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Community-minded, small-scale, sustainable: designing for China's 'new normal'

BY BEATRICE LEANZA

In May 2014, less than two years after his ascent to the top of China's ruling Communist Party, President Xi Jinping announced it was time for the country to enter a stabilizing phase of development, or what he labelled a 'new normal'. Xi's 'cooling' economic regime targets a more sustainable rate of growth by implementing financial policies that, in the long run, aim to improve the quality and competitiveness of domestic industries. It also subtends a more significant course of normalization directed at deep-seated imbalances resulting from uneven economic distribution, differing living standards and unabated environmental depletion.

Working within this transitional framework of development, a number of young design practices are responding to contemporary challenges of social fragmentation with pragmatic and ethically minded propositions.

'The internet is offering us new possibilities,' says the architect Zhang Yanping, one of two partners in Wee Studio, established in 2015 and currently based in a 20m² space in a creative cluster off Beijing's fifth ring road. The Studio's Treehouse, built in 2016 in the mountain area of Miyun, northeast of Beijing, is a self-initiated project realized through Kaistart.com, a Chinese crowd-funding platform specifically hosting projects in the design and lifestyle sectors. Within three hours, the project raised more than three times the amount requested (CN¥50,000). Comprising two wooden huts with a combined floor area of 8m², the house includes a studio with bedroom, sanitary facilities and a small observation deck. Fully prefabricated, the project proposes a formula for what Zhang's partner, Dai Haifei, refers to as an 'architecture without ground', which addresses the critical ambiguity of land ownership in China by supplying potential buyers with fully customizable and proprietary mobile units of habitation. (In the People's Republic, all land is in public ownership; land-use rights – a form of leasehold – are granted by the state.)



People's Architecture Office, People's Canopy, 2015, Hong Kong, commissioned by In Certain Places, University of Lancashire. Courtesy: People's Architecture Office, Beijing

Rising Canes, a proposal for a structural system developed by Penda, a young architecture studio based in Beijing and Vienna, similarly engages structural and material modularity with regenerative thinking. It shows how affordable 'landscapes of domesticity' could take shape with ecological alternatives to engulfed urban centres. Their engineered bamboo-and-rope system of triangular, interconnected cabins and platforms could be potentially multiplied into vertical clusters, housing up to 20,000 families.

This growing trend of architectural experimentalism on a small scale reflects the fact that, with ebullient real-estate markets and soaring costs of living in major cities, space is an increasingly unaffordable luxury. This is particularly the case for millennials, who account for more than 30 percent of the population. Unlike in previous generations, where wealth and status have tended to be measured quantitatively – through house size and decor, for instance – this generation's lifestyle choices privilege qualitative spending on basic comfort and flexibility.

Customization, low cost and low-impact materials, plus ease and rapidity of construction, are recipes for a new form of 'architecture as product'. The Beijing-based People's Architecture Office (PAO) first ventured into this territory with their Plug-In renovation system in 2013 (which I wrote about for *frieze* issue 169). This approach was further developed with People's Canopy: a crossover of performative architecture and urban sculpture originally commissioned for the public arts programme 'In Certain Places' in Preston, UK, in 2015. The People's Canopy is a two-storey wheeled structure with an expandable, red-canvas covering that can stretch up to 12m in length to provide shelter for various kinds of public activity. A set of canopies was recently acquired as a public facility by the city of Leuven in Belgium. By enabling relationships between developers, residents and private stakeholders, PAO's self-driven explorations are an expression of regenerative urbanism integrating social and spatial bricolage. The Plug-In House (2016) is an augmented version of the namesake system, which PAO has now realized for two residents in Beijing's Dashilar hutong district, while Mrs Fan's House (2016) expands and partially replaces an old building, adding a kitchen and a bathroom. Its irregular form, which avoids intrusive proximity to neighbouring properties, is the result of onsite adaptations made possible by the flexibility of the prefab system. Based in the same area, the architects' office is regularly visited by locals hoping to improve their modest living quarters. As of 2017, PAO's efforts have won the attention of the Chinese Leping

Social Entrepreneur Foundation, a private non-profit initiative whose investment will hopefully allow their ideas to find more extensive application.

Similar remedial strategies have gained recent international recognition: in November 2016, Zhang Ke of standardarchitecture received a prestigious Aga Khan Award for Micro Yuan'er Children's Library and Art Centre (2012–14). The project is part of the firm's ongoing work in Beijing's hutongs, which aims to tackle the hyper-density and structural unfitness typical of this context with affordable solutions that insert newly made, concrete-and-wood buildings in existing courtyards.

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ve to rebuild a culture of community, to rediscover value in ns. - Zhou Zishu

This attention to an ethics of participation in urban making resonates elsewhere. Designer Zhou Zishu, currently a teacher at the School of Design at Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts, is a graduate of Central Saint Martins, where he first developed the idea for his Digua Community. The project aims to repurpose abandoned basement spaces – which, in Beijing alone, house a population that some estimates put at nearly a million. (The *digua* is a Chinese sweet potato: a living form that grows underground.) With governmental support, the first Digua pilot opened in early 2016 in Beijing's Yayuncun area (the capital's populousmakers and electronics hub) and connects over 9,000 residents with 560m² of neatly designed facilities and community services, including a mini cinema, library and kids' playgrounds. 'In China, we have to rebuild a culture of community, to rediscover value in personal relations,' Zhou comments.

With a similar ethos, the reality-TV series Dream House, produced since 2014 by the

satellite station Dragon TV, challenges local architects with housing renovations that must meet residents' requests and site constraints on limited budgets. From a cramped *lilong* house of 35m² for a multi-generational family in Shanghai (Atelier Deshaus, 2015) to a sea captain's three-storey abode in southern Fujian (Vector Architects, 2016), the show chronicles every endeavour from concept to realization. Each episode takes place against a backdrop of radically disparate living conditions, raising awareness of the complexities of specific local and community contexts. For everyone involved – from the show's producers to the architects and the eventual viewers – Dream House provides an education in the realities of China's social transformation.



ZAO/standardarchitecture, Micro Yuan'er Children's Library and Art Centre, 2012-14, Beijing. Courtesy: ZAO/standardarchitecture, Beijing

Another inspiring initiative is currently underway in Yantai, a second-tier harbour city in Shangdong province. The KwanYan Panorama is an urban revitalization programme for Yantai's 19th-century historic quarter. With the support of the local government and operations managed by a private investor, the artist and activist Ou Ning, together with a group of like-minded designers and architects, has been recruited to rebrand the city. Centred around the establishment of the Chefoo Library and Institute – designed by Vector Architects with a hip visual

identity by graphic studio XiaoMage+Chengzi – the project positions cultural and educational business as key to the proposed developmental strategy. Public-private partnerships of this kind, which are increasingly encouraged by official agendas as part of a ‘new normal’, can provide great opportunities for those seeking to build a common future. To be continued.

Lead image: Wee Studio, Treehouse, 2016, Beijing. Courtesy: Wee Studio, Beijing

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