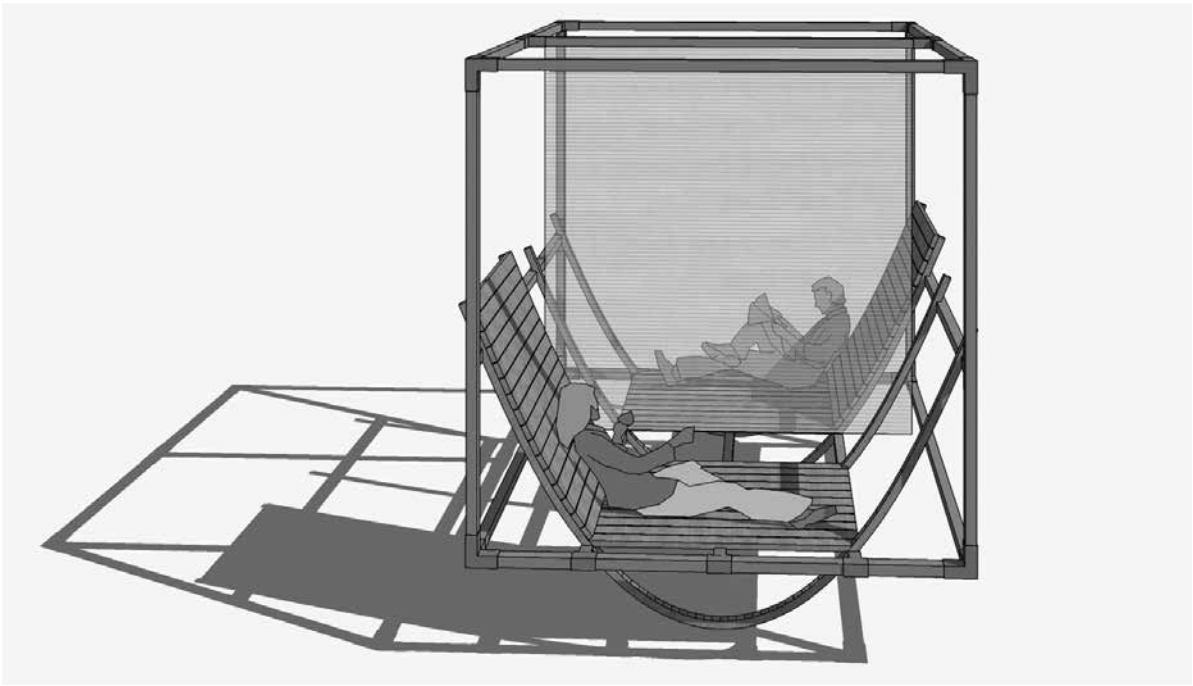


1a



1b

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Four case study projects from URBANUS develop a bottom-up, everyday architecture, which poses as a challenge to top-down, non-everyday practices.

Designing the everyday

Hui Wang

No successful architectural practice in contemporary society can avoid contemplating the following conceptual pairing. The 'everyday', which refers to frameworks and conditions that support human life, can be understood in terms of a bottom-up perspective on individual needs, wants, actions, and interactions. This can be set-up in contrast to the 'non-everyday', referring to institutionalised systems and their activities understood from a top-down perspective centred on the collective whole, such as the state and the market, and its institutions (government offices, corporations, banking systems, and so on). Thus, the pairing of 'everyday' and 'non-everyday' can be imagined as representing two often opposing forces in the processes of architectural production: the latter interested in an architecture as a grand pictorial or figural representation of the institution; and the former concerned with architecture as a temporal or spatial framework, occupied by the events of everyday life. These two forces can be seen as incompatible in many respects. It is worthwhile to ask whether contemporary architects are sufficiently prepared to operate gracefully in-between the two. Specifically, it is important to question whether a Chinese architect is capable of designing the 'everyday' in the context of contemporary China, while his or her professional experience mostly comprises projects of the 'non-everyday'.

At a first glance, in terms of architecture, the worlds of the 'everyday' and the 'non-everyday' seem to operate on different scales. The former perhaps refers to the scale of the small, informal and private; while the latter refers to the big, formal and public. A common mistake in designing around subjects of different scales is to apply an all-encompassing strategy in the hope of unifying the seemingly incompatible. On many occasions, people have taken for granted that a set of typologies is universal in relation to different scales of objects. For example, an assumption is made that small towns can be planned following methods drawn from the metropolis, and that ideas for large buildings are also applicable to small structures. These mistakes stem from a more profound habit of thought that understands macrocosm and microcosm as structurally consistent. Traditional Chinese urban design may best illustrate such a belief. For example, an old Chinese city contains urban elements of different scales, such as palaces, temples, and residences that appear similar to each other, which in the end achieve a harmonic unity where the whole city appears composed of one type of species. This tradition of holistic thinking is reinforced in modern architecture by the concept of 'total design', which advocates that a complex should be designed consistently in every aspect of its different scales. This idea also encourages architects to deal with projects of different scales with what might be imagined as a simple universal methodology. However, it is clear that the rules of design are not inherently transferable between scales. Furthermore, the 'everyday' and the 'non-everyday', as defined here, do not always appear distinctively dissimilar in scale. For instance, in a rural village centre or a country marketplace, public and institutional activities may occur informally without the appearance or image of institutional grandness.

Discourse on the public realm

So, what is the nature of the line between the 'everyday' and the 'non-everyday', the bottom-up and the top-down, the individual and the institutional? The political theorist Hannah Arendt's discourse on the public realm, and the private, gives us a clue to better understand the issues at hand.[1] She notes sensitively that, in ancient Greek society, there was a distinct boundary between the public and the private realm that differentiates the roles of a citizen. Arendt points out the historical fact that ancient Greeks could be in completely different states of being between city spaces and their domestic home. To be specific, under the systems of patriarchy and slavery, the goal of the private realm was to maintain individual livelihoods and some kind of racial continuation, and therefore tyranny, violence, and inequality

1 *a, b* Case 1: With whom to sit together.

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were seemingly justified as inevitable. This dark control over the necessities of the production of life presented itself as the precondition that enabled a small proportion of the population, a male elite, to be elevated into the public political arena. Compared to this seemingly tyrannical private realm, people in the public realm apparently pursued freedom and equality. Arendt reflected that the chasm between the public and the private realm in the ancient world gradually disappeared in later societies. That is to say, the modern period witnessed the boundary between the two sectors becoming more and more blurred. Moreover, the unique organisational principles of the ancient Greek household became replaced by public principles, namely, in a feudal society, the replacement of the family tyranny model by the state tyranny model. Furthermore, in the liberal capitalist age, the vertex of social order becomes replaced by the impersonal power of economy. Arendt further claimed that the shift from private realm to public is actually an invasion into the private realm. As the boundary gets broken, private life is exposed, private property becomes exchangeable in the public market, and eventually, the private realm becomes imagined as something to be eliminated in a Utopian society. In the course of global modernisation, the private realm has been constantly assimilated into the public sector.

In Arendt's formulation, the difference between a private domain and a public domain in human life is closely related to the distinction between the household and political/social environments, which connotes a spatial divide. Meanwhile, the conceptual opposition of the 'everyday' and the 'non-everyday' is first a spatial split, and subsequently a separation of events happening over time. The events of the 'everyday' occur at home when taking place in private spaces, and those of the 'non-everyday' in public spaces. Such was the case in ancient Greece, as demonstrated by Arendt. If these ideas about ancient life are to be believed, the boundary between private and the public was once clearly defined, the 'everyday' and the 'non-everyday' were obviously separated. However, in later times when the local 'private' gets sacrificed to the national and global 'public', the 'everyday' can be all-too-easily dominated, indeed eliminated, by the 'non-everyday' in the dimensions of both time and space. The imaginary line between the 'everyday' and the 'non-everyday' tends to become distorted as a result of the spatial blurring between the private and the public. Thus, the identity of the 'everyday' becomes threatened, deprived, and repressed.

In the context of China, especially in the last two decades, the triumph of urbanisation has brainwashed public minds with a grand narrative of gentrification. A systematic design doctrine and methodology has been developed to equip architects to fulfil every type of project with a single cure-all approach. In this manner, design methodology established for the 'non-everyday' dominates and replaces that for the 'everyday'. It can be argued that working knowledge gained from one framework of architectural production might hardly be valid on the other. Many contemporary projects in China become more of a vehicle whereby institutional images are projected and conveyed. Meanwhile, the voices that express individual needs, wants, actions, and interactions are often not included in the discussion. When the strategies to cope with grand narrative issues become useful for architects, the private sector becomes the instrument for their application, and therefore the everyday gets sacrificed by the 'non-everyday'. The resulting built environment consequently often lacks the necessary depth, vigour, and sensibility at the human scale.

Hence, it is important to promote a discourse about protecting the 'everyday'. Such protection may retrieve territory from the 'non-everyday' back to the 'everyday', or sustain the survival of the 'everyday' within the ever-expanding scope of the 'non-everyday'. It is necessary to search for, and develop, a set of design methodologies in order to restore the 'everyday'. In China after some twenty years of urbanisation, the most urgent subject of study is now about how to design from a different perspective than that of grand narrative gentrification and to allow the 'everyday' to regain its vitality even in the public domain.

In the course of China's urbanisation, the architectural practice URBANUS has sought to make the city more dynamic and attractive. The 'everyday', as it accords with the synergies of contemporary life, has been a recurrent research theme.

Case study 1: with whom to sit together?

During Beijing International Design Week in 2015, an outdoor exhibition entitled 'Building Dreams through Bamboo' was planned at the south plaza of the China Millennium Monument, a landmark that had become less and less attractive to the general public after its inauguration at a magnificent state event on the Millennium night of New Year 2000. The exhibition aimed to install public devices to energise this lifeless square. Ten architects were invited to participate and asked to design a cubic block of 2.5 x 2.5 m, using the given material of laminated bamboo, to activate the plaza.

It can be argued that the 'everyday' in China is to be found less frequently in the absolute private realm. For instance, family gatherings happen more in restaurants rather than in domestic spaces. Indeed, China's cities have provided sufficient free public space to embrace the 'everyday' publicly. However, the public realm is hardly an ideal domain for supporting the 'privatised' everyday, given that it is mostly designed around grand narrative forms that appear aloof to casual inhabitation.

Our solution was to transform the cubic pavilion into a 'rocking chair' [1a,b]. This design sought to bind a pair of strangers together in a shared

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device where only their cooperative effort could make the chair rock rhythmically. A curtain placed in the middle eased embarrassment amongst the two strangers, and a subtle slice of opening encouraged an ambiguous relationship, indeed attraction, between them. In this instantaneous space, strangers tended to take part in short interactions, keeping open the possibilities of unpredictable occurrences and stories. This is the very nature of the everyday, full of potentials in random occurrence. Our design was intended to play the role of catalyst to promote unpredictable connections. Without losing the feeling of privacy, the rocking chair design seeks to engage the private realm in the public one, to create an easy route for the communication of strangers.

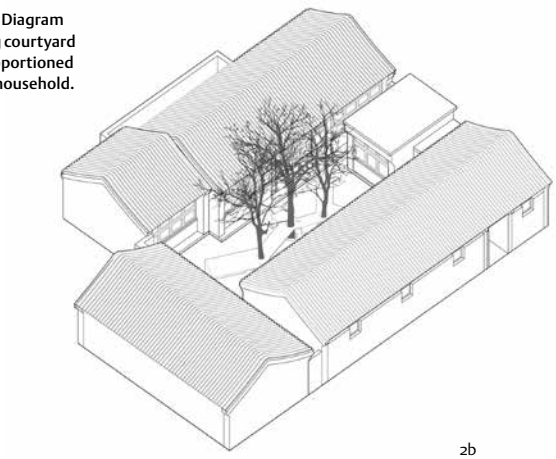
Case study 2: a shared table

The hutong courtyard is a famous housing typology native to Beijing *[2a]*. It is typically composed of four housing units surrounding a central courtyard in a quadrilateral shape. Like a grid, the courtyards can increase in number depending on the wealth of the family. Over the past century, the ownership of the hutong courtyards became increasingly blurred due to the decline in ownership that was a result of the abolition of land ownership following the establishment of the New China. As a result, the hutong courtyard is now occupied mostly through rental, and its former one-family housing type has dissolved into shared living by multiple families. Neighbours fight to expand each household's territory into the public yard, and

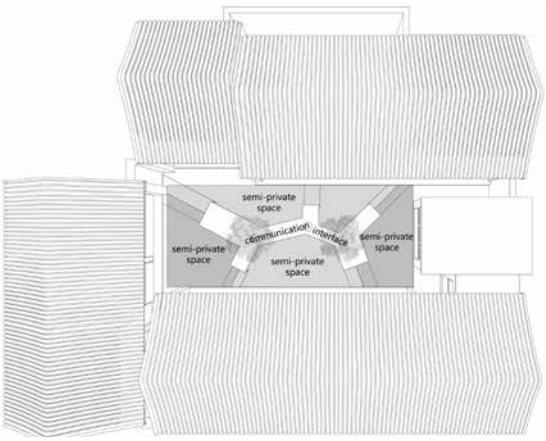


2a

2 *a* Case 2: Original courtyard.
b Case 2: View of courtyard from above.
c Case 2: Diagram showing courtyard space apportioned to each household.



2b



2c

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2d



2e

2 *d, e* **Case 2: Shared table.**

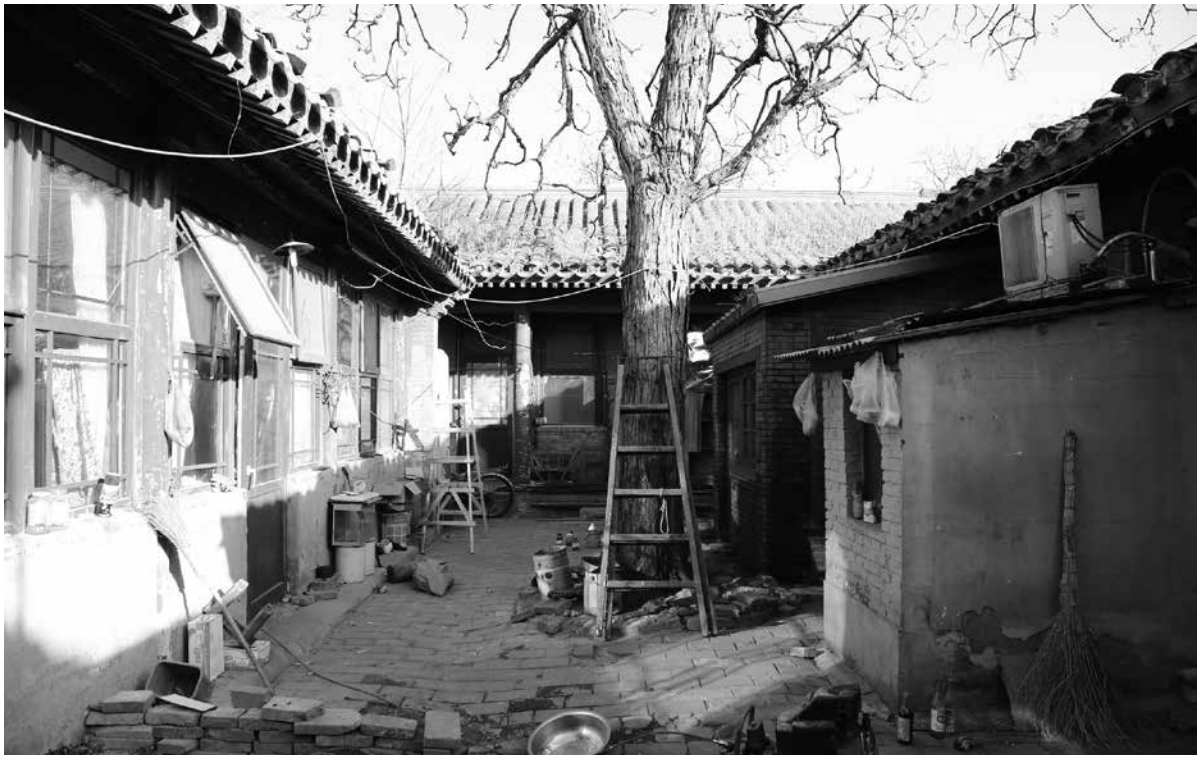
eventually the public domain becomes a minimal, leftover circulation space full of junk. A latent rule is that neighbours do not criticise each other for taking advantage of the public domain, but secretly compete with each other to gain more space. In doing so, a well-ordered courtyard type becomes dissolved into a chaotic community.

While this scenario in connection with the everyday courtyard house is perhaps to be regretted, the intense competition for public space in the hutong somehow retains the vitality of neighbourhood life in contrast with sterile collective dwelling in high-end apartments. Living in a communal courtyard, neighbours have to share resources like tap water and toilets. The shortage of these public resources actually promotes social bonding, forcing residents to interact with each other. By contrast, the abundance of resources in well-equipped modern housing tends to segregate people into total privacy.

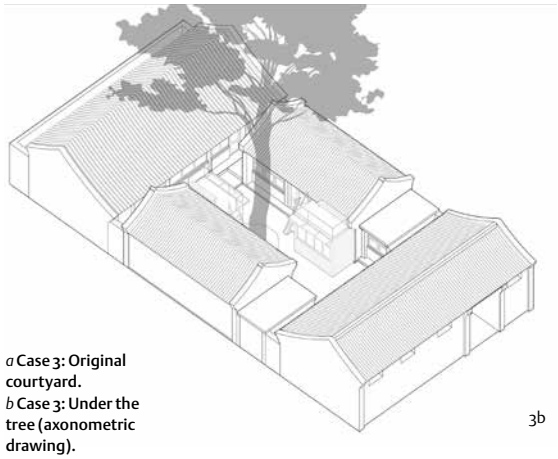
Our design intent has been to transform the difficult reality of hutong life into a positive situation by refining the boundary between neighbours. The idea of a shared table was offered as a solution. The first step was to divide the courtyard into private domains attached to each household, and then to thicken the boundary between the adjacent parts by a width of about ninety centimetres *[*2b,*c]*. When parts of this thickened border are raised to a suitable height, it forms a concrete table *[*2d,*e]*. The table functions as a fence to define each semi-private domain, as well as to generate a peaceful place to invite neighbours to sit and share their leisure time. This boundary is therefore not some kind of demilitarised zone in a game of space invasion, but instead a shared platform for playing cards and chess, eating and drinking, as well as perhaps decorating the table with flowers, bird cages and fish tanks.

Additionally, for each unit we designed, we proposed that potential spaces under the pitched roofs would be fully used so that each household had enough indoor storage to prevent them from piling their possessions outside and jeopardising the communal quality of the courtyard.

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3a



3b

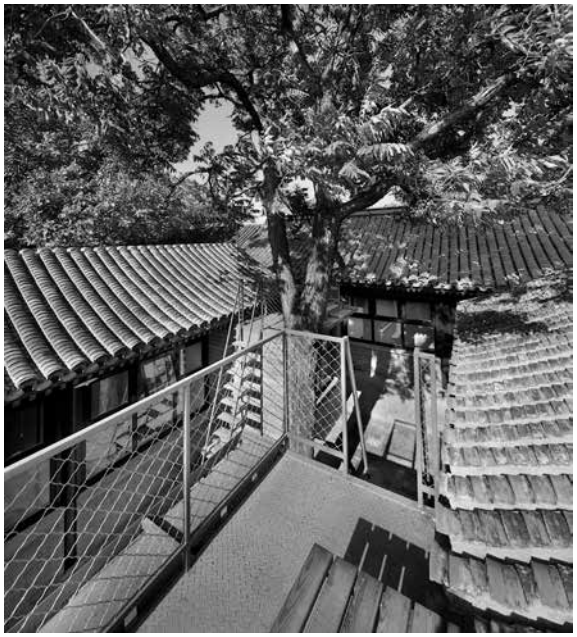
3 *a* Case 3: Original courtyard.
b Case 3: Under the tree (axonometric drawing).
c Case 3: Under the tree, ground level view.
d Case 3: Under the tree, deck level view.

Case study 3: under the tree

This design was inspired by the illegal huts built by tenants in the original hutong courtyards *[3a]*. In Beijing's hutong housing, illegal additions have become an idiosyncratic symbol of shared living. When most of the new solutions to restore the dignity of the courtyards sought to gentrify chaotic existence into neater forms of life, our approach was instead to seek measures for their refinement based on real life. The focus of this courtyard design was to develop an everyday story around a tree in the centre. Each of the houses flanking the tree was supplemented by a small hut, the footprint of which occupied some part of the public space. The loss of public space was compensated for with



3e



3d

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a rooftop deck approached by a ladder [3b,c]. The ladder was deliberately designed with composite functions. Its lower part was enlarged to become benches and a table on which people can dine and work, in addition to hiding the outdoor air conditioning unit. Arriving at the roof deck, residents could enjoy a totally different space enlivened by proximity to the tree top, overlook people on another roof deck, take a nap on the bench above the roof tiles, chat with neighbours from a higher elevation, or even sun-dry laundry on the roof [3d]. The intention was to provide a more romantic setting for such everyday activities.

As the everyday begins from each individual's personal interests and concerns, it might inevitably have negative impacts on public order. This is obvious in the cases of illegal construction in hutong courtyards in Beijing. When gentrification takes place, the demolition of these structures is always taken for granted. However, when the quantity of such demolition has become increasingly large, architects should be aware that a typologically-distinctive architectural species is in danger of extinction. Generated by real needs of everyday life, such structures can be celebrated as buildings without architects. We architects should rescue this typology by elevating it to a more desirable form in order to maintain the vitality of the everyday.

4 *a* Case 4: The relic site of Dragon Spring (before).
b Case 4: The relic site of Dragon Spring (after).

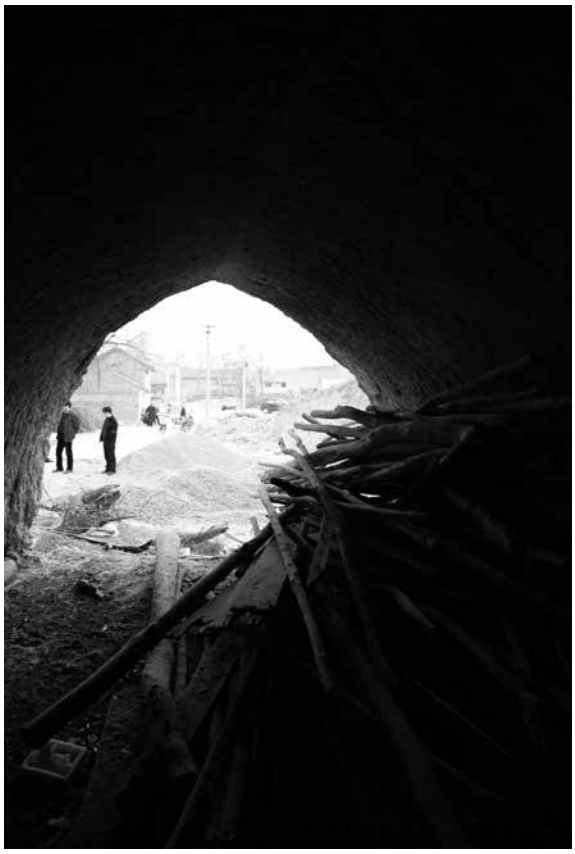


4a



4b

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5a



5b

5 *a* Case 4: View through the cave (before).
b Case 4: View through the cave (after).



6a



6b

6 *a* Case 4: Arched cave (before).
6 *b* Case 4: Arched cave (after).



7a



7b

7 *a* Case 4: View of the main temple from the northwest (before).
b Case 4: View of the main temple from the northwest (after).

Case study 4: a spiritual centre regained

According to the philosopher Martin Heidegger, human dwellings should be destined to realise the unity of what he called the fourfold relationship between earth, heavens, divinities, and mortals in order to provide the ultimate shelter for human being.[2] Heidegger's architectural followers have argued that modernist instrumental rationality tends to imagine housing purely in terms of numbers to be contained, of physical considerations, that the divine tends to get excluded from designed environments. What can

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8a



8b

8 *a* **Case 4: View of the main temple from the east (before).**
b **Case 4: View of the main temple from the east (after).**

9 *a* **Case 4: The viewing platform (before).**
b **Case 4: The viewing platform (after).**



9a



9b

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be imagined as this extreme rationalism tends to result negatively, which we have witnessed as architects in the course of a heritage rehabilitation project.

Located in Ruicheng County, in Shanxi province in China, the Five Dragons Temple is thought to be the second oldest standing timber structure, and the oldest surviving Taoist temple in China. Therefore, it is under the protection of the National Key Cultural Relic Protection Unit. Historically, the Five Dragons Temple underwent several repairs, although none altered the underlying structure, which date back to the Tang Dynasty. However, despite its cultural significance, its status is not commensurate with its surroundings. Indeed, its humble appearance resulted in its receiving only a handful of visitors a year.

Situated on a ridge raised above the surrounding village, the temple itself is also segregated from the everyday life of the villagers. The original picturesque view of the temple lost its charm due to the increasing alteration of the surrounding environment *[4–9, showing before and after]*. Also, with improvements in modern irrigation techniques, people no longer deem rain prayers to be necessary, transforming Five Dragons Temple from a spiritual centre into a relic. A final component in the decay of this former village spiritual centre has been its well-intended historic preservation. Its timber structure enshrined



10



11

10 Case 4: View of the Five Dragons Temple from the entrance pathway.

11 Case 4: Court of Dougong.

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13

the temple as a national first-class historical monument, therefore a wall was built to fence it off from the everyday life of the villagers. From late 2013 to early 2015, the National Heritage Department restored the architecture of the temple to its former glory. However, its surrounding environment continued to be neglected, and its conditions have since worsened. With the improvement of living standards in adjacent rural areas, farmers have also begun to build around the temple ridge, creating further chaos around the site. It thus became important to redesign the surroundings of Five Dragons Temple, alleviating the disintegrating environment while elevating the temple as a historic destination for architectural pilgrimage [10, 11].

Against the relatively conservative context of Chinese heritage conservation, our designs sought to employ contemporary thinking towards environmental improvement, centred on two themes. A more obvious theme was to design a series of courtyards revolving around the temple to create an open architectural museum dedicated to telling the history of the temple and the ancient architecture of China [12–15]. This would encourage people to learn about traditional Chinese architecture through the ages, helping them better understand the importance of this place and thus

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bolster the villagers' self-confidence about their cultural identity. The other latent theme was to transform the outdated religious facility into an area for everyday congregation in the village, changing the historic surroundings of the ancient temple to be more compatible with contemporary lifestyles *[16–19]*.

The significance of this project lies in its effort to restore a spiritual homeland for the villagers. China's construction boom has made farmers 'homeless'. On the one hand, they are the major labour force in urbanisation, even though they have not yet been given citizen status in urban areas. On the other hand, much of their meagre earnings from urban construction work is directed towards rebuilding their dilapidated houses in their home villages, where they still feel a sense of belonging. Meanwhile, the qualities of their once picturesque villages now lay deteriorating due to the concrete constructions that they helped to build.

This constructive deconstruction effectively exiles them in their own homeland, neither belonging to the village way of life nor the urban environment of a city. In this context, we believe that it is necessary to re-establish a new spiritual system based on physical architectural spaces, therefore our environmental improvement project was not only about a practical facelift, but even more about a lifting of spirit to help the villagers regain their own sense of existence and presence. In Heideggerian terms, seeking to refresh divinity in architecture, this design aims to enact a new unity of earth and heavens, divinities and mortals. Therefore, rather than annexing tradition with modernity, we have sought to preserve tradition in its modern capacity. As modern times tend to promote material fulfilment, the divine aspect in the everyday arguably fades away, and eventually, modern people become exiled from the potential peace of the everyday. We architects need to reconsider this human condition



14



15

12 Case 4: Court of meditation and gallery of precinct ancient buildings.

13 Case 4: The timeline and the section of the temple in the court of entry.

14 Case 4: View of the Five Dragons Temple from the theatre stage.

15 Case 4: Court of meditation.

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16



17

and develop an ontological thinking in relation to the real needs of the everyday, in the hope of finding opportunities to solve the problems of the everyday.

A concluding reflection

Not limited to the private realm, the everyday distinguishes itself from the non-everyday by way of its own distinctive built forms. The everyday can be understood as the realm where the real needs of human beings are negotiated and enacted.

While architects conventionally gain most of their professional skills and knowledge from designing non-everyday projects, they should also be sensitised to the concerns of the everyday. Currently, China's construction sector is undergoing a significant change, from a period of expansion to one of shrinkage. It is therefore an appropriate moment for architects to shift their design mentality from the Odyssey of the grand narrative to the ordinary of the everyday.

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16 Case 4: The celebration held by villagers after completion of the project.

17 Case 4: The celebration.

18 Case 4: Villagers back on the site.

19 Case 4: Villagers sitting in the temple yard.



18



19

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URBANUS Architecture & Design Inc., all images

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Author's biography
Hui Wang is a New York State-registered architect practicing in China, and is one of the three founding partners of URBANUS along with Xiaodu Liu and Yan Meng. Established in 1999, URBANUS is a leading architectural practice in China, and its achievements were recognised through awards, exhibitions, and publications. Aside from architectural practice, Hui Wang has also lectured in many distinguished universities in China, teaching part-time in Tsinghua University, and has been a guest speaker at many renowned institutions worldwide. The Five Dragons Temple was recently nominated by Beazley, and will be exhibited at The Design Museum in London.

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