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Creating an inclusive and participatory way-finding canvas for All

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ABSTRACT

The recent development of the Chinese visual culture has shown the coexistence and the combination of two major trends: a seamless development involving changes and innovation, and a clear break between a *before*, often not so distinctly defined, and a *now*. Here, we can find that the idea of a contemporary national identity, that can be detected in crafts, art, graphics, design, architecture, fashion, music, dance and so on, is going through a process of constant development and maturation. This article summarises and discusses the process and some of the outcomes of a three years research project with a Design for All approach (DfA), started at Tongji University, and which aimed at co-creating a way-finding system through an open platform towards a strategic inclusive approach in the college. Our goal has been to offer a structured canvas to the school for the professors, the students and the staff so they could freely experience it, interpret it and work on it while adding new layers relative to the all the various present and future projects: a participatory, transcultural, multisensorial, inclusive and auto-poietic project, i.e. DfA in its core.

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Design-driven social innovation; design for all; Chinese traditional art; cultural bridging; participatory design – way-finding

Relevance to human factors/Relevance to ergonomics theory

After more than 20 years exploring and practicing Design for All, I wanted to explore which role a DfA approach can have in building a bridge which main focus is transcultural understanding and expression, achieved through an inclusive and participatory plan of actions, eventually to be implemented in different disciplines with a multi-sensorial expression. Witnessing daily in China the permeable coexistence and the somewhat dichotomous combination of traditional culture and sedimented habits with a swift ever changing development, and having at disposal for analysis and testing a contemporary building which encompasses traditional culture, we reckoned it could be relevant to start from spatial perception, understanding and communication, in view of an upcoming branded way-finding definition/construction. A historical research and the evaluation of the various experiencers's; A.N.A.s, brought us to a possible spatial experience defined by simultaneous acts of parallel views with the aim of achieving satisfaction for All.

1. Introduction: research choices

China energetic and fast growth encompasses a rich spectrum of both diversities and contradictions. Some areas are going through an almost seamless development along with changes and innovation; some other areas seem to be experiencing a clear break between a *before*, often not so distinctly defined, and a *now*. Looking at the strengthening of the national soft power, we can perceive an on-going search for a contemporary national identity through crafts, art, graphics, design, architecture, fashion, music, dance and so on.

In this context, we started a research project, 'Bridging China to new China', in order to explore all possible ways to translate and interpret ancient and traditional heritage into contemporary expressions through a DfA approach. Part of our findings were used as the intercultural outline in tracing the way-finding canvas design and in creating outputs and landmarks.

More specifically, we researched the traditional Chinese spatial perception in ancient gardens and paintings so to define a common pattern. Our hope was to sketch a structured perceptual system through which explore potential similarities and possible deep seated influences in contemporary expressive artefacts, which could represent a fertile terrain of investigation of traditional patterns for further developments, both practical and theoretical.

We believe that a deeper understanding of Chinese traditional spatial perception, i.e. the way-finding that guides through a physical environment and influences the understanding and the perception of the space itself, will open the way to numerous and interesting cross-cultural and interdisciplinary approaches of inquiry about Human Diversity, while disclosing the route for a new Chinese identity rooted in both tradition and innovation.

2. A Chinese design trend

China's economic and social growth led to an increased attention to cultural soft power, which is also supported by national policies such as 'Two hundred years' goal and the realisation of the Chinese Dream¹ of Great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.²

To improve the country's cultural soft power, China considers fundamental to evaluate four distinct aspects – (i) improving the foundation of national cultural soft power, (ii) striving to spread the values of contemporary China, (iii) striving to display the unique charm of Chinese culture and (iv) striving to improve China's international discourse power – which represent the fundamental guideline for building a strong socialist cultural country and improving country's cultural soft power.³

As regards the Chinese development of both international exchange and communication, the deep understanding of traditional culture plays a pivotal role in the theoretical and practical breakthroughs in the field of art and design. For instance, the 2012 Pritzker Architecture Prize winner, Wang Shu, draws his aesthetic inspiration from an in-depth interpretation of the Chinese literati culture, with special attention to the Song dynasty 宋 (960–1279) landscape paintings and the Ming 明 (1368–1644) and Qing 清 (1644–1911) dynasties traditional Chinese gardens.⁴ Likewise, Li Xiaodong⁵ translates traditional Chinese culture through a 'silent and low-key approach' that does not rely on mere formality, but is like a deep stream of water, simple and unassuming. Behind his critical attitude towards certain buildings, he does show confidence in the future of Chinese architecture and a personal sense of identity, which both combines architectural language, materials, techniques, space, function and aesthetic, together with the local historical culture.⁶

3. Chinese spatial perception: present and past

In traditional Chinese culture, the relationship between painting and gardening is very close: painting theory directly affects the practice of gardening. Traditional Chinese landscape paintings and gardens have always been an important source of inspiration for modern Chinese design. In Fang Wen's *Images of the Mind* (2014) or in James Cahill's⁷ studies [Cahill 2009, Cahill 2013], methodologies like the 'style analysis' were implemented to systematically study the evolution of Chinese painting and to better understand the above-mentioned relations. These studies have opened to a shift from a pure artistic framework to a design one: for example, the employment of scattered perspectives to explain traditional Chinese painting is one of the cases.

Chinese traditional painting and garden have always been different from traditional Western one, in both development and objectives. The trend of modern design theory is going towards interdisciplinary and cross-domain development. Hence, the exploration of the traditional culture in order to trace back the source of a theoretical guidance of Chinese design development seems to be the new direction along which moving forward: a perspective that will help in shaping a modern and inclusive language of Chinese design and will offer a clear understanding of the different cultural background.

The starting point of this study was, therefore, the historical evolution of Chinese traditional landscape paintings and gardens from which, following the spatial awareness and evolution mechanisms, we were able to detect Chinese specific patterns of spatial perception: *guan* 观 [observing] and *you* 游 [wandering]. These two elements not only have played a key role in the creation of Chinese landscape paintings and gardens⁸ but have also profoundly influenced Chinese opera and fiction.⁹

As regards the term *guan*, it is interesting to notice how the character not only encompasses the meaning of vision but also a strongly philosophical one closely related to the idea of visual experience as a way of perceiving and being connected with the world around. Despite being a visual art, Chinese traditional paintings were never just a result of solely visual theory, but have always been the product of a multi-level dialogue between the world and the human heart-mind in a two-dimensional representation which, consequently, has been the fundamental standard to measure the true value of art.

The earliest understanding of the character *guan* can be found in the I Ching *Yi jing* 易经 [Book of Changes]¹⁰ where, in the commentary to the relative hexagram, it is said that *guan* is formed by the two trigrams representing one the Earth and the other Wind moving above it. According to this explanation, both the human experience of observing the outside world and the ability to perceive it in its unity are involved: an ontological approach that connects and combines the human heart-mind experience with Nature – i.e. the Tao, the origin of all things.

On the basis of this reading of *guan*, and looking at Chinese landscape paintings and gardens, therefore, we should understand the visual representation of landscapes as a concrete synthesis of the abstract human exploration of the world in communication and accordance with the Tao.

In its ontological sense, *guan* is, therefore, the essential idea without which the art theory at the basis of Chinese landscape paintings and garden would not subsist.

As regards the term *you*, the conveyed idea of 'wandering' is strictly connected to the character *yuan* 远 [distant, far-reaching], a concept that finds its root during the centuries of the Wei-Jin period 魏晋 (220–420) and later systematised by Guo Xi 郭熙 (d. 1090), one of the greatest landscaped painter of the Song dynasty who summarised his landscape art

theory in his *Lin quan gao zhi* 林泉高致 [*Lofty Messages of Forests and Streams*], Outlining the theory of the *San yuan* 三远 [Three farness], which set the basic principles for creating distance and spaces in landscape paintings, Guo Xi established a methodology that would have greatly influenced later Chinese landscape painting *tout-court*.

Afterwards, especially from the mid-Ming era on, the idea of distance and space in landscape paintings developed into a more elaborate and intricate representation that resulted in paintings where the panorama was similar to a map intended to guide along a journey or wandering (*you*).

The concept of *you* led to a different interpretation of the spatial organisation of the landscape itself, fragmenting and decentralising it within the painting and, in doing so, conferring great vitality to it.

Surely, both the concepts of *guan* and *you* would deserve a deeper and more exhaustive analysis that here, nevertheless, we can grasp how they constitute the pillar of Chinese landscape painting for what concern visual perception and spatial wandering.

3.1. Source of objects and images

Traditionally, the form of an art artifact is what encapsulate its artistic value: the form is both the carrier and the life of an art work. In visual arts, the form includes size, shape and combination, which all confer a specific internal structure to the art work; consequently, if the structure changes, the form also changes.¹¹

Looking at the structure from the perspective *guan* and *you*, we can delineate an evolutionary path of landscape painting, along which we can detect specific characteristics useful to analyse the spatial structure of Chinese landscape paintings and gardens.

Tang 唐 (618–908) and Song 宋朝 (960–1279) dynasties painters rejected the rules of perspective, thus wanted to avoid the distortions that the subjective foreshortening effect involves, but stressed on the fact that art should depict the original proportion of an object in the world, and advocated the objective and ontological state of it, completely immune to human interference. In other words, what mid-medieval painters focused on was the ‘source of objects and images’ [*wu xiang zhi yuan* 物象之源], and not the reality filtered by the human eye.

We can summarise the visual principles of this idea of pursuing ‘the source of objects and images’ in three main points:

(1) The importance of orientation

The relationship between distance, direction, and position is constant and objective, regardless the subject’s position.

(2) The importance of the original proportion

As advocated in the *Yi jing*, the integration of men into Nature should not affect or interfere the natural state of objects and, therefore, respect the original proportions of the world.

(3) The understanding of visual laws

The *Yi jing* also expresses that when the objective conditions of the objective world change, people’s perception remain unaltered to a certain extent, since there is a tendency

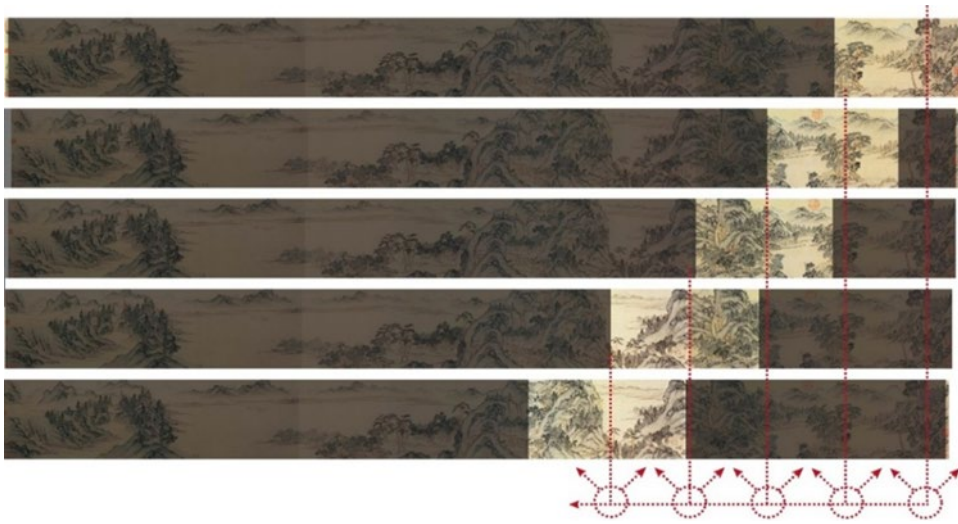


Figure 1. Representation of Wen Zhengming 文徵明 (d. 1559).

to perceive familiar objects as unaltered in shape, size, color, brightness and so on, despite the stimuli changes may involve, i.e. the principle of perceptual constancy.¹²

Figure 1 helps us in practically exploring the concepts of *guan* and *you*, regarding the methodology of drawing and how to appreciate it. The mechanism of the scroll itself, unlike the static representation of Western paintings, reveals the landscape gradually, allowing a dynamic appreciation of its changes and different elements, offering the viewer the opportunity to wander and have a dynamic experience inside the painting.

The painting represents a combination of different and opposite elements from various perspectives, showing some similarities to the principles at the basis of cubism. One of the main differences is that in cubism the simultaneous depiction of different perspective in space and time causes the overall image to be highly fragmented and not harmonic. Inversely, what portrayed in traditional Chinese landscape paintings is a gentle visual realisation of different dimensions and perspectives with still a strong refusal of visual perception. Furthermore, as previously presented in reference to the 'source of objects and images', we can notice that the image in traditional Chinese landscape paintings has not been influenced by any natural phenomena like light, weather, shadow and so on, contrary to Western paintings in which we find a strong component linked to human perception and vision of natural changes. In this sense, Chinese artists tried to depict a landscape of eternal existence, quiet and peaceful, where there is nothing more than time and space and the possibility of a comprehensive experience (*guan*) and a wandering (*you*) opportunity along the landscape.

Similarly, we can find the same elements in traditional Chinese gardens (Figure 2). If we look at the structure of the garden of the Mountain Villa with Embracing Beauty (*Huan xiu shan zhuang* 环秀山庄) in Suzhou, we will notice that the original concept of the garden design sets the rockery mountain only three meters away from the main building, a location that impede a complete view at once, but force a gradual appreciation of its parts and perspectives by entering and wondering around and inside it: the very same idea of viewing experience at the basis of paintings composition that invite us to progressively discover all the landscape diverse parts and points of view.

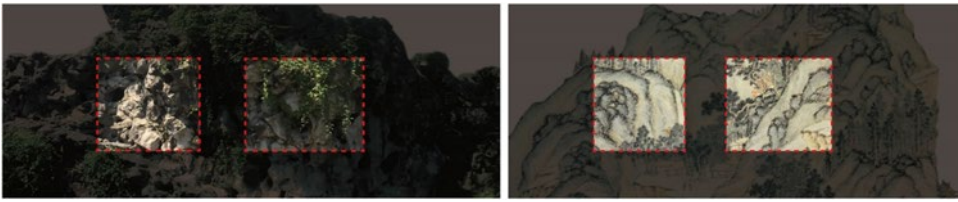


Figure 2. A comparison between the rockery mountain in the Mountain Villa with embracing beauty site and the mountain depiction in traditional Chinese paintings.

Another important element about garden design is the material uses to recreate the rockery mountain: the *taihushi* 太湖石 [porous stone], a limestone characterised by holes and pores. This embraces the idea of complementary opposites, such as the one summarised by the two concepts of *yin* 阴 and *yang* 阳: a coexistence of empty and full spaces that makes the mountain's profile blurred and not fixed, and whose appreciation is continuously conditioned by the various possible perspectives involved during the space wandering. In this way, the limited space of the garden contains in itself a kind of infinite space and countless different time and spatial experiences, exactly as a scroll painting does.

4. Spatial concepts in the Weixin building of Tongji University

The understanding of the elements of *guan* and *you*, as well as their artistic value and application through the lens of a landscape wandering, offered new insights about the realisation of the canvas for the Weixin building way-finding system.

On the one hand, the Weixin building was designed as a fairly complex system of buildings whose interior and spatial concept, resembling that of gradual spatial disclose and exploration principle and Chinese aesthetic theory, was intended to offer to the public the opportunity of wandering and progressive landscape appreciation. As the architect Professor Zeng Qun himself stated, the main idea behind the project directly took inspiration from the traditional Chinese arts of landscape paintings, gardens design and potted landscape (盆景 *pén jǐng* or *pén zāi*), of which he intended to realise and fulfil the same perceptive, visual, and philosophical spatial experience.

On the other hand, the building is addressed to a diversified and international public, thus needs to be simultaneously inclusive and transcultural in its core. In fact, despite the opportunity of getting lost and wander inside the compound, so to be able to fully appreciate the universal spatial representation of a potential world in a limited space, there is the need for the building to be intelligible to All. If traditional private gardens were intended for a more private dimension of appreciation and use, e.g. that of the literati elite and their circles, a public building in a public space, such as the Wexin building, asked for a reevaluation of few aspects and conceptual elements that, if from the traditional Chinese perspective were a plus, actually were likely to undermine the practical nature of a public building in use. The rich spatial experience of an intricate system of hallways, open spaces, stairs, doors and so on, together with an unconventional lighting system, had to meet the use and a purpose of a college building.

To be able to respect the nature of the building and simultaneously to guide visitors to their destination efficiently, we proposed to enhance the perception of its traditional features by communicating them. Consequently, we focused on the possibilities of a structured way-finding system based on the trans-cultural understanding and inclusive approach

drawn on the results of the investigation on traditional Chinese rolling landscape painting and garden, underlining the extent this modern architecture is related in terms of space construction and space experience.

The main elements can be summarised as follows: (i) art embodies the relationship and connections between laws of Nature and human observation and subject experience; (ii) both gardens and paintings convey infinite time and space in a limited two-dimensional or three-dimensional space; (iii) the space portrayed is not only the unity of a single visual image but it is also the simultaneous integration of different parts and perspectives so to convey a complete life experience; (iv) the influence of natural phenomena on the natural space is not considered as a compositional factor so to not limit perception to a single moment in time, but to recreate an objective reality in all its forms and structure; (v) a great emphasis is on the relation between shapes and their dynamicity and (vi) there is a strong avoidance of the pure geometrical forms so to not limit the space to a single perspective, in favour of a complete accordance to the multifarious natural composition.

The four infrastructures that form the Weixin building, as well as the space around them, have different uses and purposes, both public and private: this is why they, despite being four big boxes, do enclose diverse types of spatiality at different levels. The materials of the building, as cement walls or glass curtain walls, in the overall structure are subject to constant changes according to lights and shades, and thus emit different psychological and perceptual responses.

The continuity between floors, indoor spaces, and the outdoor courtyard, confers a high degree of spatial complexity in both horizontal and vertical directions, but allow to maintain an harmonic dialogue between the different levels.

The final result is that when visitors walk in, none of the big boxes can be seen or perceived in its entirety, as in Mountain Villa with Embracing Beauty, allowing a richer spatial experience and transforming the modern architectural space into a traditional landscape painting or garden (Figure 3).

As previously mentioned, this theoretical approach and its result was what Zeng Qun himself aimed at, as he stated in the interview with us: (i) give importance to the value of combination, connection and interaction between the architecture and the surrounding environment (nature); (ii) achieve a harmonious and flexible space and (iii) create a horizontal spatial rhythm.

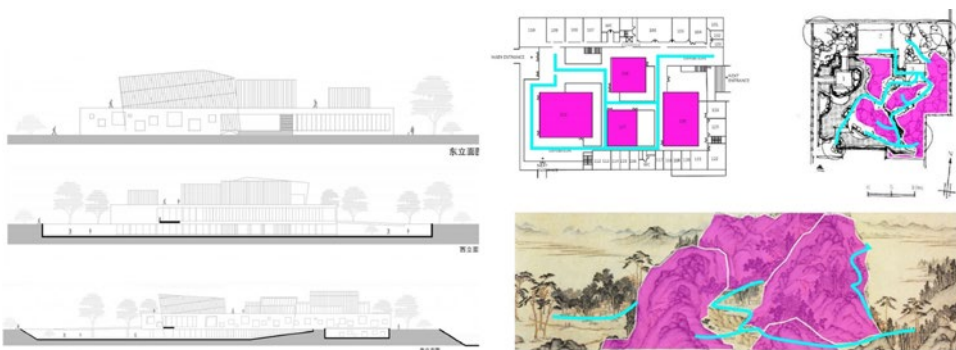


Figure 3. Weixin building compared to the spatial organisation in a traditional Chinese painting.

After the analysis of the nature of the building and its spatial concept, the next step was to understand people's perception and understanding of the Weixin building. Three tools have been employed to collect first hand data: personal interviews, questionnaires and the reactions to the exhibition of the first research materials and findings. The college's Students, professors and staff members of both campuses have been involved. Locals and foreigners have participated.

People involved in this process pointed out the need of a guiding system to enhance the functional use of the building. After discovering Weixin's original planning as directly connected with traditional Chinese culture, they also expressed the aspiration to explore the space and to transform its spatial memory into a perception of the College's brand.

4.1. A cultural bridge in a way-finding canvas

In order to allow visitors to easily and quickly find their way inside the building, but at the same time to enjoy the wandering and progressive spatial perception experience typical of Chinese gardens and landscape paintings, a guide system was proposed to allow visitors from different backgrounds and culture to fully appreciate the building design concept in a functional way.

The process started with videotaping the most important touring routes and conjunction points of the college (Figure 4). However, even if the video records the space, it fails to include a complete route experience with all the potential different changes in perspective. Therefore, following the method of David Hockney,¹³ we decided to take pictures of the progressive spatial changes and compose a more complete picture.

This complicate process became even more complex due to the pronounced geometry of the building: combine these photos turned out to be a different process than convert a



Figure 4. The Weixin building experience routes and perspectives.



Figure 5. Photo scroll of the Weixin building.

painting into a garden or vice-versa, a mechanism that risked to undermined the full integration and application of these conversion strategies to modern architecture. However, by eliminating the perspective of the single object through breaking down the single geometrical units, we managed to attenuate the strong geometric perspective of the Weixin building, and eventually to translate it into a photo collage which followed the representation rules of landscape scroll (Figure 5).

Through this flat representation seven paths were identified: places that looked like valleys and caves, others that resembled the profile of mountains and so on (Figures 6 and 7). These were used as ‘walking metaphors’ to identify spaces in which was possible to ‘live’, ‘wander’ and ‘observe’. In pivotal crossing or ‘arrival’ areas installations were created, using the elements of the College’s brand, to highlight and communicate the discussed significance of the architecture and to enhance the overall experience. These installations served also as landmarks and therefore as way-finding points of reference (Figure 8).

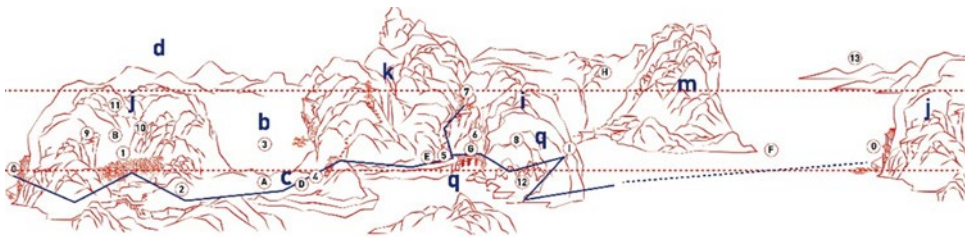


Figure 6. A translation of the space experience in Weixin building into a scroll painting.

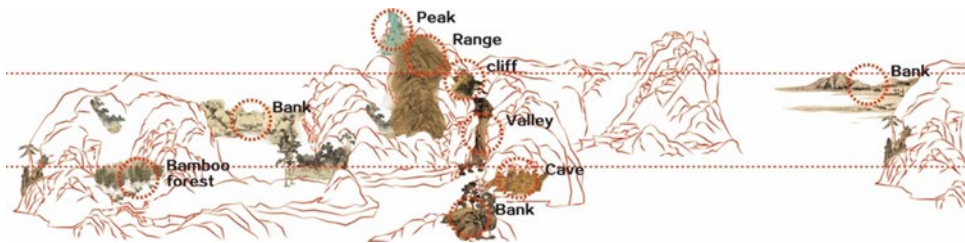


Figure 7. The scenery generating the relationship between the areas and volumes in the building.

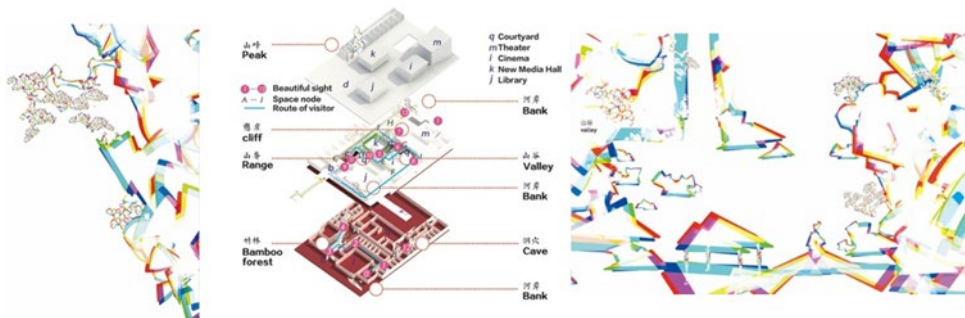


Figure 8. The seven paths and two examples of drawings for the installations.

Simultaneously the basis for a parallel way-finding system, focused on the functional identification of areas and rooms, using more conventional signage on floors and walls, was being developed.

Such a strategy will hopefully provide the visitor with a clear destination-driven guiding system and, at the same time, it will offer the opportunity to appreciate and enjoy a wander-driven process thanks to a complete spatial experience.

The aim in designing the canvas, both theoretical and practical, was to enhance the usability of the building and to guide into a comprehension and experience of its cultural entirety. Our hope was to create, through an inclusive and a trans-cultural approach, an ongoing dialogue between tradition and modernity: a small step in 'bridging China to China.'

5. Co-create a way to navigate with satisfaction, for All

At a process level, the goal has been to initiate a dynamic way-finding system, which is co-created through time and across the College's disciplines. At an implementation level, the goal has been to understand how to create a navigating experience of the Weixin building transcultural and satisfactory for All.

Through two master thesis we have explored multisensorial perception in spaces and artifacts. We have here presented the outcomes concerning traditional Chinese landscape which helped us with the basic structure of the system. Other aspects, which are not discussed here, have been inspirational for drafting a future system of landmarks, like, for example, sound in traditional Chinese gardens and landscape art, as well as comparisons between European and Chinese art.

The results of various steps of the research have been shared with the College's staff and students in both campuses, and feedbacks have been collected as inputs for project's choices and orientation. The architect's interview as well as surveys and interviews with staff members, students and visitors have also been shared to achieve a collective awareness of the topics and the issues which were being discussed through the research. From the submentioned interviews and surveys it was possible to reach a better understanding of the Necessities Abilities and Aspirations (ANAs)¹³ of the different actors and stakeholders of the College's value chain, regarding the special experience and navigation. The ANAs of the College's value chain indicated three main issues:

- (1) the wish to have a pleasant and enriching experience of the building;
- (2) the need to efficiently find specific venues;
- (3) the wish to understand the architecture and the architect's choices.

Courses, workshops and special projects have been carried out across the various disciplines of the college to explore, with professors and students, design solutions and installations, as well as to guide future designs, in the college's way-finding and communication system, focusing on:

- (1) how to respect and communicate the complexity and richness of the architect's choices with designed spatial experiences throughout the building and
- (2) how to create multisensorial landmarks which could serve both as point of reference and transcultural, multisensorial experience.

6. Conclusions

The very deep analysis of the Necessities, Abilities and Aspirations has been a key factor in our work and we reckon could be an enhancement in projects involving approaches from different cultures.

The strong differences identified and analysed required an innovative design thinking.

Our solution has been a guide-line and some pilot implementations, drafting both the Western destination-driven choice and the Chinese experience-driven choice as simultaneous acts and parallel views, bridging the two focuses and therefore the two cultural approaches and spatial experiences with the aim of achieving satisfaction for All.

Being the cultures continuously evolving and their relationship changing also as a consequence of the change in the attitude towards cultural differences (on one hand the number of young Chinese people with an understanding of Western way of thinking is growing and on the other hand, the Chinese official educational and cultural environment is trying to avoid an utter and unreserved adoption of Western cultural models) this has to be a work in progress which will never end and will keep evolving.

Notes

1. 'Chasing the Chinese dream.' *The Economist*, May 4, 2013, 24–26.
2. Full text of Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress. Accessed June 20, 2018. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-11/03/c_136725942.htm
3. 'Outlook.'
4. Wang (2016).
5. Professor at Tsinghua University, Li Xiaodong is Aka Khan Architecture Prize winner and received the Britain's 'Architect Review' world new architecture award.
6. Li (2017).
7. James Cahill is one of the contemporary authoritative scholars in the study of Chinese art history.
8. Wang (2014).
9. Ming, Yugan, and Ming (2009).
10. This one of the Five Classics of ancient Chinese literature is based on a system of triagrams and hexagrams used to represent, explain, and predict natural and human changes.
11. Liu, and Guohui (2017).
12. On the "Landscape method" 山水之法 (Shānshuǐ zhī fǎ): Liu, Jichao. 2011. Wandering-observing, ontology and interpretation of space in transitional Chinese painting. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company.
13. On the *Joiners*, perspective, cubism and human vision, see Hockney conversations with P. Joyce and J. Walker 'Joiners'.
14. Accolla (2009).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Note on contributor

Avril Accolla, associate professor in Design and Design-Driven Social Innovation at D&I College, Tongji University (China), Director of the Research Lab for Sustainable Business and Cultural Bridge, academic representative for Tongji-Polimi Shenzhen Platform, Scientific Advisory Board and Session's

Chair, in conference Design for Inclusion, AHFE. Designer, scholar and author, researches, and designs accordingly, on Design for All (DfA), Design Driven Social Innovation, Holistic Ergonomics, Strategic Design, Sustainable Development.

Jixiang Jiang, mater degree at Tongji University, focusing on design-driven social innovation and research on how to promote Chinese traditional culture into contemporary design practices.

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