

The sacred caves

Xu Tiantian is an architect, director of DnA Design and Architecture, founded in Beijing in 2004. She has been the first woman in China to set up her own practice.

Her work has won numerous awards, including the WA China Architecture Award in 2006 and 2008; the Architectural League New York's Young Architects Award in 2008; the Design Vanguard Award of Architectural Record in 2009; the Moira Gemmill Prize for Emerging Architect in 2019; the 14th International Prize for Sustainable Architecture Gold Medal and the Swiss Architectural Award in 2022; the Berlin Art Prize / Kunstpreis Berlin - Architecture, the Global Award for Sustainable Architecture, and the Marcus Prize in 2023.

In 2020, she was appointed Honorary Fellow of the American Institute of Architects.

Xu Tiantian has been heavily involved in the process of revitalising China's rural regions. Her 'architectural acupuncture', a holistic approach to the social and economic revitalisation of rural China that she has developed within her agency, has been selected by UN-Habitat as a case study of inspiring practice on the links between urban and rural areas. Xu Tiantian holds a Master of Architecture in Urban Design (MAUD) from the Harvard Graduate School of Design and a Bachelor of Architecture from Tsinghua University in Beijing.

Since 2000, Unesco included the Longmen grottoes in China on its list of World Heritage sites. This unique Buddhist complex, built over several centuries from the fifth, is one of the many sites that bear witness to the practice of carved caves. As places of worship and pilgrimage, these caves are not unrelated to the Huangyan quarry complex. In both cases, the architecture is highly contextual, with the architectural form carved in negative into the stone. The space is carved out of the rock and not, as in the case of a conventional structure, erected on a plan. At Huangyan, however, the space is not designed for worship, even if some of the proposed uses, such as meditation, reading or entertainment, may evoke behaviour similar to that of a sacred place.

The Huangyan quarries are thus the desacralised form of these sculpted caves. A site conducive to the experience of the sublime, stripped of its religious dimension. An invitation to share in the formal richness of a place that has been built up over centuries of quarrying.

The Huangyan experience has yet to find its feet. Time and use will tell whether it will be a place for individual contemplation or collective awareness-raising: about mankind's capacity to redevelop the high points of its environmental toxicity.

Repairing the wounds of the era of unbridled extraction

More than any other region on the planet, China bears the scars of its rapid urbanisation. The explosive development of the last 40 years has left behind a plethora of extraction sites. The scale of China's urban development suggests a similar quantity of excavated sites, battered mountains and removed rock.

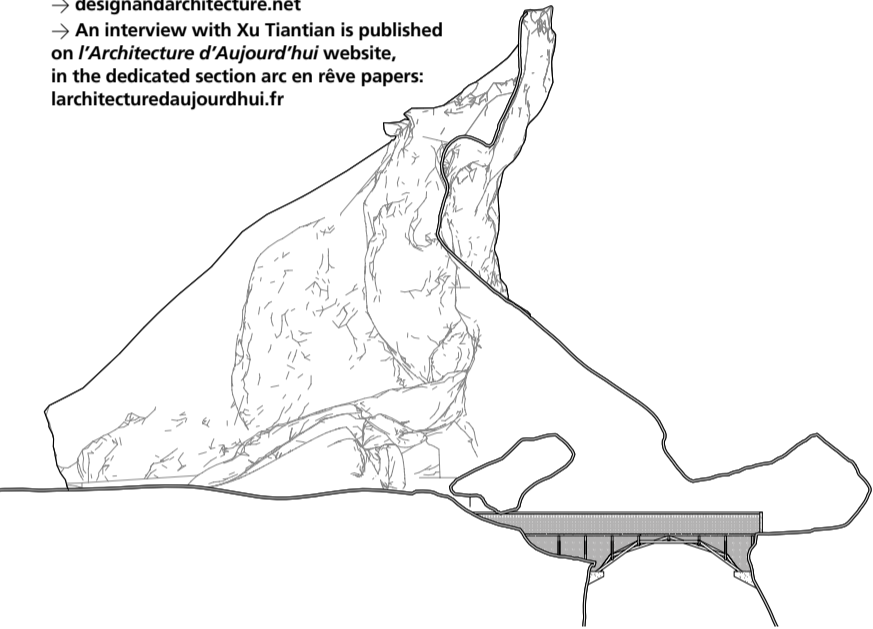
The architectural intervention in the Huangyan quarries stabilises and secures a mountain, which has been mined since the 14th century. In so doing, it erects a monument to the quarrying past that has shaped the site. By offering a social conversion of an industrial production site, the project becomes an open-air showcase of mining techniques. Centuries of mining have given rise to a formal and technical polysemy that the development designed by the DnA agency highlights. By stabilising an extraction site in a given state, the traces of the different phases of mining can be preserved intact. Although not the main objective of the conversion, this aspect of the site comes into play and is one of its main attractions.

A public space

At the heart of Xu Tiantian's approach is the desire to create an open public space. Despite the lure of privatised ventures to profit from the site's natural beauty, such as luxury hotels and exclusive leisure parks, Xu Tiantian negotiated with Taizhou city authorities to realise her vision. She advocated the exclusion of inappropriate proposals and prioritised the creation of a space accessible to all. From the outset, the project was defined as a public reclamation of a disused industrial area. As in the case of the Zollverein mining complex in the Ruhr, the reconverted site carries its public character in its genes. By activating services and administrations that do not share the same project culture, the Huangyan revitalization project is paving the way for a method that can be likened to social design. It is a reproducible approach that makes it possible for stakeholders who are unaccustomed to stepping outside their field of expertise to work together. In this way, the negative public space engraved in stone becomes a symbol of the activation of distinct services to achieve a shared objective: the common good.

→ designandarchitecture.net

→ An interview with Xu Tiantian is published on *l'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* website, in the dedicated section *arc en rêve* papers: larchitectureaujourd'hui.fr



stone voids

Xu Tiantian,
DnA Design and Architecture

exhibition

25 04 → 27 10 2024

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25 04 2024, 18:30

by

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guided tours

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Huangyan quarries, March 2024 / © DnA Design and Architecture

Over the last ten years or so, Xu Tiantian's name has been associated with numerous infrastructure revitalisation projects in rural China. By approaching architecture as a lever for regional development, the architect draws on local traditions and know-how to trigger new dynamics and revitalise local economies. In this long-term undertaking, the transformation of a former stone quarry in Jinyun into a public space in 2019 has been a highlight. There are still 3,000 abandoned quarries in Jinyun county alone, a heritage with enormous potential for this Chinese hinterland, which has been deeply affected by the rural exodus and is now looking for a new vocation.

In the wake of this initial repair work, the project to convert the Huangyan quarries in the city of Taizhou involves returning 20,000 m² of disused space to the community and gradually reactivating them. Dedicated to this new project by the office DnA, founded by Xu Tiantian in 2004, the exhibition **stone voids** presents the development of these rocky galleries, the studies on the ecosystem that has formed there over the years and the dialogue with the local community that the architect set up throughout the project.

The presentation of this highly symbolic conversion is also an opportunity to question the future of this industrial heritage at a local level: no fewer than 1,400 quarries have been identified in the Gironde department in recent years.

An exhibition produced in partnership with
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