, which made Henri Lefebvre once say that most “monumental buildings mask the will to power and the arbitrariness of power beneath signs and surfaces which claim to express collective will and collective thought.” [7] However even this sophisticated monumentality is still likely to embody and impose “a clearly intelligible message” (*ibid.*). The new Chinese position also transcends Kenneth Frampton’s schedule of either historicism or the “glibly decorative” that he has singled out as the two typical postmodern approaches. [8] In these Chinese cases, the monumental (the expression that is most likely to refer to historicism) *is* decorative. Most recently, in the West and also in the East, postmodern playful symbolisms have rekindled an architectural interest in monuments. On the other hand, wherever monuments appear today in Western democracies, they are not supposed to spell out ethical messages linked to narratives of progress or well-defined historical orientations about countries or people. In post-world war Germany, for example, a certain anti-monumental approach is common. The past abuse of heroic architecture for fascist aims has made any attempt to represent political ideas through monumental buildings suspicious in the eyes of most Germans. As a consequence, buildings with monumental potential are often small scaled, lightweight, and playfully structured, which gives them the quality of “authenticity” in the sense of being just what they are.

Germany’s case is extreme but the pattern is generalized. Ours is an era of apology in which presidents apologize for slavery, wars, murders, and colonization. As a consequence, monuments have to be humble and signify – what? It is wrong to suppose that “postmodern” monuments have become merely decorative. As a matter of fact, they still continue symbolizing something. Mario Carpo, in his article on the postmodern cultural monument, speaks of “micronarratives, microhistories, and microcultures” that monuments are now supposed to evoke, and which are most typically presented by the case of the replica of the flame held by the Statue of Liberty situated in Paris. The flame has been reinterpreted by Lady Diana’s fans as a cenotaph to her memory. [9]

Another task of monuments is to register grave errors and to deplore abomination. In almost no cases do new monuments today provide role models and have no “incitement to action” (p. 53). Carpo attributes this new modesty and the attitude which resists the monumental celebration of great deeds to the “non-socialist” world because in the capitalist world “we can hardly honor any act of valor accomplished after the end of World War II: the heroes we now tend to remember are most often the innocent victims of someone else’s crimes” (p. 54). As a consequence, monuments have become part of the material world of anthropology rather than of history or politics. This in agreement

with the UNESCO Operational Guidelines for the World Heritage Convention, which decided that the identification of cultural heritage as monumental architecture is a Western construct and that in the post-modern era of preservation, heritage does not need to have, or should not have, monumental value. [10]



*Diana "monument" in Paris*



*Makeshift memorial site for Michael Jackson at the base of the statue of Renaissance composer Orlando de Lassus on Promenadenplatz in Munich.*

What do monuments look like in the “socialist” world? Is the ideologically loaded monument also here subject to discomfort? What makes the case of the Chinese buildings presented above so curious is that they do not provide the slightest discourse of domination. These arches do not register grave errors nor do they evoke the small micronarratives or microhistories. Instead of dominating our understanding in any way, those monumental elements are dominated. However, dominated by what? They are dominated by global or international ideas that are not only alien to the architectural elements themselves but also, to a certain extent, to the cultural environment in which they appear. Those ideas are: international aesthetics, modernity, humanism, political correctness, democracy... This is the reason why this stammering monumentalism is not allowed to symbolize anything concrete. It has even ceased to speak the lofty language of eternity that Louis Kahn established as the minimal requirement of monumentality. Through its degree zero of monumentality it reflects China’s relationship with the world.





*The arch*

### **Stammering Monumentality**

Nor should the above monumentality be confused with the “degree zero of the monument” that Roland Barthes once attributed to the anti-monumental structure of the Eiffel Tower which, while being useless, stimulates peoples’ imagination. [11] The two Chinese buildings do not offer this advantage either because the monumental elements are here simply pushed towards a secondary and absurd context in which they appear not as speechless and sublimely silent but rather as stammering. The monumental discourse appears as neither unified/firm nor absent but simply as “timid” in the sense of no longer daring to convey anything substantial. Finally, the monumentality of the Hangzhou buildings should not be confused with what Sigfried Giedion has called “the devaluation of symbols.” [12] The devaluation of symbols can mainly be encountered in eclecticism where it expresses a state of diffuseness and disorientation. The monumentality of the Hangzhou buildings is rather a stammering and “liquid form of monumentality” because here the firm monumental ideological content as well as the form of the monument have been transformed into liquid decorative images that appear to be acceptable in a modern, globalized context. The signifier has been detached from

the signified which, as a rule, produces a liquefaction of meaning. No artist, not even Krzysztof Wodiczko, who specializes in the absurdification of monuments, would be able to appropriate or misappropriate those arches.

The same phenomenon has been observed in other contexts. However, wherever they appear, such liquefied decorative images will most likely be inserted into complex historical surroundings, which are postcolonial settings in which the past needs to be evoked in a stammering, indirect fashion. Ackbar Abbas describes the Hong Kong Cultural Center where the red brick clock tower from the demolished colonial railway station has been saved and been incorporated into the modern design of the new building. Far from perceiving the tower as a monument of history, Abbas concludes that it is "not more than decorative, an image of history meant for visual consumption." [13] Hangzhou does not provide such a context either.

The absurd way in which both Hangzhou buildings make use of the arch becomes emblematic of a decorative-monumental procedure that is different from that of the Hong Kong clock tower. Normally, arches are supposed to heighten the sense of spatial distinction, as they suggest the existence of an ideal environment situated in a "within" that needs to be separated from the "without." It is, of course, possible, that "nothing" is inside, that the arch is merely part of a device of simulation. However, in that case there will at least be an "inside" whose economic or symbolic value can be designated as an act of simulation. In Hangzhou, the arches are "all there is" without leading towards any "inside." They continue to symbolize everything arches are supposed to symbolize but they do so in an empty and merely decorative fashion. Even their way of displaying follows the paradoxical rhetoric that all arches have in common, which is: being sober and unemotional though at the same time always dangerously close to kitsch.

### **Nietzsche: The Decorative vs. the Monumental**

It was Nietzsche who categorically opposed the monumental to the decorative because he believed that only the monumental character of culture is able to provide culturally creative people the strength to create something new. [14] Weak imitators do not understand anything of culture's inner driving force, since all they want to do is decorate. They have no real access to the power of creation. By hiding and dissimulating a cultural truth (which normally should represent a harmonious whole composed of life, thought, appearance, and will), decorators end up creating an absurd universe of cultural pastiches.

Nietzsche's opposition of the monumental and the decorative is anti-modern in the sense that it contrasts a "deep" historical-monumental approach towards the world with a superficial, "modern" one which grasps only the "image," that is, the world's decorative surface. Certainly Nietzsche does not condemn decoration per se. "Decoration" can be part of the monumental but it needs to be clearly subordinated to the latter's rules and its language. To take a more recent example, Stalinist architecture developed cornices, obelisks, and figures that were decorative but participated in their own way in the

discourse of monumentality. Only a self-sufficient decoration speaking about nothing but itself (and which is therefore de facto silent) is deprived of cultural power.

The monumental elements in the Chinese buildings described above are powerless. They do not even influence the attitude of the visitor because people do not attend these places but simply look at their monumental elements. Here it becomes clear that the strategy pursued by the stammering monumentalists is also different from the subversive procedure of Pop Art, which declared that decoration must be seen as the most essential element art has to offer. Opposing Adolf Loos's view that ornament is a crime, pop artists would put the modern system of 'monumentality vs. the decorative' upside down, as has explained Mark C. Taylor: "For the pop artist ornament is not a crime but is the very 'essence' of art. When ornament is essential, however, essence becomes ornamental and vanishes in a play of appearances grounded in nothing beyond itself." [15] This is an inverting strategy. As to its essence, it remains modern to the bone. Pop Art "decorations" are exposed in art galleries or in public space just like monuments.

In agreement with Nietzsche's thoughts are those of Lewis Mumford who claims that modernity simply *cannot* produce any monuments: "The very notion of a modern monument is a contradiction in terms: if it is a monument, it cannot be modern, and if it is modern, it cannot be a monument." [16] What Mumford means is that history-denying modernity is unable to pay tribute to lasting beliefs. However, it is not the geometrical character of modern architecture that he condemns. On the contrary, simplicity and formalism of design can be very beneficial for expressions of monumentality. The problem is that modernist geometry does not intend to say anything because it is devoted to the speechless lack of ornamentation.



*The Clock tower in Hong Kong*

## **Monuments and Identity in China**

In China, clear, outspoken monumentalism has in many places been abolished. In Shanghai, for example, communist symbols like the red star on the Hong Kong-Shanghai Bank have been removed in order to prepare a smooth passage into the capitalist future. This creates an at least apparent freedom from political statements about the past, future and present. It is therefore amazing that a ghostlike form of monumental aesthetics survives in some – otherwise modernized – parts of the province.

The scheme exposed above turns out to be very characteristic of the present Chinese political situation since the partly neutralized or domesticated monumentalism works along the lines of other "neutralizing" ideologies. Minority cultures, for example, far from being integrated in the social tissue of the Chinese Republic, appear almost nightly in insipid State Television shows to perform their folk dances. They are encouraged to do this not in order to develop their own cultural strength but in order to provide a spectacle. While they are presented as living monuments of a multicultural China, in reality they are nothing more than its decorations or, in the worst case, objects of touristic consumption because the political context of present China does not foster their real cultural development.

All this goes hand in hand with the pop versions of a new "Mao cult" selling badges bearing the portrait of the chairman as decorative accessories; or with the pop treatment of Chinese revolutionary songs by rock singers like Cui Jian in the 1980s. Far from being a simple parody of the revolutionary aesthetics (which would never be permitted), Lao Cui's "rock tunes dismantle and deconstruct the revolutionary ethos offered by the literal meaning of the words." [17] And when words are put in the alien musical context of Western rock music, their monumental character is neutralized to become merely decorative. The new Mao cult or the "Mao Zedong Fever" that broke out at Mao's birthday centennial in 1993, are manifestations of the same stammering monumentalism that is manifest in the architectural examples presented.

The most obvious examples of "decorative monumentalism," however, might be the "Eiffel Towers" that can be spotted on the roofs of thousands of suburban Chinese family homes. What would Roland Barthes have to say about them? Having no other function than conveying the social prestige of its owners, the Eiffel Tower, this Western symbol of monumental concreteness, becomes here fully "liquidized" into decorative fantasies symbolizing nothing other than a very vague idea of Western lifestyle. [18]

Thorsten Botz-Bornstein



*"Eiffel Towers" on roofs*

## Notes

1. Hannah Beech: "Ye Olde Shanghai" in Time Feb. 14, 2005.
2. I concede that this is not the only possible definition of good architecture. Cf. Catherine Cooke: "Beauty as the Route to the Radiant Future: Response to Soviet Architecture" in Journal of Design History 10: 2, 1997, p. 139.
3. Cf. Don L. Hanlon: "Architectural Education in Post-Maoist China" in Journal of Architectural Education 41: 1, 1987, pp. 26-29.
4. Peter Rowe & Seng Kuan: Architectural Encounters with Essence and Form in Modern China (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2004), p. 123.
5. D. Brownlee & David e Long: Louis Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture. New York: Rizzoli, 1992, p. 43.
6. WU Hung: 'Tiananmen Square: A Political History of Monuments" in Representations 35, Summer 1991, p. 52.

7. Henri Lefebvre: *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 143.
8. Kenneth Frampton: 'Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance' in Hal Foster, (ed.) *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983), p. 20.
9. Mario Carpo: "The Postmodern Cult of Monuments" in *Future Anterior* 4:2, Winter 2007.
10. B. von Droste amnd U. Bertilsson: "Authenticity and World Heritage" in K. E. Larsen (ed.), *Nara Conference on Authenticity* (Trondheim: Tapir Publishers, 1995), pp. 3-15, p. 6.
11. Roland Barthes: *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies* (New York: Farrar Straus, 1997), p. 7.
12. Sigfried Giedion: *Mechanization Takes Command* (New York: Norton Library, 1969, 329-33).
13. Ackbar Abbas: "Hyphenation: The Spatial Dimensions of HK Culture" in Michael Steinberg (ed.): *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History* (Ithaca & London: Cornell UP, 1996), p. 219.
14. Cf. Untimely Considerations II. It needs to be pointed out the Nietzsche distinguished the monumental attitude from the antiquarian one whose conservatism he criticized. The result of his lengthy examination of the theme in the UC is that "critical monumentalism" is the best attitude.
15. Mark C. Taylor: "Skinscapes" in *Pierced Hearts and True Love: A Century of Drawings for Tattoos*. (New York, Honolulu: The Drawing Center and Hardy Marks Publications, 1995).
16. "Death of the Monument" in Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art quoted from Cecil Elliot: "Stalinist Architecture 1933-1955: Monuments and Monumentality" in *Journal of Architectural Education* 1964, 18:4, pp. 51-53.
17. Sheldon Hsiao-Peng-Lu: "Postmodernity, Popular Culture, and the Intellectual: A Report on Post-Tiananmen China" in *Boundary 2*, 23: 2, 1996, pp. 139-169, p. 156.
18. "They are antennas" is a frequent justification. It is interesting to note that Walter Benjamin has been particularly interested by the fact that, initially, the Eiffel Tower has not been created for any use but was later "justified" as a transmitter of radio waves that had not been invented when the tower was conceived. See Jeffrey Mehlman: *Walter Benjamin for Children: An Essay on his Radio Years* (University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 14.