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Museum/Bówùguǎn.

A Conversation with Liu Jiakun About Time Issues in Architecture in China

Edited by Maurizio Meriggi

Abstract

The text discusses time-related issues in architecture through a conversation with Liu Jiakun, one of China's most prominent architects, who was recently awarded the Pritzker Prize. His work primarily focuses on public space projects, including museums and the revitalization of historical sites and newly developed areas. Liu Jiakun elaborates on the unique aspects of museum design in China and his narrative approach to architecture, using four of his most well-known projects as examples. These include a memorial dedicated to the victims of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake and three public buildings. In the latter projects, he emphasizes the rural identity and historical markers of the communities. Throughout the conversation, Liu's approach to architectural design unfolds as a material translation of connections between collective memories, local identities, and the present, past, and future of the communities he has worked with.

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Fig. 1 - *Luyeyuan Stone Sculpture Art Museum*, 2001-02, by Liu Jiakun. Photo courtesy of Jiakun Architects.

“History & Contemporary – Environmentally Friendly,” “Translate Oriental Culture into Contemporary Architecture Language – Symbiosis with Nature,” and “Individual Memories & Collective Memories – Local Techniques & Folk Wisdom” are the three pairs of concepts that compose Liu Jiakun’s theoretical hexahedron model, which serves as a paradigm for his architectural work. “Time” is the first term referenced in each pair, while “Materiality” serves as the second. I met Liu in November 2024 in his Atelier in Chengdu, to discuss how architectural works in China address “time-related issues,” particularly his projects for museums and the revitalization and renovation of historical sites. During our discussion, he mentioned several projects: the Luyeyuan Stone Sculpture Art Museum (2001-2002), the Shanghai Xiangdong Buddha Statue Museum (2007-2008), the Sichuan Shuijingfang Company Museum (2008-13), the Suzhou Imperial Kiln Ruins Park & Museum of Imperial Kiln Brick (2017-2018), the Hu Huishan Memorial (2008-09), the West Village in Chengdu (2015), the Renovation of Tianbao Cave District of Erlang Town (2020), the Songyang Culture Neighbourhood Renovation (2020). Liu Jiakun’s work and biography are well known, and his official website (<http://jiakun.com>) provides a comprehensive iconographical and textual description of the projects mentioned in our interview. Out of 17 major projects, 8 are museums and 3 are revitalization projects, where the relationship between time and memory plays a central role.

I would like to highlight a significant episode from Liu’s creative career that surfaced during our conversation. After completing his studies in architecture in the late 1980s, he spent a decade focused on literature, during which he wrote a dystopian novel titled “The Concept of the Bright Moon,” published in 2014. The novel tells the story of an architect whose utopian project ultimately fails to bring about societal renovation.

I want to begin our conversation with a question about terminology. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) translated the ancient Greek term Museum into the Chinese term Bówùguǎn, which is composed of the terms: bó, meaning many; wú, meaning objects; and guǎn, meaning public building. Therefore, the term translates to “Public building to house a collection.” There is a subtle difference in meaning between the Greek term “Museum” and the Chinese term “Bówùguǎn,” especially when considering the evolution of the idea of place and space for preserving memory in Western and Chinese cultures. For example, the neoclassical museum buildings that became popular in Europe during the 19th century are very different from the “literati gardens” found in China, which feature a collection set within a natural and architectural ensemble. Can you appreciate this difference in your work as an architect who has designed several museums?

LIU JIAKUN The precise historical Western definition of a museum is unclear to me. However, in the Chinese context, it's relatively straightforward. Museums are indeed related to historical facts and artefacts, displayed for public viewing to provide insights into that period. Essentially, a museum is a place where artefacts are displayed and information is presented. Yet, this more traditional usage in Chinese has, in recent years, broadened. Many museum-labelled initiatives are not necessarily culture-related. While the State may not officially recognise them, many tend to self-identify as museums. In China, we've worked on numerous projects labelled as museums, although some cannot be formally classified as museums. Among my works, I can mention the Luyeyuan Stone Sculpture Art Museum, which has been officially recognised; the Xiangdong Buddha Statue Museum in Shanghai is probably not listed in the national museum directory, but both can self-identify as a museum. The Clock Museum of the Cultural Revolution in Chengdu is recognised because the entire museum group in the Jianchuan Museum cluster is acknowledged as a museum, so although it's just one part of the complex, it is also recognised as a museum. As for the Hu Huishan Memorial, we built it ourselves after the earthquake as a donation and construction project dedicated to a young girl victim, like many others, of the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan. The Memorial is not officially recognised and is even considered an illegal structure. The Shuijingfang Museum in Chengdu is formally recognised as the Suzhou Imperial Kiln Gold Brick Museum Park. However, the Renovation of the Tianbao Cave District of Erlang Town is not recognised, nor is the Songyang Cultural Block Renovation, which, like the West Village in Chengdu, is not a museum at all. I don't know about the situation outside of China, but the process is relatively straightforward if you are officially building a museum in China. It must have a defined theme, and if it is to be recognised, it must also house artefacts. The project must first be approved for State projects, and artefacts must meet specific standards. The direction for

projects is clear when they feature clear themes and official approvals. The primary focus then shifts to the building's architecture, which must align with its intended purpose. However, following current trends, museums are evolving beyond simply being repositories for lifeless objects. Some people criticise official museums, derogatorily describing them as mere buildings filled with dead artefacts. In academic discourse and social debates, there is a growing interest in whether non-museum architectural projects can also embody a certain essence. When we refer to the "present," it is always connected to the past, present, and future. Concepts such as "para-museum" or "museumisation" are applied to various projects, suggesting that even those outside the traditional museum context should strive to convey elements of history, current relevance, and future significance. This represents a new expectation for museums. Therefore, the projects I previously mentioned, which may not be officially recognized as museums, are similarly engaging with these themes and expectations.

2 *You mentioned three types of museums, which serve the purpose of immersing visitors in time and helping them learn from history. The first type is the "official museum," which follows the official standard parameters. The second one is the "memorial," as the Hu Huishan's Memorial. The third type is what you call a "para-museum," which expands the museum concept to include the revitalisation of historical areas. The impact on visitors in these three types of museums is similar: they all connect the past, present, and future through a spatial experience that engages the actions of the visitors.*

LJ The questions you are asking me revolve around whether, in my work, daily life is part of the exhibition. Sometimes, we build very formal, recognised museums, while at other times, we create places that were neither recognised during construction nor likely to be recognised in the future. Yet, in the minds of the clients and society, these spaces are often perceived as more public, open, informal, and socialized versions of a museum. This is why, in China, the term "museum" is sometimes used rather loosely. There are often requests for "museum" or "museumification" for formal museums and exhibition halls within certain spaces. Museums have distinct requirements, including exhibition halls, storage rooms, and other supporting facilities. Different criteria are necessary to preserve artifacts; for example, a museum focused on paper may require constant temperature and humidity control, whereas a stone museum does not have such stringent demands. The Songyang Cultural Block Renovation and the West Village mentioned earlier are not real museums, but they do engage with concepts of time and space, reflecting on the past, present, and future, even though some may not meet the standards of traditional museums.



You follow a conceptual protocol in your works that focuses on the emotional impact your museums have on visitors, rather than only the museum performance. A museum should offer cultural enrichment to its visitors, and the question is: how can this be achieved? I noticed that in your museums, whether official or not, the spatial composition provides a profound emotional effect through a spatial narrative. As one walks through your museum, it feels like following a story, with the spatial sequence serving as a common thread, much like events in a novel. In describing your museum's project on your office website, you often use terminology drawn from literature. Indeed, your museum design appears to incorporate various narrative techniques reminiscent of literary genres, such as novels, poetry, and short stories. I also noticed that you utilize two distinct types of lobbies, bright and dark. What does it mean, exactly?

3

LJ Constructing a formal museum is relatively more straightforward due to its defined nature, which includes specific artefacts and a clear theme. These artefacts and themes inherently establish a historical ambience and a storytelling atmosphere, simplifying the design process. Nevertheless, the creation of the building must take into account other factors, such as the use of local materials and the local climate. In my approach, I prioritize adapting to the locale by utilizing regional materials and techniques – often referred to as locality – while also integrating the ambience and direction suggested by the museum's theme. From an

Fig. 2 - Sichuan Shuijingfang Company Museum, 2008-13, by Liu Jiakun. Photo courtesy of Jiakun Architects.

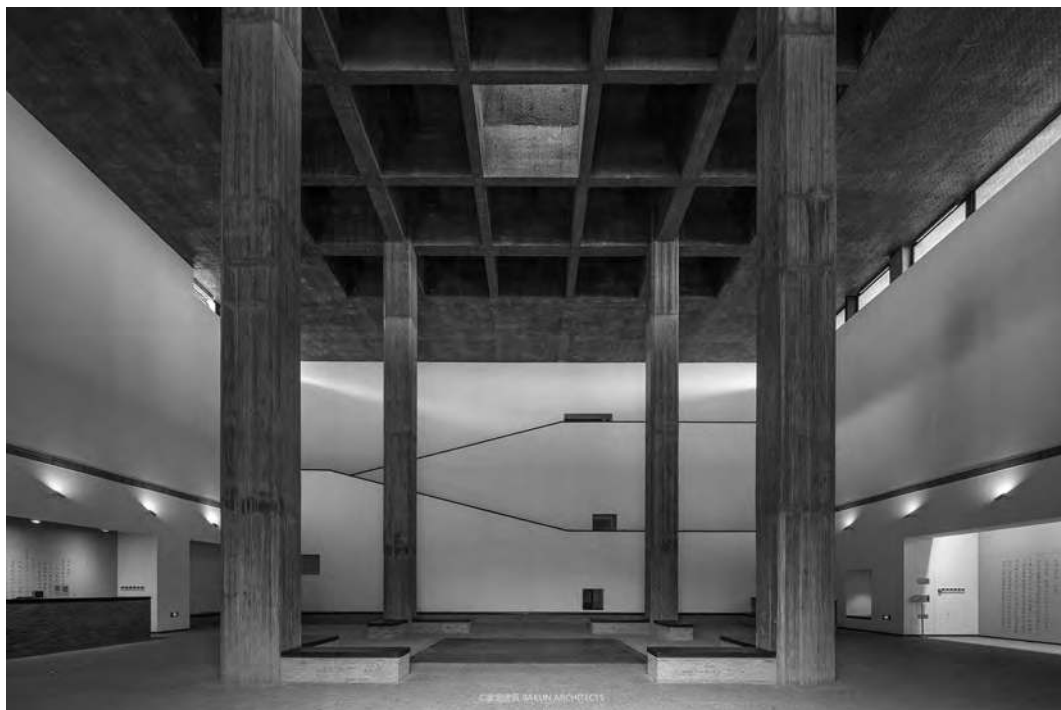


Fig. 3 - Suzhou Imperial Kiln Ruins Park & Museum of Imperial Kiln Brick, 2017-18, by Liu Jiakun. Photo courtesy of Jiakun Architects.

imagery perspective, the task is clearer, and it is comparatively easier to combine various aspects of the hexahedron theoretical model when designing the architecture. A formal museum with defined artefacts always has a relatively clear narrative thread regarding light and shadow. For instance, it's usually clear when an artefact was produced, its journey, its production process, and its presentation. Architecture, however, cannot be laid out so straightforwardly; it requires creating an atmosphere that aligns with each narrative segment. Sometimes, the atmosphere is bright and grand, while other times, it's low and dim. Architecture must also accommodate people's emotional responses, so light and shadow are used to adjust the experience. Ultimately, you create a specific building in a particular location, and the architecture has a specific theme. These threads are intertwined, and each must be handled in detail. The site and environment vary, and I don't have a fixed rule for every museum. Each project requires a comprehensive, on-site, specific approach. While I can elaborate on specific examples, the overarching principle is that there isn't a one-size-fits-all solution; rather, each issue should be addressed distinctly. For instance, consider the Suzhou Imperial Kiln Gold Brick Museum Park. Its exhibits are very simple, primarily consisting of bricks produced locally in Suzhou that were utilized in the Forbidden City. In essence, it serves as a "brick museum," with the focal point being a "square brick." In conceptualizing a museum dedicated to this brick, the design begins with the need for a kiln to fire it, which influences the museum's overall shape, mirroring that of a kiln itself. The entrance hall

is designed to evoke the grandeur of an imperial palace, featuring a tall and dignified structure. A few bricks are laid underground; they do not serve as artefacts, but rather to illustrate the space's intended purpose and the atmosphere it seeks to convey. As visitors proceed through the hall, they journey across three floors that narrate the brick's lifecycle, from soil extraction and production to transportation and final use. This museum tells the story of the brick. Concluding the experience is another kiln symbol, representing the place of rough fabrication and its surrounding environment. This serves as both a symbolic and architectural synthesis. The extensive use of bricks throughout the structure acts as a chronicle, connecting the past with the present. While these bricks form a contemporary building, they ultimately draw attention to that singular gold brick, an embodiment of numerous interconnected threads. Another example is the Hu Huishan Memorial, which is not an official museum. Its prototype is an earthquake relief tent, which directly relates to the earthquake. The symbolism is evident. The interior space is the same size as a tent and encapsulates collective memories from the earthquake relief period, centered around a young girl. To illustrate this further, let's compare three examples. The Shuijingfang Museum, for instance, is a formal museum situated in a designated architectural preservation area where the planning department mandates sloped roofs in traditional districts. Consequently, the museum's overall form was established during the planning phase. Inside, it houses a centuries-old distillery, including its original structure. The new sections we have constructed function as extensions of the historic distillery, all adhering to the sloped roof design. These newer areas may display modern distilling techniques, while the original distillery showcases traditional methods. Together, they form an architectural ensemble that tells the story of past and present distilling practices. The exterior and interior details impose certain choices on the building's form and materials. Given the Shuijingfang Museum's location in a protected traditional neighborhood, all design decisions must resonate with the character of the area. In the case of formal museums like this, the pathways to clarity are relatively straightforward, as the internal content and external conditions work in harmony. On the other hand, the Hu Huishan Memorial is not classified as a formal museum, yet its theme is distinct and easily communicated.

4

I have some specific questions about the Suzhou Imperial Kiln Ruins Park & Museum of Imperial Kiln Brick. I want to confirm the understanding of your approach to making the museum. The main pavilion features a façade that evokes the architecture of the Imperial Palace, complete with eaves. Upon entering, visitors find themselves in a hall with four columns, which resembles a “dark lobby” or shady area, as you mentioned earlier. Next, there's a ramp that mimics the staircase visitors must climb when exploring the halls of the Forbidden City. The halls, located on each floor, tell the story of the various phases of production, transportation, and use of the golden brick. So,

1 – Lin-pan, literary: “forest-village”. It is a vernacular form of village in Sichuan rural areas.

I would define the strategy in this museum as a historical novel.

LJ Architecture can indeed be understood through the concepts of clues and pathways. However, it also relies on fundamental methods. For instance, on the three floors of the building, visitors often find themselves circling around and consistently returning to the main hall, where the ramp is located. After exploring the first floor and returning to this central spot, one can clearly understand their position before ascending to the second floor, where the same circling and returning pattern occurs. This is essentially what central orientation entails.

- 5** *The Hu Huishan Memorial evokes the atmosphere of a “linpan¹ memorial,” reminiscent of a village cemetery where simple, hill-shaped mounds are surrounded by trees near a small creek. These three elements create a respectful aura for the site. In a short film about the Memorial, we see you planting trees to form a small clearing in front of the tent-shaped building. The architecture of the Memorial, therefore, incorporates this clearing as an integral aspect. In the Shanghai Xiangdong Buddha Statue Museum, you have also designed similar small forests. Here, the museum’s architecture contrasts the rough exterior of a former industrial warehouse with the delicate interior, where small bamboo groves surround Buddhist art sculptures arranged on a sequence of platforms. These platforms create an experience reminiscent of a Buddhist Hall. While the use of surrounding environmental elements is fundamental to the architecture of the Hu Huishan Memorial, the inclusion of the bamboo groves in the museum allows for a harmonious combination of ancient sculptures with the brick and metal structure of the industrial building.*

LJ. The environment plays a vital role in creating the right atmosphere. When the appropriate conditions are present, they can significantly enhance the ambience a building seeks to establish and support the narrative the building intends to convey. You mentioned the Xiangdong Buddha Statue Museum in Shanghai, which came about somewhat by chance. An abandoned factory existed in the area alongside an individual who specialized in collecting Buddha statues. The local government saw an opportunity to merge these two resources. Since the collection was private, public access was limited. They proposed: “We have an abandoned factory, and you have your Buddha statues. Can we collaborate to create a museum?” There wasn’t much of an external environment, so – given the factory’s height – we envisioned the experience as an ascending journey to worship Buddha. Visitors enter a hall and walk upwards, reminiscent of the journey one often undertakes to reach a temple, which typically involves climbing a mountain to ultimately arrive at the statue. This concept reflects the relationship between action and archetype. Internally, we designed the museum to mirror this journey: upon entering the main hall, visitors ascend, encountering numerous Buddha statues along the way before circling back down. This design exemplifies



Fig. 4 - *Hu Huishan Memorial*, 2008-09, by Liu Jiakun. Photo courtesy of Jiakun Architects.

a self-created internal environment. Additionally, we incorporated bamboo plants, which resonate with the behaviors, archetypes, and imagery characteristic of Eastern culture. Bamboo serves as a significant symbol, further enriching the space. In contrast, the external environment is more rigidly regulated due to the site's proximity to a river, leaving little room for modifications. Currently, some concerning trends are emerging in the Xiangdong Buddha Statue Museum. The involvement of the collector and certain monks has led to an atmosphere that resembles a temple, suggesting an effort to transform the museum into something akin to a religious site. In contrast, the Shuijingfang Museum, situated in a traditional neighborhood, features numerous courtyards and atriums that seamlessly connect the architectural complex with its historic surroundings. Additionally, the Luyeyuan Stone Sculpture Art Museum is nestled among bamboo forests and clearings. Both examples highlight the effective use of the site's unique conditions and characteristics.

I believe the renovation of the Tianbao Cave District in Erlang Town is a true masterpiece of Poetry. It combines various atmospheres that evoke different sensations and visual experiences, aligning the intangible cultural aspects of the museum with the stunning views of the natural mountain landscape. What inspired you to design an intangible culture museum in the shape of a Chinese garden nestled in the mountains? It feels like a dream brought to life.

6

LJ Before I got involved, other teams had visited the site. They even hired a Spanish team and some local design institutes. The location was difficult to access, especially remote and with challenging terrain. The Spanish team felt the place was somewhat dangerous, far and risky. So,

Fig. 5 - West Village in Chengdu, 2015, by Liu Jiakun. Photo courtesy of Jiakun Architects.

Fig. 6 - Renovation of Tianbao Cave District of Erlang Town, 2020, by Liu Jiakun. Photo courtesy of Jiakun Architects.



they eventually approached me. I took on this project mainly because I found the terrain and landscape incredibly unique! After taking on this project, I had to consider how to approach it. The red-coloured portions of the buildings represent only a small part, perhaps one-eighth. A larger section utilises stones similar to the surrounding mountains for foundational elements. Many functional components are incorporated here. Roughly one-eighth uses thick steel to stand out visually. This approach minimises the visual bulk; for example, of the total 8000 cubic meters, about 7000 are barely visible, leaving only 1000 visibly scattered on the cliffs. This concept resonates with ancient paintings, particularly those from the Song dynasty, which illustrate the relationship between ar-



Fig. 7 - Songyang Culture Neighbourhood Renovation, 2020, by Liu Jiakun. Photo courtesy of Jiakun Architects.

chitecture and mountains – an idea deeply rooted in Chinese ideals of human habitation. I intended to emulate the imagery in Song paintings to manage the relationship between this mountain and the building effectively. A too large structure would disrupt the connection with the mountain, while complete concealment would fail to convey the ideal of human habitation. Therefore, only a small portion is exposed, with the majority intentionally hidden. This complex is not an official museum; efforts are underway to transform it into one, with internal exhibition renovations in progress.

As we delve into the relationship among the present, past, and future, I want to connect two of your projects: the Songyang Culture Neighborhood Renovation in Zhejiang and the West Village in Chengdu. I believe that the most effective catalyst in both projects is people's everyday life. The key question is this: while corridors and halls in museum architecture typically guide visitors to tell a story, these projects lack traditional hallways and corridors. Instead, it is the people moving through the spaces who link the various parts of the narrative; they are the ones actively shaping the experience of the museum.

LJ The Songyang project is characterised by the coexistence of buildings from various eras within a small area. These include traditional structures, those from the Republican period, buildings from the planned economy period, and more recent constructions from the post-reform and opening-up era. Each type of building has a different level of historical significance, yet all represent distinct segments and traces of history. Our contemporary intervention aims to integrate and organise these structures. To achieve this, we have incorporated a corridor-like layout:

the narrower sections function as hallways, while the wider sections serve as rooms. The new structure is designed as a single-story building that is lower than the surrounding preserved buildings of various ages and styles. This design makes it resemble a promenade rather than a traditional building. The resulting connected and organized space allows people to move smoothly, while ensuring the new structure remains unobtrusive. I envision this as a platform or corridor where visitors can walk through and view the cross-sections of the historical buildings nearby. Despite the differences in their heights, we are not antiquarians. I believe history should be viewed equally.

- 8** *Also in the West Village, people seem to like the authentic “architecture” of the place. You have created scenes for people throughout the space – such as walking on the rooftop and staying on balconies, moving in the bamboo forests, and running along the jogging paths. You placed the physical elements of the linpan village in the middle of the complex. This approach, as you explain during your project presentation, revitalizes memories of the hometowns of the local inhabitants, in the Sichuan countryside. In this way, people serve as the central figures of the museum.*

LJ The designated land for the West Village is an open space surrounded by large residential areas, open on all four sides. A conventional approach would involve constructing a mall in the centre, surrounded by landscaping and parking lots. My approach, however, focuses on using the commercial building itself – since West Village is a commercial structure – to enclose a space along the street edges. This approach aims to revive elements lost due to rapid urban commercialisation. By designing an enclosed space, we can reintroduce what commercial development has consumed: memories, bamboo landscapes, and human interactions are integrated back into the large courtyard. Such design emphasises human behaviour as a vital component of space.

- 9** *The materials used in your buildings are like words in a poem. You take great care in selecting each material as it announces the essence of the space. Additionally, you incorporate another immaterial element, light and shadow. For instance, in Luyeyuan Buddhist Stone Sculpture, you alternate bamboo with water, or dark interiors with bright objects and lighting from the top, or views of the sculptures framed by strips of nature visible through gaps in the masonry. You frequently refer to the concept of “rhythm.”*

LJ Adding to the previous question about space, I believe architecture has a vast array of tools, and one should not rely on a single, fixed approach. You should assess your project and the requirements before deciding on the most suitable method. Therefore, providing a universal method is difficult, but what I mentioned earlier could be viewed as one possible

approach. The defining feature of the Luyeyuan Stone Sculpture Museum is its bamboo forest and the clearings within it. I perceive the clearings as bright halls and the bamboo groves as dim halls. The architecture itself can also be seen as a hall, and if treated as the other elements, it becomes a manufactured hall. My design concept, which includes gaps in the walls formed by many small iron pieces, allows for views of the outside from inside. The aim is to create a coexistence among bright halls, dim halls, and the architectural hall. The Luyeyuan Stone Museum reflects Buddhist equality of life and the coexistence of all things.

To end our conversation, I recall that your novel has a bitter ending, where the architect fails in his comprehensive project. In contrast, I view your West Village as a realised utopia.

10

LJ When discussing the parallels between architecture and literature, I typically avoid making direct one-to-one comparisons, though I do provide examples from time to time. For instance, the Luyeyuan Stone Carving Museum can be likened to a poem, as I have previously noted. I largely agree with this perspective. In contrast, when considering the West Village, I find that it resembles a sociological text that delves into the future while examining the coexistence of the past, present, and future. The novel “The Concept of the Bright Moon” has an intertextual relationship with the West Village; one is literature and the other is architecture. However, they both relate to one another, making the West Village somewhat akin to a sociological utopian text. It not only explores the future but also reintegrates lost aspects of the past, as I mentioned earlier. Yet the novel ultimately exposes architectural authoritarianism as a failure. In reality, architecture can take a more positive direction through the shortcomings of these authoritarian construction ideologies!

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