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Shou County Culture and Art Center

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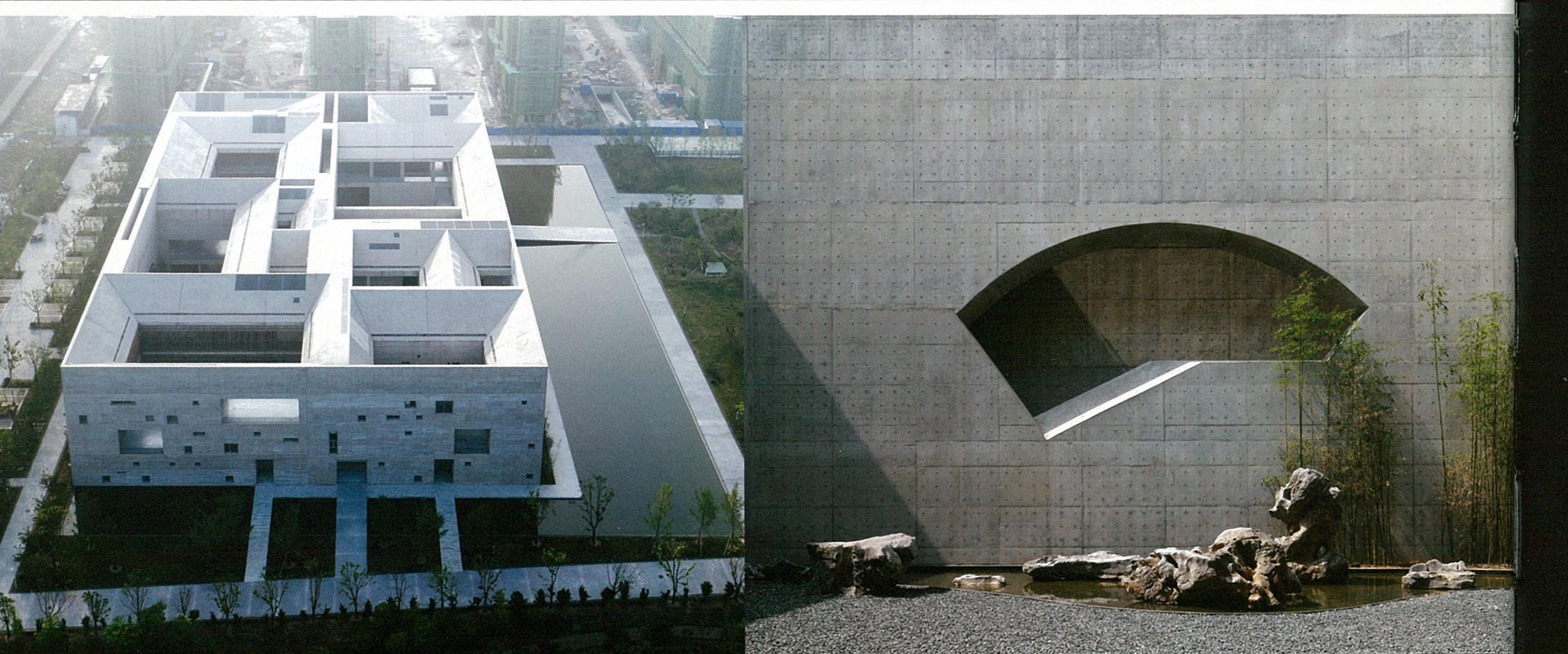
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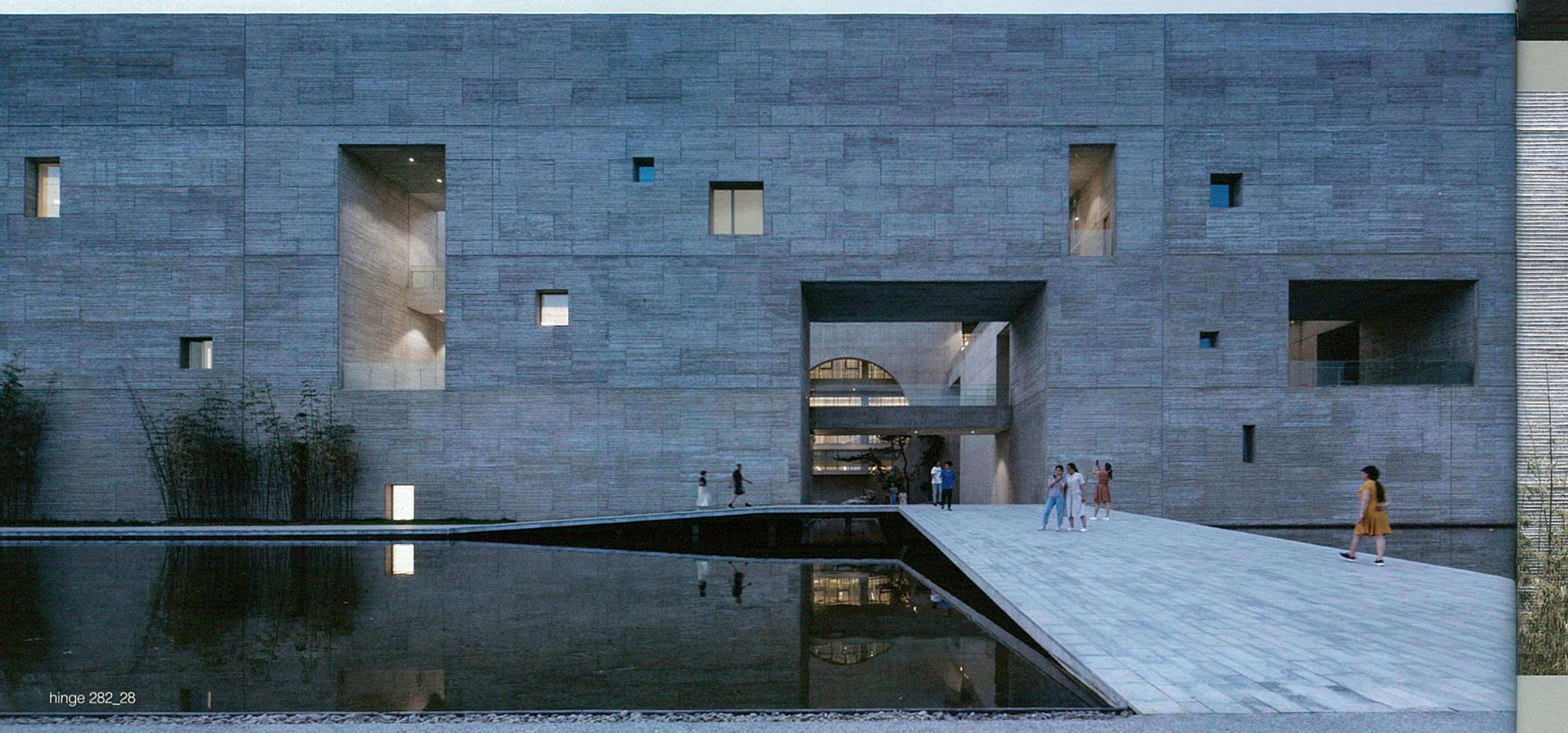
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# SHOU COUNTY CULTURE AND ART CENTER

SHOU COUNTY, ANHUI PROVINCE, CHINA  
STUDIO ZHU-PEI



Photography by Schran Images, courtesy of Studio Zhu-Pei



This new cultural and art facility in Anhui's Shou County would look wonderful as a ruin; you can't help but imagine the enormous building as an abandoned relic overtaken by nature. It would be a fantasy to wander through it like that, exploring its nooks and coming upon its many courtyards as sudden releases from the heavy, gargantuan walls. Alas, it's a fantasy that won't come true, because the building is likely to enjoy the long and fruitful life intended for it, as a centre for cultural events and artworks.

The historical inspiration for the scheme is rather obvious: the old town of Shou County itself, a walled, moat-wrapped enclosure of rammed earth and brick edges, with punctures for light and air, and courtyards, bridges and alleyways inside. It is a marvellous compendium of solids and voids, grown organically into a holistic urban mechanism for human work, play and habitation. The city's inherent solidity and introversion grew in part as defence against a climate imposing cold winters and hot summers. People hunkered down and lived inwardly. And that made for fascinating spatial complexities.

On a site a couple of kilometres away, on open flat farmland, a new city typical of current form in China emerged. Generic tower blocks hovering over wide roads contribute to an overall character of utilitarian banality. Studio Zhu-Pei was given free rein in the commission; it only had to work quickly.

A programme of art galleries, cultural centre, library and archive describes the to-do list. The parti is deliciously clear: a huge rectangular block carved out by open courtyards of different sizes. The perimeter walls – giant surfaces of striated concrete – are perforated with random patterns of openings that accentuate the monolithic character of the block. The resulting plan navigates the interstitial solids between the courtyards to place interior usable space where it can. You move through the place as if in a maze, making constant

