

A photograph of a person walking in a large, empty, white-walled space. The ceiling is white with a large, irregularly shaped, glowing light fixture. The person is walking from left to right in the lower third of the frame. The overall atmosphere is minimalist and architectural.

CHINA DIALOGUES

FOREWORD BY IWAN BAAN

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ROOT AND INNOVATION
BEYOND EXPECTATIONS
COLLECTIVE THINKING
FUTURISTIC MINDSET
INCOMPLETE SPACES

ZHU PEI

STUDIO ZHU-PEI

Beijing-based architect ZHU Pei (b. 1962, Beijing) stands out for his diverse and expressive forms. This must explain why his commissions almost exclusively constitute art museums all over the country. Yet, Zhu insists that architecture is not sculpture; his work is about experience and history that has been in a precarious state of transformation. Zhu received his first Master of Architecture at Tsinghua University in 1991 and his second Master of Architecture at the University of California at Berkeley in 2000. He worked at RTKL Associates (now CallisonRTKL) in Los Angeles from 1994 to 1999, the year when he became one of four founding partners of Shenzhen-based URBANUS, which he left in 2004 to start his own practice in 2005. Zhu has been teaching at leading universities, including his alma mater, Harvard's GSD, and Columbia University in New York. In 2018, the architect was named the new dean of School of Architecture at CAFA, the Central Academy

of Fine Arts in Beijing. Zhu's inspirations may not be surprising or unique—nature and history—but his daring, yet, non-signature solutions are remarkable and enlightening. Just two years after establishing his studio, the architect was commissioned by the Guggenheim Foundation to design the Guggenheim Art Pavilion in Saadiyar Island Cultural District in Abu Dhabi and the Guggenheim Museum in Beijing (both unrealized). His built works include the Jingdezhen Imperial Kiln Museum in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi (2020); the Shou County Culture and Art Center in Anhui (2020); the Yang Liping Performing Arts Center in Dali, Yunnan (under construction); the Minsheng Museum of Modern Art in Beijing (2015); the OCT Design Museum in Shenzhen (2012); Digital Beijing, Olympics Control Center (2008); and Courtyard House renovation for artist Cai Guo-Qiang in Beijing (2007).

FOR ME NATURE IS ATTITUDE

In conversation with **ZHU Pei** of Studio Zhu-Pei, Beijing
Studio Zhu-Pei in Beijing, April 17, 2017 & November 27, 2018

Zhu Pei: More than half of all the models that are usually on display, in my studio here, are currently being shown at Aedes gallery in Berlin; the show is called *Mind Landscapes*. There are five projects on display: the Jingdezhen Imperial Kiln Museum, the Yang Liping Performing Arts Center, the Dali Museum of Contemporary Art, the Shou County Culture and Art Center, and the Shijingshan Cultural Center. All projects are under construction because I wanted to show my current thinking and design process, and a range of interests based on place, climate, culture, lifestyles, local materials, history, and most of all, nature. I want my architecture to reflect all these particular conditions, to learn from them, and create a new experience, which would be very specific for every place.



135 ZHU Pei. Courtesy of Studio Zhu-Pei

Vladimir Belogolovsky: You just said that nature is the most important of all of your inspirations. But when I look at the photos of your exhibition in Berlin, the layout is very geometric and abstract. And almost everything there is represented in white color. Even your landscape drawings are shown in black and white. Your nature is nonrepresentational, right?

ZP: Sure, people typically associate nature with green color, with mountains and the forest. But today most people live in cities. In my work, I don't emphasize physical nature, unlike so many other architects who try to mimic nature literally, with greenery that covers their architecture, which is a counter-Chinese idea. That is not real nature. I never try to make my architecture look like nature. It is impossible anyway. No architecture can be like nature. The idea is to respond to nature, not to copy it. For example, many good ideas can be learned from traditional houses

with tall courtyards, solid walls, and small windows as a response to a hot and humid climate. So, for me nature is attitude; it is all about our attitude toward how we respond to the climate. Architecture should be our direct response to nature and about how we want to build our relationship with it. Also, I don't like buildings that express technology or cover themselves in expensive, shiny materials. That's very pretentious.

VB: Just by looking at your works such as currently under construction projects—the Imperial Kiln Museum and Yang Liping Performing Arts Center, or your other well-known earlier works—Digital Beijing or OCT Design Museum, it is hard to believe that all



136 Caiguoqiang Courtyard House Renovation, Beijing, 2007 © Studio Zhu-Pei

of these works were designed by one architect. Why are they so different? What are the main intentions behind your architecture?

ZP: I strongly believe in specificity of each project. Climate is one of the key reasons for finding very different solutions and expressions. So, you can't apply one standard stylistic approach. This is my approach and I hate to use the same kind of architecture everywhere. Some architects developed their signature styles. I am not interested in that. I am modest in that respect and I would rather design architecture that's specific and not personified or recognized. So, the materials and forms I use are always different. What never changes is my attitude—I always aim at creating something beautiful to complement nature. My favorite architect is Le Corbusier, and he changed all the time. His monastery La Tourette and Ronchamp chapel were designed around the same time, but you can't find buildings that are more different. It is because the sites, programs, and scales all contribute to the resultant forms being very different. But if you go beyond these buildings' forms you can find similarities in the materials, colors, or the way the light is treated, and in how these buildings relate to nature.

VB: Well, let's not idealize Le Corbusier who may be many architects' favorite. Still, to say that he was interested in site specificity more than in projecting his own ideas is a bit of a stretch. He was a fountainhead of ideas and he used opportunities that came his way to implement them. Ronchamp is a wonderful building, but I can perfectly picture it in another location. There is nothing specific about it and being a brilliant architect, he could have come up with a number of other solutions for that site. Or he could have Ronchamp built elsewhere and we would love it just as much.

ZP: I may disagree with your idea. Ronchamp works so well with its site.

VB: Of course, it does. He was a genius. All I am saying is that the design came from his mind and heart, not primarily from the site... You know, so many of contemporary architects are so hung up on deriving ideas from the site that there is no way they would ever come up with something as liberating as Ronchamp. For that to occur you need to look for ideas beyond the site. When an architect has something to

say the site may be just as well a mere blank canvas. There is nothing consequential about great architecture. It comes from the architect. A number of architects told me that they didn't like their site to the point that they would create their own site and literally put a fence around it. What's a traditional Chinese courtyard house if not a world within itself?

ZP: You are right. Innovation is always the key for architecture. In my case, I am very much inspired by different local conditions, and then create new experience for the specific place.

VB: There is a bit of a contradiction in the idea of bringing well-known architects to other places to express something local, don't you think? There is nothing modest about that. For centuries, it was all about inviting accomplished architects from overseas, so they could bring with them something new,

personal, and iconic. Bernini's invitation to Paris by Louis XIV is a famous example. Today, just like every museum wants to own a Picasso, every city wants to build a building by Hadid...

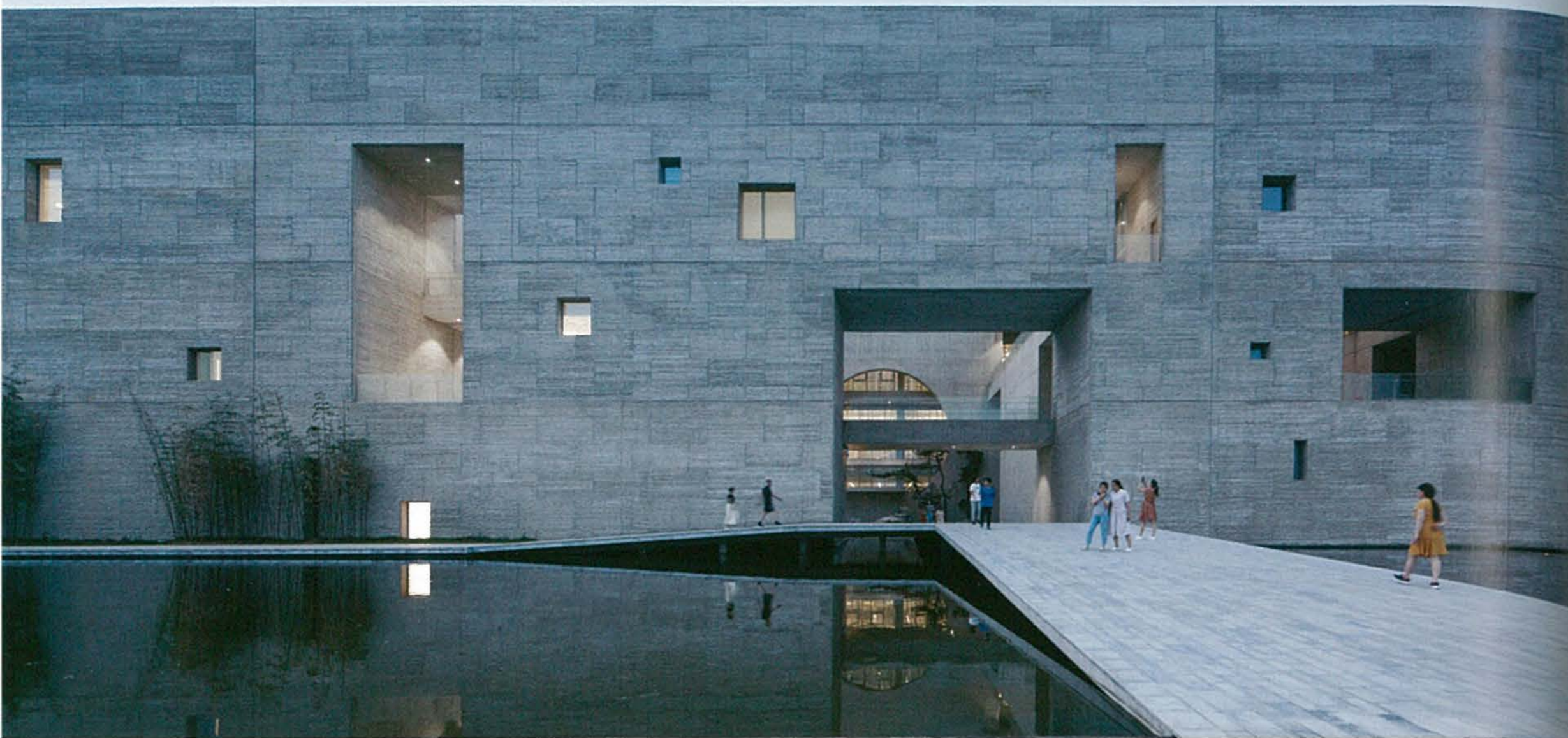
ZP: That's not true...Not anymore!

VB: But Beijing already has two huge built works by Hadid—two commercial centers, and two more are in the making—an airport and a skyscraper.

ZP: There must be a balance. As an architect, you need to create the experience that people know; then you need to try to create the experience that people don't know. That is perfect architecture. Architecture is not about creating something strange. Architecture is not sculpture. It is all about the experience, about going inside, exploring, getting excited. So many new cities are built based on the latest fashion or like theme parks rather than real cities. But I believe in architecture that's rooted. If you build in China, you have



137 Minsheng Museum of Modern Art, Beijing, 2015 © Qingzhu Photography



138 Shou County Culture and Art Center, Anhui Province, 2019 © schranimage

to connect it with local Chinese culture. Architecture should be based on two fundamental principles—one is the root and the other one is innovation and new experience. I think you need to combine revolutionary thinking and respect for local culture and conditions. Architects coming from a different place have an advantage of seeing things differently. That is very important.

VB: You once said, "I seek a new definition for architecture, exploring traditional ideas with a futuristic mindset." What words would you use to describe your work or the kind of architecture you want to achieve?

ZP: Two words that I already used—root and innovation. The root is associated with nature and culture, and innovation is all about the new experience.

VB: You called your approach to architecture a non-architecture style.

ZP: Because I hate the idea of having a style. I don't have a style. I want to be different every time. I want to be more experimental. I want to forget what I have done in the past.

VB: Do you see architecture as art, and do you believe in the concept of architect as artist?

ZP: Yes, I strongly believe that architecture is art. And if architecture is art this means that architects are artists. Why do we call some people artists and others designers? Artists create something that didn't exist before. They create new perspectives, new experiences, new ideas. But there is a difference between architecture and art. Architecture is not only about space but also about function and experience. Art is created for everyone. But architecture is very specific. Architects create buildings for a specific people, place, culture, and climate.

VB: I would like to ask you to comment on some of your own quotes. You said, "The most

important moment for architecture is not the completion of the building, but when the spaces intersect with people."

ZP: This is correct. When you look at a traditional Chinese painting, it looks incomplete. It is the job of the observer to complete the painting in his or her mind. Just like Chinese scholars' landscape paintings, they have never sat down in front of the mountains to sketch them. They would travel for months in the mountains to experience them. When they came home, they would try to recapture those moods by putting together all the accumulated memories into their paintings. Chinese gardens and architecture are also focused on the experience to create spaces to walk, to view, to live, and to roam. No building should be completely finished. There should always be some space left for peoples' interpretation. Architecture should be just like a Chinese painting; it should strive for exploring possibilities beyond the immediate function. A building that's created just to perform a particular function is a dead building. Look at the traditional hutong with its courtyard in the middle. There is no particular function for that. It is just emptiness, but it also means everything. People eat in the courtyard, socialize, get married there. We call it the incomplete space. But this is the most important space in the house, its heart. When we work on our buildings, we try to avoid providing finished solutions; we leave space for interpretations, so different functions can be imagined beyond our own

expectations. A building should be like a sponge; there should be many incomplete spaces in between.

VB: Another quote, "We seek natural logic using great contradictions. Creating ambiguous spaces is one of my signatures."

ZP: For example, when I did a courtyard house for artist Cai Guo-Qiang here in Beijing, it was mostly a renovation of a historical hutong, but the part that was damaged beyond restoration I rebuilt as a new pavilion without trying to copy anything. I used new, even futuristic materials and forms to contrast with the old ones. It was a very ambitious project; some would call it ambiguous, but to me this way of juxtaposing old and new is about respecting the past, while moving into the future. Most people would see this example as contradictory, but for me this is how I search for a new harmony. In every project, I look for opportunities to express my work in the most contemporary ways.

VB: You also said, "You cannot just use traditional tiles and then claim that this is traditional architecture." Was this a particular criticism aimed at your colleague Wang Shu?

ZP: Not really. Different architects have different approaches. I admire Wang Shu's work very much and we share many ideas. He is looking for the root; I am also looking for the root. What I was criticizing in that quote was the way to build traditional architecture

139 Jingdezhen Imperial Kiln Museum, Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province, 2016-20. Watercolor by Zhu Pei; Courtesy of Studio Zhu-Pei





140 Jingdezhen Imperial Kiln Museum, Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province, 2020 © schranimage

today by using new materials to copy traditional imagery. Wang Shu's work has a deep soul. He uses recycled material, which I like and, in fact, I am now working on the Imperial Kiln Museum in Jingdezhen where I am also recycling local bricks, which was a local tradition; the kiln structures needed to be rebuilt very often and the workers recycled the old bricks to build their houses. So, there is a strong culture in China to recycle and repurpose building materials.

VB: And the final quote, "Our studio has always been geared toward the future."

ZP: Yes, I am always looking for ways to create new experiences, something that did not exist in the past.

VB: What are your favorite buildings?

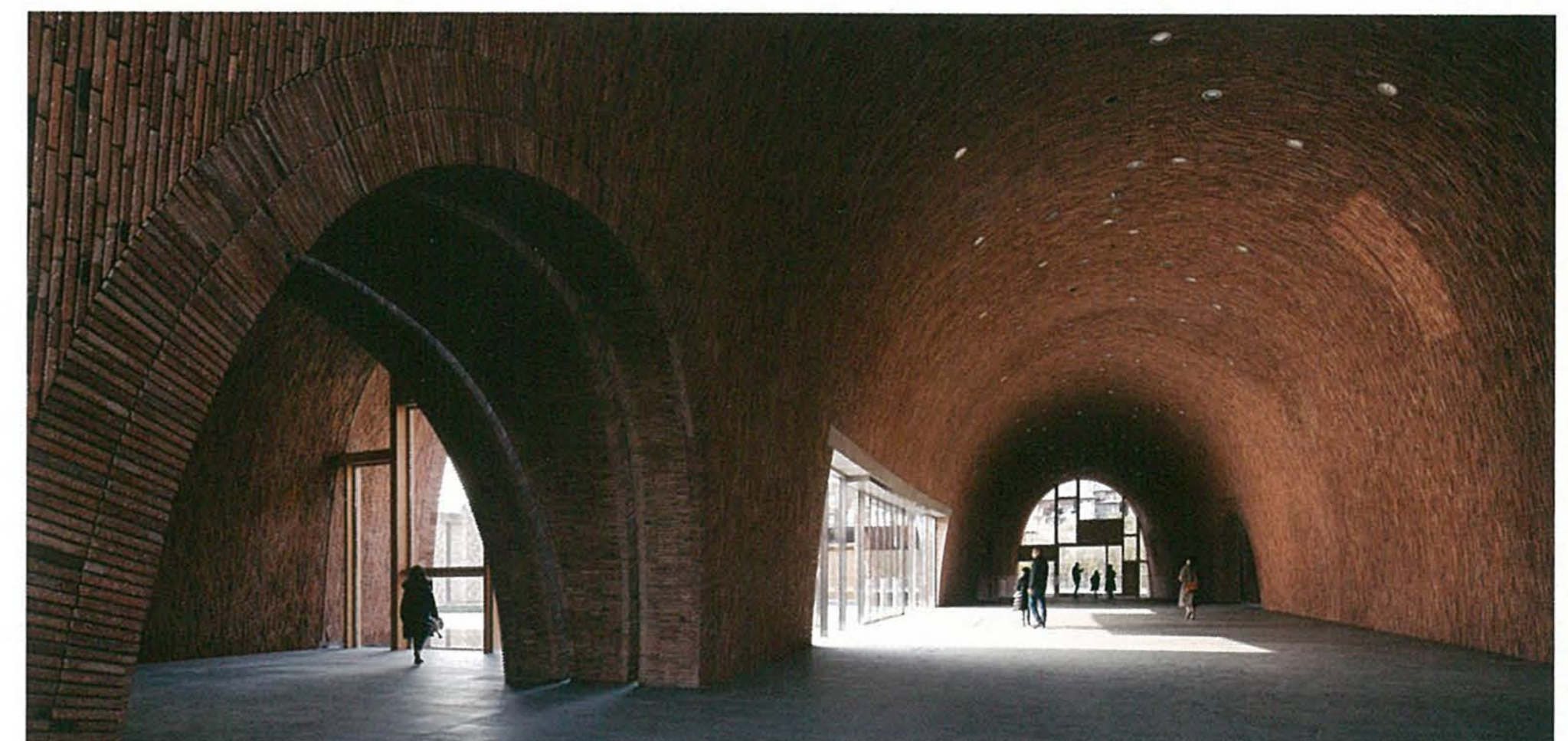
ZP: The Acropolis in Athens. Also, some traditional villages in China. I like getting inspiration from buildings that were built based on collective thinking and not driven by one person's ideas. There is something natural about how these structures were developed. And in our attempts to build the future we have to study and know the past. Also, unlike many traditional structures in the West such as Neoclassical palaces or the Forbidden City here in Beijing, I prefer to avoid primary axis and symmetry. I like the approach of adapting architecture to the place. Then I feel that this kind of architecture was done as a careful collaboration with nature.

VB: If you had a chance to have a conversation with any one architect, who would that be?

ZP: Le Corbusier. He was so great. I love his very artistic mind and dynamic, innovative architecture.



141 Jingdezhen Imperial Kiln Museum, Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province, 2020 © Studio Zhu-Pei



142 Jingdezhen Imperial Kiln Museum, Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province, 2020 © schranimage

"Vladimir Belogolovsky has caught China in mid-somersault from tradition to ways of building and anchoring communities that go far beyond what we know in the West. This book assembles some of the very best practices not just in Asia, but in the world, displaying their work with photographs of great depth, while letting the designers tell us about their sources, dreams, and aspirations."

Aaron Betsky, Director, Virginia Tech's School of Architecture

"Away from the stereotypes about China's massive urban transformations, Vladimir Belogolovsky lifts the veil on a prolific new generation of designers, who have in common a highly intellectualized and conceptual understanding of architecture. Amply illustrated, Belogolovsky's interviews reveal the ideas underlying the work of some twenty firms, helping to understand their site-specific, reflexive buildings. These focused conversations highlight how, despite their diversity, the strategies of the contemporary architects converge in the search for the creation of unique spaces, islands of poetry in the ocean of China's prosaic developments."

Jean-Louis Cohen, Sheldon H. Solow Professor in the History of Architecture,
New York University Institute of Fine Arts

"This remarkably revealing and celebratory book is a summation of a series of interviews recently conducted by Vladimir Belogolovsky with all leading architects currently practicing in the People's Republic of China. Herein, each conversation is an extraordinary testimony to the energy of an undeniable renaissance, in which these talented and highly cultivated architects are engaged in the common project of creating a civic culture for a new society. In its move away from the instant high-rise megacity, the Chinese government has seemingly opted for the decentralized modernization of the society, an inspiring project, which is largely lost in the rest of the world."

Kenneth Frampton, Ware Professor of Architecture at GASP, Columbia University

"My first trip to China in December 2001 changed my life. I was invited to an international competition for a new town in Nanning in the Guangxi region. China was opening up to a desire and excitement for modern architecture in a spirit of new freedom and hope for the future. In *China Dialogues*, Vladimir Belogolovsky tirelessly presents the Chinese architects who in 20 years have embodied that new freedom and promise."

Steven Holl, America's Best Architect (*Time*, 2001), Praemium Imperiale (2014)

"This bringing together of interviews from among China's emerging group of architects sheds light on their common and individual motivations, backgrounds, and ambitions. Lavishly and thoughtfully illustrated, this volume will serve scholarship on contemporary Chinese architecture for years to come."

Peter G. Rowe, Raymond Garbe Professor of Architecture and Urban Design, Harvard University



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