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arc en rêve centre d'architecture bordeaux

Amateur Architecture Studio Hangzhou, China

# Lu Wenyu Wang Shu

Wang Shu & Lu Wenyu, with their firm *Amateur Architecture Studio* in Hangzhou, have developed an approach that is radically different from most Chinese architecture. Freeing themselves from Chinese architectural traditionalism and often destructive modernity, they have established new practices that are both inventive and critical. *Amateur Architecture Studio* are builders who explore the relationship between changing architecture and lifestyles in China, poetically interpreting traditional Chinese expertise via contemporary architectural language.

The name of the firm reflects their interest in vernacular Chinese architecture, which is craftsmanlike, affordable, spontaneous, and often impermanent. Eager to preserve traditional techniques and expertise, *Amateur Architecture Studio* adopts a critical stance with regard to the profession of the architect in China which, in a context of urban and rural upheaval, places image above use and yields all too often to the lure of finance and symbolic representation. The firm tackles the issue of the wholesale destruction and poorly planned reconstruction of Chinese cities. They use their expertise to serve “contemporary tradition”. They defend the professionalism of amateur architecture, and yet this is a very serious conceptual exercise as it involves thinking about how people live their lives. They carry out their architectural work like artisans who are also expert innovators. This is an experimental approach in the literal sense, with no theoretical presuppositions. The work of *Amateur Architecture Studio* focuses on reinterpreting local traditional architecture and involves recycling and re-use. Repurposed materials, traditional crafts and ancestral building methods are all sources of inspiration. For **Wang Shu** and **Lu Wenyu**, form is of secondary importance. Architecture is not artistic, though they are not opposed to art. The language of art simply draws inspiration from architecture, making it possible to build with a great deal of freedom. Over the last ten years, *Amateur Architecture Studio* has created a remarkable body of work and a unique style that challenges the role of the architect today, in China and beyond.

**Francine Fort** general director, arc en rêve centre d’architecture

curated by

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Wang Shu, public lecture  
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Since 1981 arc en rêve centre d'architecture has elaborated a cultural awareness-building strategy focusing on contemporary architecture and extending into city planning, landscape design, aimed at broadening perceptions of a changing world. Its internationally recognised programme features exhibitions, lectures, public discussions, publications, workshops for children, seminars for adults, visits to buildings, city tours, and planning experiments.

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***Reducing tradition to a decorative symbol and then applying it to the surface of a modern construction... That’s exactly what kills the true meaning of tradition.*** Wang Shu

The chairman of the Pritzker Prize jury, when it was awarded to you, explained the jury’s decision in these words: “The question of the ideal relationship between past and present comes at just the right time, because the urbanisation of China raises the question of whether architecture should be anchored in the past or only look towards the future. As with any major architectural work, the work of Wang Shu transcends this debate and produces architecture that is profoundly anchored in its environment while remaining timeless and universal.”  
**Wang Shu** : For me, tradition has always existed, just like my devotion to it. When I graduated, I left the academic circuit, not only in terms of reading its codes: my whole life moved away from that circle. Because I realised that studies alone are not enough: the most important thing is to change your way of life. If our life is a total break with tradition, we can’t understand tradition. I live in the countryside, and I look at nature and the fields with my own eyes. That’s how you can really feel nature and observe the changing seasons, not just as a tourist.

For about ten years you worked with your builders, learning from them; you once even made a list of the names of all the workers who had contributed to one of your buildings. You have a very concrete way of understanding tradition.  
**W. S.** : Yes, when dealing with tradition, you have to get inside what is most fundamental about it, you have to concentrate on something concrete and assimilate it in a very profound way. Only then can you start talking about that tradition. Otherwise, discussion on the subject remains broad and empty, and you end up turning the past into a mere symbol, into something artificial and false. The tradition I’m talking about here isn’t something pretty displayed in a museum, it’s more of a technique, a present, living memory in the hands of artisans. If they have no work, those memories will disappear, and our tradition will die with them. As I’ve always said: first of all, I myself changed. When I realised I knew nothing about Chinese tradition, and that the knowledge we get from reading books is actually dull and uninteresting, I got closer to those workers and I began to understand that the essential secrets are preserved in their hands. It goes beyond architecture: if you read Zhuangzi (the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE Chinese philosopher who founded Taoism), you’ll see that many of his fables are about artisans, for example *The Butcher Cuts Up An Ox* (*Páo dīng jiě niú*). It’s a great Chinese tradition: practice and wisdom are never separate, and philosophical discussion must always be rooted in everyday life: the two must be closely linked. Ideas are always drawn from practical, concrete things: we can learn philosophical ideas from the experience of calligraphy, painting, furniture making, house building, hydraulic construction, and so on.

In terms of city planning, a lot of effort has been put into the urbanisation process over the past few years.  
**W. S.** : This subject requires a very wide-reaching cultural vision. Everyone says that the next great hope for the development of China is urbanisation. In the next five or ten years, we predict that 300 million farmers will arrive in the cities. Urbanisation is a really big issue, because it determines the direction our development will take in the future. We must have a fundamental conversation about this: it’s a cultural issue that will have an impact on the overall development of our country. If urbanisation in China goes beyond 50%, its urban population will be 700 million. The whole of Europe only has a population of 500 million, and the USA 300 million. China would be the country with the highest urban population in the world.

That’s why you keep saying that the countryside is so important.  
**W. S.** : Why is the countryside important? Because from an ecological point of view it’s an essential reserve: a huge water storage basin. The development of cities has to take place alongside the development of the countryside. If not, all our natural resources will be damaged. Almost all the food we have today has problems. Arable land is already limited, and it’s being eaten away by property development projects. At the same time, we keep telling farmers they have to produce more, and to meet these impossible goals they have to use pesticides, chemical solutions, transgenic products, and many unacceptable things that just become normal. This is absolutely not healthy agriculture. When you travel through Europe, you see that these countries are already experiencing modernity, but their fields are protected and their countryside is really beautiful. It would be wonderful if we could benefit from modernity and enjoy our magnificent countryside one day.

How can we connect the protection of the countryside and your speciality: architecture?  
**W. S.** : Of course, we’re particularly interested in tradition. We’re attracted to traditional Chinese construction methods and traditional materials. We learn things from tradition and apply them to new forms of architecture. For years, our new projects have been based on a lot of research on this subject. I also introduce the results of our research into my educational programme, so that the students learn to do the same. We have a lot of knowledge about tradition, but you also have to establish physical contact in order to feel it. Only when we reach that level of discipline can we say that we are able to understand that tradition and be the bearers of its legacy. Then we can think about how to improve on a traditional technique and make it more relevant to modern society. In our laboratory, we analyse soil from different places to find the right

combination with concrete and steel structures. If you don’t ram earth in the traditional way, but with a pneumatic rammer, you have to adjust your method. In the end, the solution has to be feasible with regard to current regulations, in terms of energy saving, for example.

The Pritzker jury appreciated one thing in particular in your work: the way the ecological aspect of your architecture has made it possible to avoid the visual repetitiveness caused by globalisation.  
**W. S.** : Using true tradition is not synonymous with uniformity. It means knowing how to answer one question: how can we ensure that each place finds its unique cultural identity, with its original DNA? The construction of this cultural dignity, this cultural trust, conflicts with the values of industrialisation, which is in a position of strength. How can we counterbalance this? It’s an essential issue. If you go to the countryside, you see great architectural diversity, each region has its own dialect and its own special architecture, the style of the houses changes when you move from one place to another, and those styles have subtle variations. That’s what real culture is. Real fashion is constantly changing. It’s always the product of progress generated by different cultures. Today, everyone talks about globalisation, but everyone needs a recognisable cultural identity, a special vivid colour, to find their place in this context, otherwise we’ll find ourselves on the bottom rung of the ladder within this huge movement.

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**Wang Shu** was born in 1963 in Urumqi, and gained a master’s degree in 1988 from the Nanjing Institute of Technology.  
**Lu Wenyu**, born in 1967, is also a graduate of the Nanjing Institute of Technology.  
Together they set up the Amateur Architecture Studio in Hangzhou in 1997. As well as co-directing the Studio, Wang Shu has been dean of the architecture school at the China Academy of Art in Huangzhou since 2007.



