

## architecture



*Split House at the Commune by the Great Wall*  
This dwelling has a commanding location overlooking the other 11 houses. Its four bedrooms each have a private balcony, while a glass bathroom is wedged between the living room and the dining room. Chang has seemingly split his creation down the middle and prised it apart, thus allowing the scenery and the surrounding space into the building. The immediacy of the environment is reinforced by a creek that runs beneath the glass-floored entrance room

Chang has also made the Split House ecological. Its load bearing walls are made of rammed earth with a partial wood frame.

Rammed-earth construction is a time-honoured building method in China. With minimum environmental impact, it builds a well-insulated wall that makes the house cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

Meanwhile, the incorporation of tradition in this sort of project suggests an effort to create a contemporary Chinese house by building upon images of the past, but not by simply mimicking them

The Lotus Festival is in full bloom in the gardens of the Old Summer Palace where I meet Yung Ho Chang, at the office of his Beijing architectural practice, on a rainy July morning. Given Chang's prestigious career – in 1999 he set up the Graduate Center of Architecture at Peking University and won the 2000 UNESCO Prize for the Promotion of the Arts; in 2002 and 2003 he held the Kenzo Tange Chair at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design; and since 2005 he has headed up the Department of Architecture at Massachusetts Institute of Technology – I have prepared myself for a prima donna. I am pleasantly surprised when a jovial man with a Beatles haircut and saucer-sized spectacles comes to greet me. This being China, I am immediately offered a glass of warm water, and Chang begins to tell me about his childhood.

**A NATIVE BEIJINGER, CHANG WAS BORN IN 1956 AND WAS 10 YEARS OLD** when the Cultural Revolution swept across China, forcing him out of school. Chang says he was lucky that he got a few years of high school before the universities reopened in 1977, and he sat the entrance exam along with everyone else who had been without education for the past decade. His father was an architect, and although Chang wanted to be a painter, he was persuaded that his best chance of getting a place at university was to follow in his father's footsteps. Since there was great uncertainty as to how long the universities would remain open, Chang, like his contemporaries, was determined to grab any opportunity for an education.

Chang began his studies at the Nanjing Institute of Technology, renowned for its architecture school before the Cultural Revolution but still following a beaux-arts curriculum implemented in the 1930s by the first generation of Chinese architects who all studied under the French professor Paul Philippe Cret at the University of Pennsylvania. Chang describes the state of architectural training once the universities reopened: 'You couldn't really talk about architecture because anything Western was problematic. Anything traditional was also problematic. My education took place at the moment right after the Cultural Revolution, which banned any kind of discussion of aesthetics, form, ideas – but the desire to reopen was also changing the picture rapidly. So it was very bizarre.'

Chang credits his father with teaching him English at home during the Great Leap Forward, and pushing him to go abroad to study because his own plans had been foiled when the Communists took over. In 1981, Yung Ho Chang found himself with a visiting studentship to Ball State University, and straight from post-Mao China on a Greyhound bus headed to Muncie, Indiana – considered by sociologists to be the epitome of Middle America. Chang's acclimatisation to Indiana was a little rocky at first. He jokes: 'I studied English using British textbooks – *Essential English* – it was all





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HIS EDUCATION BEGAN IN CHINA AFTER THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION AND CONTINUED IN MIDDLE AMERICA. HE IS GREATLY INFLUENCED BY MODERN EUROPEAN ART. NOW HE HAS RETURNED TO CHINA. *SUBLIME* MEETS YUNG HO CHANG, WHO IS ASKING SOME CHALLENGING QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ARCHITECTURE

# BUILDING DISTINCTION

Words Kristina Pérez





about Oxford, Cambridge, London. For me, the US was one big Manhattan! Just imagine, I had hardly travelled outside Beijing and suddenly I was in Muncie, Indiana. It was hard at the beginning but I was very hungry for new ideas and I was super-lucky.'

Six months after arriving at Ball State, Chang says he met a professor who fascinated him and who was very influential in the development of his architectural practice: visiting South African Professor Rodney Place from the AA (Architectural Association School of Architecture) in London. 'He spoke British English, and he presented his ideas at the beginning of the semester. I couldn't really understand a word of what he was saying. There was a classmate standing next to me and he told me this guy was saying something really interesting – so I took his class!', laughs Chang. 'It turned out to be kind of a brainwashing experience. He had some very radical ideas, and it suited me well because my interest in art was always there. He introduced me to modern European art, which has changed the way I think ever since.'

After graduating with a BA in 1983, Chang was accepted on to the Masters of Architecture programme at the University of California at Berkeley. When asked his opinion of Marxism permeating art and architectural theory in the early 1980s, Chang says, 'Every single teacher I have had in the US was a Marxist! When I left China I was totally disappointed with the version of Marxism I experienced. I didn't believe in Communism. I had a hope for a market economy in a very naive way. When I was in the US, like most of my generation I shied away from political stuff, not that there was any fear but I was not interested. Finally, I could study architecture.' Following his graduation from Berkeley in 1984, Chang taught at Ball State University, the University of Michigan and Berkeley before returning to Beijing in 1993 to establish Atelier FCJZ (*Fei Chang Jian Zhu*, or 'Unusual Architecture'), China's first private architectural firm.

Although he spent the first decade of his career in academia, Chang says his ambition was not to teach but rather not to take the traditional

architect's career path and 'Stay in school as long as you possibly can! Of course, you have to teach so you can work on your own ideas. Then you can start your own practice.' After ten years of crystallising his ideas, what were the theories he wanted to put into practice? 'Basically because of all the art I studied – I know this sounds terribly ambitious – I wondered if I could do what Marcel Duchamp did in art, in architecture. Sometimes I don't know how to do it, sometimes I do. I wonder how to bring in really ordinary, everyday life and tilt it slightly. I was totally into Duchamp's Parisian apartment with two frames and one door.' He reminisces about exploring his Duchampian principles in one of his first projects, a now defunct Beijing bookstore. 'I discovered that the bookstore was taking over a place that was used for traffic – at that time there weren't many cars in the city – so I put bicycle wheels all over the bookshelves. That was twelve years ago, but it is still the kind of

architecture I like to pursue.'

Perhaps one of Chang's most notable and innovative projects is the Split House he built in 2002 as part of Zhang Xin and Pan Shi Yi's Commune by the Great Wall development which won the Special Prize at the Venice Biennale that same year. For his Split House design, Chang transplanted the *siheyuan* (traditional courtyard house) from the urban context to the countryside, or *shan shui* (mountain and water) and split it in half so that the line between the natural and the artificial is blurred. The frame structure of the Split House also harks back to traditional Chinese building techniques of *tu mu* (earth and wood) by using laminated wood with rammed-earth walls, which have a

low environmental impact.

The Split House is also an embodiment of Chang's self-professed desire to be the Marcel Duchamp of architecture. Chang explains, 'The Chinese have the understanding of continuous time; there is no difference between old and new. I know that sounds rather postmodern but I think it's true. In classical architecture, symmetry is very important but it became dogma. I rather like to see symmetry develop for totally

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Left Today Art Museum, Beijing  
This page Interiors of Tang  
Palace restaurant, Beijing

different reasons. That is partly why the Split House came about.' The symmetry of the Split House begins at the pivot, and Chang put a staircase in the middle so that when it was split there would be a stair on each side. 'It wasn't a formal symmetry. It was more a conceptual symmetry. So the conceptual thinking took me back to the Marcel Duchamp idea.'

The Tang Palace, a Cantonese seafood restaurant in Shanghai designed by FCJZ in 2006, is another example of Chang's desire to take the ordinary and give it a twist. Most restaurants in China are composed of one main dining hall surrounded by a group of private dining rooms; but here Chang has combined the two spaces by doubling the height of the ceiling and installing a wave-shaped layer of traditional clay bricks suspended from steel frames, both thin and translucent – resembling the scales of a fish – to delineate them.

Given the almost mythic rise of the megastructures on the Beijing skyline in advance of this summer's Olympic Games, the question *du jour* is, What is contemporary Chinese architecture? 'I think there are many ways of finding the new Chinese architecture. But if I could be critical of some of my younger colleagues' work, I don't think they're interested enough in tradition,' replies Chang. 'If I'm not mistaken – I could be totally wrong – they're probably afraid of being too traditional. I don't think that's my interest, either but I think one ought to pay a certain amount of attention to tradition to figure out where we are now.'

As for the impact of the Olympics itself on Beijing, Chang gives a

measured response. 'The positive side is the development of the infrastructure ... but the downside is the further wiping out of the old urban fabric. Architecturally speaking, there are two sides – the positive side is that China is more open-minded as a culture than the US towards architecture, and that is an inspiration for architects who work here or

come here to work.' The negative impact for Chang is that Chinese architecture is becoming focused entirely on boldness. 'It's pretty easy to have the illusion that architecture is making these big statements, urban icons that are isolated from the rest of the city that have nothing to do with everyday life.' Chang also decries what he calls 'Dutchist' Chinese architecture. 'We don't think in the same way as Westerners. America and China share so many values, such as hard work and so on, but we're very different people. America is a religious country, a political country – because of democracy, an ideological country; China is not, not at all. We share a lot of things with Europe – and then we do not. Culturally we are very different. In China at the moment, the formal, European language of

architecture is not interesting.' Chang says there are instances of innovative Chinese architecture going up but the foreign media tends to latch on to the Dutchist megastructures. 'It's not easy for us to come up with our own style of buildings. But we ought to ask the questions: What is Chinese contemporary architecture? What is the Chinese architectural heritage? Those are questions which, as an architect, you ought to ask, even if the answers don't give you an entirely different style.' ■

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