

WestminsterResearch

<http://www.westminster.ac.uk/westminsterresearch>

**Towards a New Normal: The Blurred Landscape of Architectural
Research in China**

Zhang, J.

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Zhang, J. 2019. Towards a New Normal: The Blurred Landscape of Architectural Research in China. *Architectural Design*, 89 (3), pp. 120-125, doi:10.1002/ad.2445, which has been published in final form at:

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1002/ad.2445>.

This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving.

The WestminsterResearch online digital archive at the University of Westminster aims to make the research output of the University available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the authors and/or copyright owners.

Whilst further distribution of specific materials from within this archive is forbidden, you may freely distribute the URL of WestminsterResearch: (<http://westminsterresearch.wmin.ac.uk/>).

In case of abuse or copyright appearing without permission e-mail repository@westminster.ac.uk

This is the accepted version of the following article:

Zhang, J. (2019), Towards a New Normal: The Blurred Landscape of Architectural Research in China. *Archit. Design*, 89: 120-125.
doi:[10.1002/ad.2445](https://doi.org/10.1002/ad.2445)

which has been published in final form at [<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/ad.2445>]. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with the Wiley Self-Archiving Policy [<http://olabout.wiley.com/WileyCDA/Section/id-820227.html>].

Towards a New Normal The Blurred Landscape of Architectural Research in China

STANDFIRST:

The legacy of Soviet influenced Communism and 40 years of market-led reform have given the Chinese architectural professional a unique profile. Architect and researcher **John Zhang**, who teaches a China-focused studio at the University of Westminster in London, sets out its three main strands, each of which blends domains that are largely separate in the West. From state-owned Local Design Institutes often affiliated to universities, to commercial developers with in-house design capabilities, to a new generation of theoretically engaged architects who use their practice as means to establish their critical positions, he investigates their genealogy and approaches, and explores their pros and cons as models of architectural practice.

Architectural research within academia, practice and the market are often perceived to be taking place in isolation, despite the pressure on these ever-shrinking 'islands' to be more communicative and valuable to each other. To this end China offers a global and non-Eurocentric counterpoint, where architectural research is increasingly taking place over a blurred landscape that straddles the three domains.

Between Academia and Practice

In contrast to the UK model, architectural research and pedagogy in China does not exist in an isolated academia, but is exposed to the world of practice via university-affiliated state-owned architectural practices.

This is largely a legacy of the era under China's first Communist leader Mao Zedong (1949–76) when Soviet models shaped the forms of expression, the means of professional practice, and the structure of pedagogy in Chinese architecture. Architecture schools became a part of the state apparatus, and the profession was nationalised into a system of state-owned practices, better known today in the West as Local Design Institutes (LDIs).

With matters of style beyond debate (China having already adopted wholesale Soviet influenced Socialist Realism), architecture research and pedagogy became more practically and technically focused, which logically led to the birth of the university-affiliated LDIs, operated by architecture schools themselves. In the post-Mao era, thanks largely to market-oriented reforms and a professional regulatory system skewed heavily in their favour, the LDIs and their affiliation with architecture schools have survived the collapse of the Soviet paradigm. Today, some of the largest and most prominent practices in China are LDIs, and some of the most prominent LDIs are still affiliates of the most renowned Chinese architecture schools.

Such a relationship between academia and practice presents a series of perceived advantages for those in the West who wish for a closer proximity between teaching, research and practice. The income from the LDI contributes towards greater financial independence and funding for the development of practical knowledge as well as more theoretical, historical and reflective inquiries, which are so often underfunded. In reciprocity, university-affiliated LDIs can also gain a broader spectrum and greater depth of knowledge, making them more competitive. From a pedagogical

perspective, the exposure to and immersion in the professional environment of the LDI provide students with precious experience of the realities of practice.

To a certain extent, this is indeed the case with Tongji University and its affiliate LDI, Tongji Architecture Design Group (TJAD), whose success is built upon the rich history of cross-pollination of knowledge and expertise with the university, where many of the TJAD architects are also academics undertaking teaching, research and practice activities simultaneously. Reciprocally, a significant amount of the university's research output is directly commissioned by TJAD, which often takes the form of consultative research as part of live projects, further blurring the boundary between research and practice. Pedagogically, many of the students from the school interns at TJAD, and go on to become employees at the LDI, which remains a popular destination for graduates, despite the appeal of foreign architects and boutique design-led studios. With such retention of talent, TJAD has also become the incubator for some of China's new generation of more critically engaged design talents, such as Atelier Deshaus, whose principal directors both studied at Tongji University and worked at TJAD.

Figure 1.tif

However, it would be naive to think that such a model is without flaws. architects in university affiliated LDIs are expected to be income generators for the practice to prosper, while simultaneously contributing to teaching and researching hours within the school. When the management structure of education, research and practice overlap under the same ambiguous institutional umbrella, the commercial impetus inevitably competes with the pedagogical and research priorities of academia. Consequently, the method and purpose of architectural education and research can be prone to distortion. This is evident in the nature of many supposedly research-led Masters degrees in Chinese architecture schools, where the students spend a significant amount of their time working for their supervisors as interns, in an exchange between cheap labour and the possibility of job security in a state enterprise.

Between Market and Practice

In another departure from the Western paradigm, real-estate developers have also become a driver of architectural research in China, increasingly circumventing the architect in the design process.

This is a unique consequence of the rapid formation and growth of the Chinese property development market in the reform era. Having emerged in the late 1980s, the first generation of Chinese real-estate developers initially modelled their operations on their nearest professionalised counterparts in Hong Kong and Singapore, quickly finding that they needed more nuanced and locally specific responses to the particular demands of the domestic market. However, they discovered that the architectural profession, at least in the early 1990s, was not quite ready to meet their expectations. The handful of foreign architects who had entered China at the time lacked a full understanding of the complexities of the domestic market and the subtleties of the pattern of demand in China. On the other hand, the archaic LDIs were still undergoing reforms themselves to shake off their Soviet past, lacking the knowledge and experience to produce market-led solutions in sectors that often did not exist in pre-reform China.

In this knowledge gap, Chinese developers were forced to become self-reliant by recruiting and forming their own team of architects and designers to offer in-house design capabilities, in order to meet the challenges of the market and the rapid pace of development. As that pace continued to increase and the market became ever more competitive in the 2000s, maturing developers have further consolidated their design expertise and capabilities, formalising their research and development operations.

The vast research base in Dongguan, Guangzhou, by Vanke, one of China's largest property developers, exemplifies this consolidation of research on the developer side.¹ On a site of 130,000 square metres (1.4 million square feet), the Vanke Architecture Research Centre comprises a series of research and public-engagement facilities in a campus landscape designed by Chinese architecture firm Z+T Studio. The on-site buildings, with the exception of the zero-carbon centre designed by GBBN, are designed in-house by Vanke itself. Hosting developer-led research that

feeds directly back into the business, the site contains labs to test the performance of various exterior and interior materials, along with a plethora of research spaces set aside for collaboration with various universities' postdoctoral research programmes. With an increasing proportion of Vanke's construction utilising prefabrication, a large factory workshop space is provided for the prototyping and testing of prefabricated building elements, whilst another area showcases full-size prefabricated prototype housing units with internal layouts and finishes fully installed. A full-scale structural concrete shell tower replicates the conditions of a residential high-rise, used to test drainage, air-conditioning and firefighting systems in-situ. The site is run on sustainable energy, processed on site, which also hosts a Zero Carbon Centre aimed at public engagement and education. The landscape contains ponds and wetlands that harvest rain and grey water from the site, clean them through filtration beds and feed back into the water supply system.

Figure 2.tiff
Figure 3.tiff

Vanke is not an anomaly. Nine of the 10 largest real-estate developers have some form of in-house design, research and development organisation.² As such, professional architects are increasingly excluded from the design process, particularly in the residential sector, which accounts for a substantial segment of the total construction output in China. Architects have become 'window-dressers' in many cases. To the lament of many within the profession, and perhaps as a consequence of the research prowess developers now possess, increasing numbers of architectural graduates are now shunning the traditional career path and joining developers to become client-side designers. The consensus among them is that they are likely to have more control over design quality and it will be easier to affect more significant changes at a more strategic level by working for developers instead of practices.

Between Practice and Academia

Whilst the activities of academics and developers are encroaching into the traditional remit of the practitioner in China, a new generation of Chinese architects are conversely deploying their practice as a form of academic research, using the opportunities afforded to them through commissions to critically address the plethora of challenges that have emerged in the wake of almost four decades of breakneck economic growth.

From the likes of now internationally renowned home-grown auteurs such as Wang Shu and Chang Yung Ho, to younger and lesser-known provocateurs such as Zhang Ke from ZAO/standardarchitecture and Wang Zigeng of PILLS, what unites this diverse range of Chinese architects is a sense of 'criticality' in their different approaches, meaning an awareness of their practice within the wider historical condition of contemporary China, and a reflectivity, through their work, on their resistance, and negation of the system within which their practice takes place.³ As such, their built and unbuilt projects can be understood as a form of research, at once theoretical and practical, through which they can establish their critical position or 'thesis'. The Chinese critic and curator Li Xiangning uses the term 'critical pragmatism'⁴ to describe the endeavours of these avant-garde Chinese architects. This criticality stands in contrast to the 'post-criticality'⁵ of many foreign architects working in China, who had to resort to a sense of pragmatism and compromise in order to reconcile their critical positions against working in a contradiction-laden system where authoritarian rule and hyper-capitalism both prevail.

Figure 4.tiff

It is also important to point out that this critical awareness does not exist only in the debate over history, identity and craft, as exemplified in Wang Shu's particular kind of architecture. There are an increasing number of Chinese architects whose interests lie beyond matters of stylistic expression, and in the effect globalisation and the capitalistic mode of production have had on the constituency of labour, as well as their socio-spatial needs.

One such architect is Han Tao, who teaches at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, and runs his own studio THANLAB. Representative of this crop of practically minded theoreticians, or theoretically minded practitioners, Han believes that the solutions to China's urban

spatial problems lie not in more critique, but in more action. Through his work at the Chinese Academy of Oil Painting over the last 10 years, Han has been exploring the exclave conditions of new forms of communities in contemporary China, as antithesis to the prevailing models of spatial production under state capitalism. In this regard, Han's thinking is influenced by the polemics of Pier Vittorio Aureli – the architect and educator who co-founded the Brussels architectural practice Dogma. For Han Tao, his clients, a community of commercially successful oil painters, are a post-Fordian creative labour force, or 'Cultural Workers',⁵ who are actively engaged in affecting real changes, in order to craft and propagate cultural narratives which either serve to legitimise the status quo or reveal new possibilities.

For Han Tao, the change affected by his clients does not stem from their artistic output, but in their very presence in such exclave conditions on the urban–rural boundary. As such Han's architecture becomes the mean through which this artist community inserts itself into and engages with the local community. Starting from ad-hoc conversions of ex-industrial buildings, the campus has grown to become a monastic collection of structures that draws its inspiration from traditional Beijing settlements, the Florence Charterhouse in Italy (established 1341) and Le Corbusier's Convent of Saint-Marie de la Tourette near Lyon in France (1961). The intellectual intensity in Han's work is evident, and an integral part of the development of his critical positions as an academic, where the built project is clearly a research thesis by practice.

Figure 5.tiff
Figure 6.tiff

Blurred Boundaries

These Chinese precedents show that research thrives when it ventures beyond its traditional confines of the ivory towers. Indeed, in the academic model of the London School of Architecture (see pp xx–xx of this issue), in the post-occupancy research of WeWork (see pp xx–xx of this issue) and in the polemic-driven practice of Assemble (see pp xx–xx of this issue), we are already seeing UK evidence of these endeavours, which blur the boundary between research in academia, practice and the market. However, the Chinese paradigm should also act as a caution, against academic and practice-based research becoming distorted by the market, in an increasingly overlapped landscape.

Text © 2019 John Wiley & Son Ltd. Images: © ???

Notes

1. Subsequent data on Vanke Architecture Research Centre is drawn from the author's field trip: see John Zhang, 'Towards a New Normal: The Relationship Between Foreign and Chinese Architects in Contemporary China', unpublished PhD thesis, Royal College of Art, London, 2018.
2. Data compiled by the author from the Annual Reports of respective property development companies as well as the China Index Academy, a part of National Bureau of Statistics.
3. Jianfei Zhu, 'Criticality in between China and the West', *The Journal of Architecture*, 10 (5), 2005, p 199.
4. Term coined by Li Xiangning as the curator of the 2016 Harvard Graduate School of Design autumn exhibition 'Towards a Critical Pragmatism: Contemporary Chinese Architecture'.
5. Jianfei Zhu, *Architecture of Modern China: A Historical Critique*, Routledge (Oxford), 2009, p 190.
6. See Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Project of Autonomy: Politics and Architecture Within and Against Capitalism*, Princeton Architectural Press (New York), 2008.
7. 韩涛, 贺子明, '中国油画院十年—文化工人, 飞地与重回共同体生活的可能性', *建筑技艺*, 2017 年第 11 期
Transliterated: [Han Tao, He Ziming, 'Zhong Guo You Hua Yuan Shi Nian – Wen Hua Gong Ren, Fei Di Yu Cong Hui Gong Tong Ti Sheng Huo De Ke Neng Xing', *Jian Zhu Ji Yi*, 2017 Nian Di 11 Qi]

Translated: [Ten Years of Chinese Academy of Oil Painting: Cultural Workers, Exclaves, and a Return to the Possibility of Communal Life', *Architectural Techniques*, 2017 Issue 11]

CAPTIONS

Figure 1.tif

Tongji Architectural Design (TJAD), TJAD New Office Building, Shanghai, China, 2011

Whilst still affiliated to Tongji University, TJAD has become one of China's most prominent state-owned architectural practices, with its own premises outside of the campus, in a remodelled bus station.

Group with image below, shared caption label:

Figure 2.tif

Vanke / GBBN / Z+T Studio, Vanke Architectural Research Centre, Dongguan, China, 2013

Within this campus-like site, Vanke designs most of the buildings in-house, with exceptions of the external landscaping and the Zero Carbon Centre, which are designed by Z+T Studio and GBBN respectively.

Figure 3.tif

The prototype yard at the Vanke Architectural Research Centre, showing a segmental mock-up of a decorative concrete facade element.

Figure 4.tif

ZAO / standardarchitecture, Micro-Hutong, Beijing, 2015

Founder Zhang Ke has used the Micro-Hutong project as an experimental prototype for high-density, low-rise, urban living.

Group with image below, shared caption label:

Figure 5.tif

THANLAB, Chinese Academy of Oil Painting, Beijing, 2017

The Lecture Hall at the Chinese Academy of Oil Painting has become a gathering space not only for the enclave of artists but also the local community.

Figure 6.tif

A collage conveys how the identity of this artistic enclave is juxtaposed against major infrastructures and the unstoppable progress of urban expansion.