

Learning curves

A new book celebrates 20 pioneering Chinese architects who all have one thing in common.

BY GARY JONES

With just an hour to go before the China launch of *New Chinese Architecture: Twenty Women Building the Future*, the book's British managing editor, Austin Williams, is explaining why he wanted no mention of females on its cover. Although the full-colour volume is hailed in marketing blurb as "the first of its kind detailing the lives, achievements and ambitions of 20 successful, influential women architects living and working in China today", he would have preferred no gender-revealing spoiler in its subtitle.

"I envisaged this book being called 'Twenty Chinese Architects', full stop, because if you saw 'Twenty Chinese Architects' as the title, and you opened it up and they were all men, you wouldn't give it a second thought," besuited Williams says. "I thought, 'Wouldn't it be fun if you then discovered that they were all women.' That might give you cause for reflection on how women are seen to participate in this industry."

Invited to China in 2011, to help establish the architecture department of Xian Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU), in Suzhou, Williams is an honorary research fellow at that college as well as a senior lecturer in architecture at London's Kingston School of Art.

He stresses how time frames are compressed on the fast-changing mainland, pointing out that the country's first private



Qi Shanshan's Nine House, a boutique hotel and gallery in Xitang, Zhejiang province.

architecture practice in the modern era was opened only in the early 1990s. "This is not like the West, with 200 years of playing around with this stuff," Williams says. "We are talking just 25 or so years."

One consequence of this squeezing of time is that women are already playing a pivotal role in Chinese architecture, and realised projects spotlighted in the new volume include everything from rural schools to gargantuan commercial developments in major cities.

Among them are architect Qi Shanshan's Nine House, an inviting boutique hotel and

gallery in the ancient water town of Xitang, an hour's drive from downtown Shanghai, in Zhejiang province. Qi is the founder of Studio Qi, in her hometown of Hangzhou, also in Zhejiang, and Nine House won an *Urban Environment Design* magazine accolade as China's Most Charming Boutique Villa in 2016.

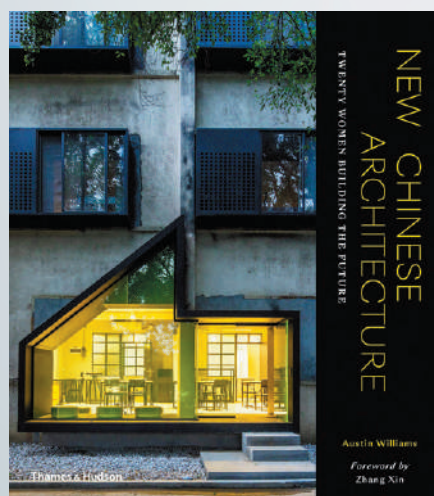
More monumental assignments in the book include the 13,200-square-metre Yinchuan Museum of Contemporary Art, in northern China's Ningxia Hui autonomous region, by architect Zhang Di, of WAA Architects in Beijing. Her massive, swooping, otherworldly structure sits beside the Yellow River, its shape mimicking surrounding sedimentary rock formations.

Meanwhile, the solemn Yanan Revolutionary Memorial Hall – by Zhang Jinqiu, who has worked with China Northwest Architecture, Design and Research Institute for more than 50 years and is now in her 80s – is a political pilgrimage site in the Shaanxi province region that Mao Zedong made his Red Capital from 1935 to 1947.

The book's launch and an accompanying exhibition are being held at Shanghai's sprawling West Bund Art Centre, which is housed in what was once an aircraft factory, beside the Huangpu river.

Although Williams' name appears on the book's cover, an all-female team of XJTLU students carried out much of the research and interviews, and some of the fresh-faced youngsters make last-minute adjustments to architectural scale models spread throughout the exhibition space, while wall-mounted profiles describe the career trajectories and design philosophies of the included 20.

It seems only fair, then, that *New Chinese Architecture's* publisher, Thames & Hudson, plumped for "women" on the book's cover, differentiating the slab-like tome on bookshelves. All statistics suggest, after all, that men have historically



Picture: Studio Qi

dominated architecture not only in China, but worldwide.

In September of last year, *The New York Times* noted that “architecture was long viewed as a ‘gentleman’s profession’”, and had “systematically excluded women for most of its existence”.

“As late as the 1990s, the percentage of architecture firms owned by women in the United States was still in the single digits,” the *Times* continued. “Today, less than a third of the American Institute of Architects membership is female, and a survey of the world’s 100 largest architecture firms by the online design magazine Dezeen found that women occupied just 10 per cent of the highest-ranking jobs.”

A month earlier, art-industry website Artsy pointed out that, in the US, “women make up nearly half of the student body in architecture schools, and yet those numbers drop off dramatically in the professional field, where women make up a paltry 18 per cent of licenced architects”.

“The situation is changing more quickly in China than in America,” says Williams, who also accepts that deep-seated cultural constraints persist in much of the People’s Republic, particularly in the agricultural hinterland. “Respect for elders, getting married, not being a ‘left-behind woman’ – there is still that social pressure.”

And then there are the temporal demands of what is a punishing industry the world over. “Even though [Chinese] employment law is moving in line with the global economy, women have kids and so take time off, so historically it’s unlikely they would have been employed in architecture in the first place. There is definitely this thing in architecture: there is no time off. It’s not a nine-to-five job; this is a midnight-to-midnight job.”

Talented exceptions break such rules, however, and Williams says Iraqi-British architect Zaha Hadid greatly inspired the most recent generation of female Chinese practitioners. (The aforementioned Zhang Di’s Yinchuan Museum of Contemporary Art clearly owes a debt to the woman celebrated internationally as the “queen of the curve”)

In 2004, Hadid became the first female to win the Pritzker Prize. (Two others have since won architecture’s highest accolade, but only jointly, with men: Japan’s Kazuyo Sejima, in 2010, and Carme Pigem of Spain, in 2017.) While her notable projects include the 2012 London Olympics Aquatics Centre, the National Museum of Arts of the 21st Century, in Rome, and the Al Wakrah Stadium, in Qatar (an under-construction venue for the 2022 football World Cup), China was very much Hadid’s early-21st-century playground: Guangzhou Opera House, Beijing Daxing International Airport, Galaxy SOHO and Wangjing SOHO, also in Beijing, Morpheus hotel at Macau’s City of Dreams, and Jockey Club Innovation Tower, at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, all bear her unmistakable stamp.

Despite Hadid’s death – at the age of 65, of a heart attack, in March 2016 – Williams occasionally refers to her in conversation in the present tense. “It’s almost the fact that she’s a rarity that gives her more power,” he says, adding that a busy Hadid had agreed to write the foreword to *New Chinese Architecture*. “I wasn’t going to pester her. I thought I’d give her another month, she will come back to it, and in that month, you guessed it, she died.”

Foreword duties were instead covered



Tang Yuen



Qi Shanshan



Zhang Jinqiu



Du Juan



Dong Mei



Zhang Di

by Zhang Xin, co-founder of mainland uber-developer SOHO China.

Williams also points out that Hadid, in keeping with the spirit of his book, “always argued that she does not want to be viewed as a woman architect but just as a good architect. And that is what gave her renown: that she was damned good, even if you didn’t like what she did. She knew what she wanted; she was an authoritative figure”.

“This is a tough business and she was a tough businesswoman. She made things happen.”

Williams says modern China’s development threw up differing societal expectations for men and women, and this can be seen in their approaches to building design, or at least in how they rationalise their work. In *New Chinese Architecture*, he writes: “Until the first decade of the new millennium, engineering was deemed to be a core skill for China’s rapid urbanisation and development. After all, until only a few years ago, the Central Politburo of the Communist Party were all engineers, as their aim was to rebuild the nation.

“Recently, China has entered an era of creativity and innovation that requires a softer edge to its skills-based educational provision. Now art, philosophy, history and design-led courses are increasingly becoming a first option for undergraduates.”

From the 1970s to the turn of the century, Williams argues, with men flocking into engineering and nation-building



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proceeding apace, aesthetic finesse was not the priority. “Stick a shelf on a wall. If it doesn’t fall down, it’s a good shelf,” he says.

Women trickled into the industry in increasing numbers later, largely thanks to the social changes unleashed by Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms, when traditional constraints began to loosen.

The concept of “it’s not the box but the space inside the box that makes the box,” Williams says, has been embraced more by women than by men. “I don’t want to sound like a parody by saying women are more emotional, but they do seem able to explain things in a more nuanced way. They want to get more aesthetic clarity out of their design than the guys, who are a bit more workaday.”

Asked whether she considers herself specifically to be a female architect, Qi Shanshan brushes aside the question. “If any male architect calls himself a ‘male architect’, then I will [refer to my gender],” she replies, plainly. Her description of her boutique property in Xitang, however, is significantly more florid. Qi speaks of “the movement of space and events” and the “shifting and juxtaposing of volumes, compressing and releasing of moments, intervening or penetrating negative space”.

Du Juan, associate dean of the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Hong Kong, and who heads up IDU Architecture in that city, is also included in *New Chinese Architecture*.

“Due to societal expectations and norms, I am constantly made aware by others that I am a woman working in a field largely occupied by men,” says Shandong-born Du, who has worked extensively in the US, Europe and China as an academic, theoretician and architect; has taught at both the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Peking University; and has had her work exhibited internationally, including at the Venice Architecture Biennale. “Being a woman of course shapes how I think and work. However, my gender does not predominately define my sense of aesthetics or approach to architecture, which are cultivated from my bicultural background, multicultural education, as well as professional training in different countries.”

One of Du’s projects, highlighted in *New Chinese Architecture*, is Open House, a “preservation and adaptive-reuse project of a 1940s four-storey residential building in Hong Kong’s historic Sai Ying Pun area”.

“The Open House was my first project involving Hong Kong’s unique building type – the tong lau, or Chinese walk-up,” Du says. “We wanted to create an open and modern architecture that demonstrates the possibility of giving a new life and new value to this culturally

unique, urban housing type that has been relegated to a relic from Hong Kong’s past by the general public.”

Williams is loath to single out favourites among the 20 architects included in his book but, when pushed, he admits, “I like Dong Mei, if only because of her charming design ideas.”

Dong founded Biechu Kongjian Architects, in Beijing, with her husband, Liu Xiaochuan, in 2004. Their projects include the Badaling Forest Experience Centre (a museum promoting preservation of woodlands) and the Ding Xiang Eco-Village, both in the shadow of the Great Wall.

Energy conservation is central to Dong’s approach, with the architect having embraced environmental protection – as she explains in *New Chinese Architecture* – even “before China’s public building energy-efficiency standards came out. We did a lot of theoretical investigation and practical research on how to simplify building volumes, improve natural ventilation, and so on”.

Williams also singles out the “heroic story” of Tang Yuen, the septuagenarian chief architect at the Shanghai Institute of Architectural Design & Research, who today oversees more than 1,500 staff. In 1967, Tang’s education was disrupted by the Cultural Revolution, just after she had completed her undergraduate studies at Beijing’s Tsinghua University. It would be 11 years before she could resume her studies, this time at Shanghai’s Tongji University.

Tang went on to design a number of notable public buildings in Shanghai in the late 1980s, including the 84,000-square metre Shanghai Library, in the city’s Xuhui district, and contributed to the sympathetic restoration of the Peace Hotel. Constructed on the Bund in 1929, the hotel reopened in 2010, and remains one of Shanghai’s most important art deco landmarks.

What most impresses Williams about the works in *New Chinese Architecture*, however, is their variety, even – or especially – within individual portfolios.

“The variation, the variability, the varied



Austin Williams.
Picture: Kevin Lai



nature of their work is striking,” Williams says. “You do not get that in the West, where one will have an oeuvre, as they say: you become a commercial architect, or a hospital architect ...”

For example, Wang Wei, founder of Field Architecture Office, in Beijing, has presided over a sensitive, modern-meets-regional regeneration of rural Baima village, in Sichuan province, as well as a 200-metre-long, multipurpose development in Chengdu’s Panchenggang district that encompasses a community centre, a gym, a farmers’ market and a police station.

For the Panchenggang project, she resisted the urge to think vertically, turning the skyscraper concept on its side and building horizontally. The development has echoes of the vast, low-rise factories that once defined the local landscape.

“The site is filled with memories from Chengdu’s industrial past,” Wang says. “I wanted to show my respect for that heritage.”

Williams also calls attention to “intensely private” Lu Wenyu, wife of 2012 Pritzker winner Wang Shu (the first Chinese citizen to win the prize).

The couple founded Amateur Architecture Studio, in Hangzhou, in 1998. The Pritzker jury described its work, which frequently draws on Chinese tradition and uses salvaged materials, as “timeless, deeply rooted in its context, and yet universal”.

Amateur Architecture’s completed projects include Wenzheng Library, at Suzhou University; Ningbo Historic Museum; and China Academy of Art’s Xiangshan Campus, in Hangzhou.

“There’s been a campaign in the West asking why Wang Shu won the Pritzker when his wife was equally involved in the work,” Williams says. “When you chat to her, she doesn’t want it. She says, ‘I like to sit down with my feet up and a cup of tea after a hard day in the office. I don’t want to be flying around the world going to international conferences, so leave me out of it.’”

In the pages of the book, she says, “After Wang Shu won the Pritzker Prize, his private life disappeared, but I wanted mine. I want my life.” Defying critics who lambasted her for not demanding her share of the fame, Lu adds, “To assume that I – or anyone – merit acclaim simply by being a woman is wrong.”



The Ding Xiang Eco-Village, by Biechu Kongjian Architects, which Dong Mei and her husband, Liu Xiaochuan, founded in Beijing in 2004. **Left:** designed by Ding Wowo, the People's Hall, in Jiangyin, Jiangsu province is featured in *New Chinese Architecture*.

Picture: BieChu Kongjian Architects

Williams maintains that the “starchitect” phenomenon, now so entrenched in the West, is unlikely to take root in China. “Politically, it can’t. It would not be allowed to,” he says, adding, however, that Ma Yansong – founder of Mad Architects, headquartered in Beijing – would be closest to qualifying for such celebrity, alongside Wang Shu (both of whom are male). Chinese architects, no matter how successful and respected they become, are unlikely ever to be blessed with “the same level of autonomy that they can then do whatever they damn well please because” – within China, at least – “there will be constraints on what they can and cannot say”.

“In Chinese architecture, as in Chinese society, the question is, ‘How do you marry the individual with the state? How do you marry the idea of creating a globalist future with a traditionalist past while safeguarding the stability and harmony of the system?’”

As an example, Williams considers Ma’s Chaoyang Park Plaza complex, in Beijing, which echoes the contours of black-granite mountains and reflects on Chinese *shanshui* paintings. “He’s trying to make some sort of connection [with tradition],”

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Picture: Margot Errante

Du Juan’s Open House, in Sai Ying Pun.

Williams says. “Whether he is saying that to satisfy the paymasters, I don’t know. But people are playing with the fact that they have to be part of the system, and that’s a tricky balance.

“Most of these architects – and I don’t think this is a conscious, cynical process – are genuinely trying to find what is the new Chinese architecture, but to do that you would have to have a social break with the past. If you don’t, you are only going to repeat some of the traditionalist ideas, and you’re going to do pastiche stuff.”

The international launch of *New Chinese Architecture*, on Thursday, coincides with the London Festival of Architecture, which is being held at various venues across the British capital throughout this month. The associated exhibition will kick off at the University of Liverpool in London’s campus, also on Thursday, and run for three weeks.

With last-minute tweaks being made to the displays in Shanghai, Williams declares that – while most of the 20 women architects featured in the new book studied abroad, most notably in

the US – Chinese architecture is now at a watershed moment. Influences are melding, he believes, to create something new, eclectic and dynamic in China.

“That Japanese thing about beautifully crafted buildings in very small, awkward spaces. That taps into the Confucian mindset in China, so people are shifting Asian-wards rather than just replicating some crazy parametric building in San Francisco.

“Then there’s a search for authenticity in terms of Chinese architecture, and that is looking into the realm of the past. But at the same time – because you can’t have a conversation about China without talking about its contradictions – there’s also a generation that is globalist in its mindset, who are looking to Australian vernacular, to Japanese high-rise, to West Coast weird architecture. People are experimenting.

“We’ve moved away from people going overseas to be educated in creativity, to coming back to be educated in creativity, and we are right at the moment, at that cusp, when the new direction might be found.

“These are interesting times.”
For men and for women. ■