

---

# BEAUTY

---

AND THE EAST



New Chinese Architecture

gestalten

## RETHINKING THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE FOLLOWING DECADES OF “DEMOLISH AND REBUILD”

Traditional architecture can be hard to define in a territory as vast as this one. And yet, following the sweeping urbanization of the past three decades, a revival of historic forms and techniques is emerging.

After 40 years of wide-ranging economic reform and integration with the global market, China has largely accomplished modernization and is now seeking a new cultural identity. In the pursuit of a fitting style of architecture for the 21st century, Chinese architects have turned back to tradition, much of which was lost in the course of rapid development. What is the essence of traditional Chinese architecture? And how can it be adapted to a contemporary context, given the complex and fast-changing nature of Chinese cities?

Traditional Chinese architecture resists simplistic characterization, especially considering the multifaceted role it played in ancient China. Architecture is an integral part of Confucian philosophy, the ideology dominant in China for over 2,000 years. Buildings were planned and constructed following *li* (rituals) by the vast imperial bureaucracy following instructions from the emperor, who believed it was a vital aspect of his “Mandate of Heaven.” Despite traditional Chinese architecture’s complexity and diversity, it is possible to identify some recurring traits and motifs in the surviving timber structures: mortise-and-tenon joints; overhanging, concave, tile-clad roofs; and the harmonious integration of buildings with their surroundings.

There is no denying that an appreciation of traditional architecture is part of the Chinese people’s collective unconscious. Its influence is evident in the Chinese way of dwelling and arrangement of the space today, whether at the interior or urban scale. However, as a result of a stringent “demolish and rebuild” model enacted in the name of urban renewal, many of China’s modern cities have a similar appearance. Returning to the roots of Chinese architecture offers an alternative view to the generic cityscapes.



↑ Traditional architecture in Beijing, with modern high-rises in the distance.

← For the Imperial Kiln Museum, Studio Zhu-Pei designed an eye-catching arched structure that echoes the shape of old kilns.

Architects worldwide have experimented with combining regional traditions and features with modernist idealism, and Chinese architects are no exception—most notably the architect and scholar Liang Sicheng, who is known as the father of Chinese architecture. Liang, along with his partner, the architect and →

→ poet Lin Huiyin, was among the first Chinese students to study architecture overseas in the 1920s at Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania. During the Japanese occupation (1931-1945), Liang and Lin traveled around war-torn China to identify and document 2,000 ancient buildings. Some of their most significant discoveries were Foguang Temple, Yingzhou Pagoda, and Zhaozhou Bridge.



The Shenzhen area has undergone rapid modernization and was one of the fastest-growing cities in the world.

The capricious political campaigns of socialist China prevented Liang from realizing his ambition of modernizing Chinese architecture. In the early 1950s, there was a heated debate between planners from the Soviet Union and Chinese experts like Liang Sicheng, about the fate of the old city of Beijing as part of the process of building a new capital. Liang's plan was to leave it untouched and rebuild a new city center in the outskirts. However, the party eventually chose a production-centric, cost-effective plan: they demolished large parts of the old city and repurposed the rest, with factories built inside the city. Caught in the air pollution and traffic congestion plaguing the capital today, Beijing residents still lament Liang's defeat and later persecution during the Cultural Revolution, but Liang's idealism didn't completely die out.

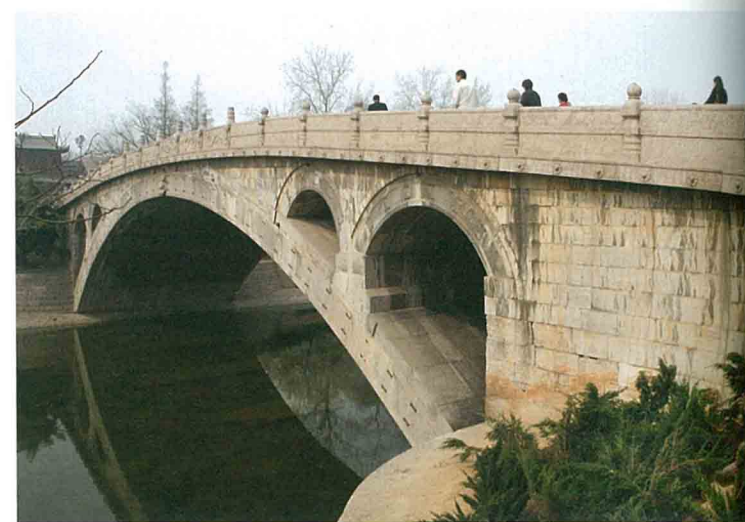
In 2012, Hangzhou-based architect Wang Shu became the first Chinese citizen to win the Pritzker Prize. In a sense, Wang's rise to international acclaim marked a contemporary renaissance of traditional Chinese architecture. "The question of the proper relation of present to past is particularly timely, for the recent process of urbanization in China invites debate as to whether architecture should be anchored in tradition or

should look only toward the future," said Pritzker Prize jury chairman Peter Palumbo on Wang's award. "As with any great architecture, Wang Shu's work is able to transcend that debate, producing an architecture that is timeless, deeply rooted in its context and yet universal."

Wang and his partner and wife Lu Wenyu founded Amateur Architecture Studio in 1998. They named their studio as such because they were critical of the Chinese architectural profession, which they viewed as complicit in the demolition of entire urban areas at that time. Wang's commitment to traditional craftsmanship and cultural continuity has manifested

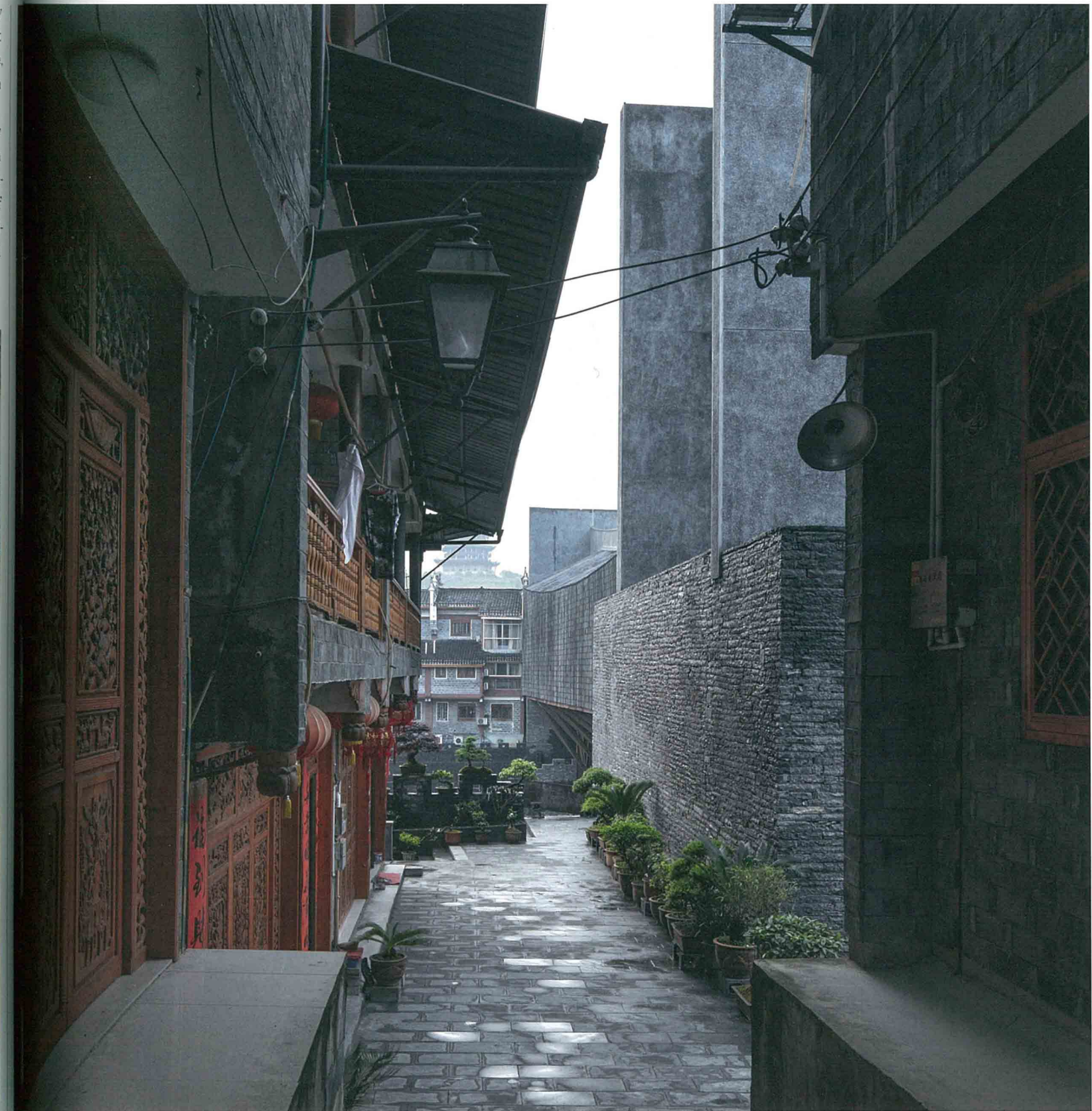


For the Xiangshan Campus, Wang Shu and Lu Wenyu mixed traditional architecture with contemporary elements.

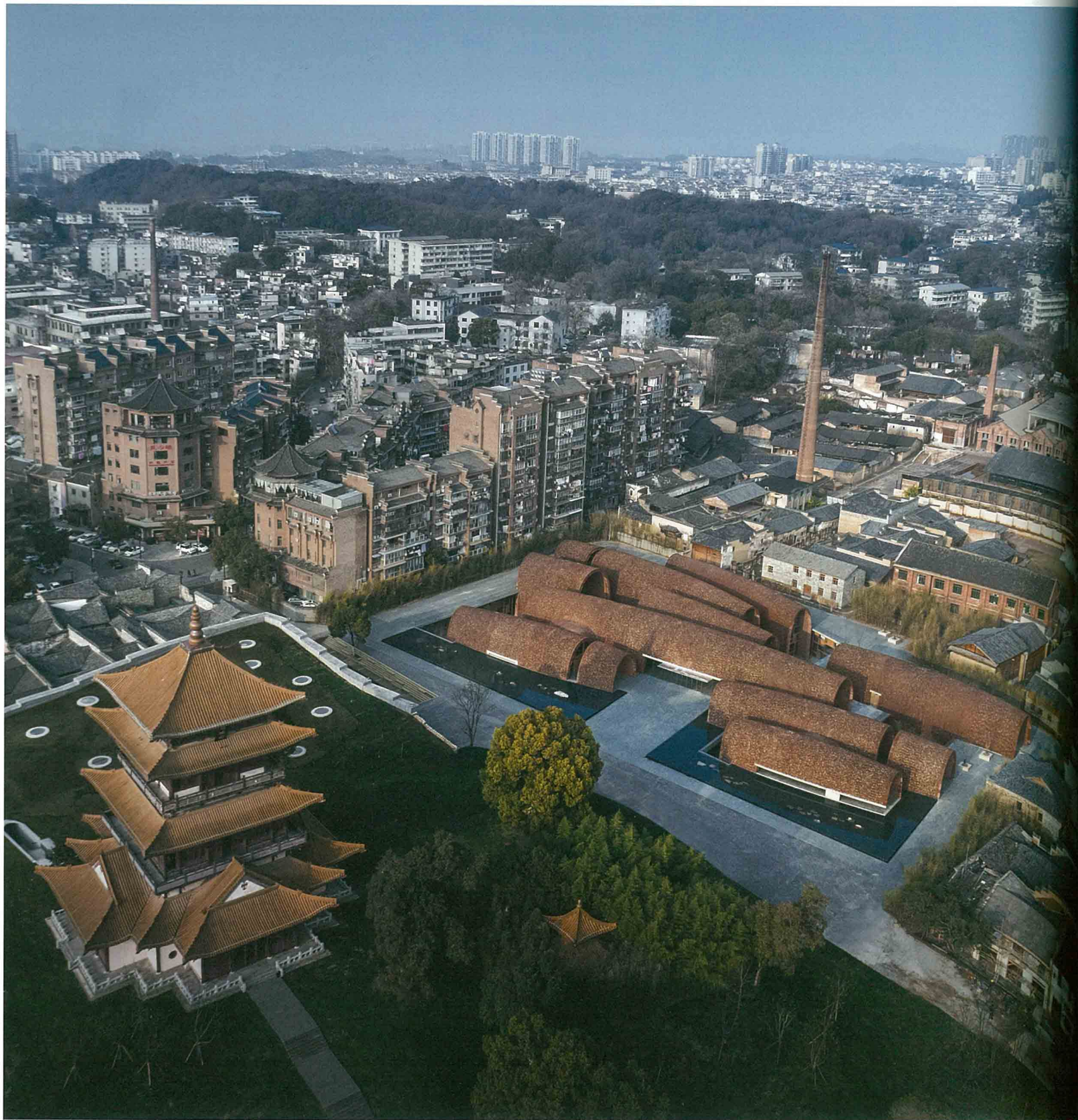


The Zhaozhou Bridge is the world's oldest open-spandrel segmental arch bridge of stone construction.

itself throughout his career. From 1990 to 1998, when he was not working on commissions, he lived and worked with local artisans to learn traditional building techniques, something few other architects are willing to do. Historically, construction knowledge has been passed on orally from mentor to pupil, so working directly with builders was the only way of →



In the pursuit of a fitting style of architecture for the 21st century, Chinese architects have turned back to tradition, much of which was lost in the course of rapid development.



Wang Shu became the first Chinese citizen to win the Pritzker Prize. His rise to international acclaim marked a contemporary renaissance of traditional Chinese architecture.



The Imperial Kiln Museum comprises more than half a dozen brick vaults based on the traditional form of the kiln.

→ learning the craft. Wang's unusual trajectory has made him an outlier, but his unique experience of time-honored building methods gives him a profound understanding of traditional architecture.

In 2004, Wang and Lu designed the Xiangshan Campus of the China Academy of Arts in Hangzhou, and the resulting structures are equally refreshing. The 19.7-acre (8-hectare) campus forms a self-contained town, which curves along the base of a hill. Students live and study in a cohesive collection of buildings with bamboo-panel facades, perforated brick walls, and elegantly curved roofs. Wang's signature use of locally sourced and recycled materials offers a fresh perspective on traditional forms and building techniques, and the campus has a strong relationship with the surrounding landscape. The buildings are nestled into the site, responding to the undulating terrain.

In 2008, after a series of renovation projects, Wang and Lu completed their masterpiece, the Ningbo Historic Museum. Built from traditional materials such as ceramic tiles and bamboo, it celebrates Ningbo's regional history and customs inside and out. Depending on the viewer's perspective, the asymmetric volume appears either mountain-like or boat-shaped, referencing Ningbo's history as a port city. The building's most notable feature is the facade constructed from millions of recycled bricks and tiles salvaged from the demolition of local buildings. Recycling construction material, and, in particular, gray bricks, is a long-standing practice in China. Wang's material palette turns the museum into a sort of Ship of Theseus and an urban icon of Ningbo. He briefed the builders personally during the construction process, giving them loose instructions and the freedom to carry out brick-laying techniques using independent judgment. This approach has delivered an intriguing facade with a rich, organic appearance, bridging the gap between past and present.

Several other new museums that pay homage to the country's complex history have been built in recent years, many of which incorporate reclaimed materials. Studio Zhu-Pei's Jingdezhen Imperial Kiln Museum is a tribute to Jingdezhen's long history as China's porcelain production center. The museum takes the form of an array of brick arches based on the traditional shape of a kiln. As is common in the local area, the volumes of varying size and curvature were partially built from reclaimed bricks from local kilns, creating a series of inviting spaces that reflect the area's heritage.

SUP Atelier's scheme for the History Museum of Qifeng Village is smaller scale, but no less ambitious. Typical of the practice's preservationist approach to renovation, they transformed a dilapidated house into a modern exhibition space that embodies the local area's history and character by retaining the original building's intricate wooden structure.

Jishou Art Museum by Beijing-based architects Atelier FCJZ highlights the architectural heritage of China's ethnic minorities. Jishou was the capital of Xiangxi, an autonomous zone for Tujia people. The museum's form takes inspiration from the traditional *fengyu qiao* style of bridge, the earliest example of which dates back 2,000 years. This type of bridge offered shelter from poor weather, as well as spaces for relaxation and gatherings. Atelier FCJZ's scheme houses a two-story art museum and functions as a transit route across the river, allowing local residents to encounter art as they commute across the city for work or leisure.

After the struggle of Liang Sicheng's era and the experimentation of Wang Shu's generation, revisiting traditional architecture amid China's ongoing urbanization remains highly contested. The current commodification of nostalgia and the politicization of culture and heritage present further challenges for architects exploring this route. After all, the revival of the past is not just about the past; it is also about the here and now. ■



SUP Atelier transformed a dilapidated house into a modern exhibition space for the History Museum of Qifeng.