As in the Western Architecture, Trapped in Western Architecture - Thinking about the Present Situation of Young Architects

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Abstract. This paper studies the domestic present situation of young architects, summarizes the characteristics of them, the miniaturization, individuality, independence and pioneering, branded and so on, and points out its advantages and disadvantages. This paper argues that young architects reference of the western architectural shape and ideas, to promote the development of domestic architecture, but trapped in the western architectural theory system, lack of original local architectural theory. This paper further puts forward some Suggestions for young architects.

Keywords: Young architects, personalization, independence, pioneer, branded.

1. Miniaturization
There is no doubt that China’s current construction market is still dominated by large state-owned design institutes and private design companies. The former is represented by China Architectural Design Institute, Modern Design Group and famous college design institutes, etc. They may belong to a certain national department, have deep social resources and technological integration advantages, and basically monopolize the design of large domestic public buildings, such as airports, high-speed rail stations. The latter is represented by large private design agencies such as CAPOL or large overseas design companies. They are well versed in business rules and have gained market with flexible and all-day considerate services, especially some real estate projects. As a result, most of the young architects who set up their own office are a group of aspiring young people who are unwilling to live a bland life in such large companies and have a passion and ideal for architecture, dreaming of changing the world by themselves. This kind of offices is mostly formed by several architects who share similar interests and tastes. The scale of offices is generally small, and there are not many offices with more than 30 employees. Compared with the standard and streamlined operations of traditional design agencies, these offices are characterized by a lively mechanism, low cost, rapid response, and obvious personalization. They can focus on exploring the frontier direction of architecture. They often travel through major institutions, use some new design tools, go as far as the “ascetic monk” to the countryside or play with their petty bourgeois atmosphere, so as to slowly find their own market space. However, under the high threshold of the national architectural design industry, the growth of these offices is mostly trapped by corporate qualifications. They often rely on large-scale design institutes to create and cannot directly participate in large-scale project bidding. It is conceivable that young architects survive in the cracks and struggle for survival. However, this did not prevent these young architects from enthusiastically striding forward. They broke through the shackles of the industry.
Some of them not only survived, but also gradually became well-known, bringing a new wind to the dull “conventional” architectural culture.

For example, “Youth Design Office” of South China University of Technology is composed of a group of on-campus students. Although the scale is small, the students are full of vigor and innovative spirit. It is easier for them to break through the rules than the experienced and reserved architects in the system. Their works are light, refreshing and refined. In the “Dongjiangyuan Environmental Education Center Renovation” Project, the students worked with local farmers to transform traditional houses and highlighted the spirit of the region by using the local materials (see figures 1-2). Their work reflects a kind of community-level fairness. Therefore, it won the “Prize for Excellence in Social Fairness” of the WA China Architecture Award[1].

2. Personalization

Personalization is obviously an important support for young architects. In terms of concepts, they follow the trend of new architectural thoughts and walk ahead of the era. In terms of art, they emphasize the identity of their works and reflect their distinctive aesthetic tastes. In terms of technique, they are willing to learn and adopt the latest technical means. These characteristics make their works different from traditional architectural companies, they are more personalized. Among them, the more successful one should be MAD Architectural Office. The founding architect, who studied under Hadid in the early days, is an earlier domestic architect who was exposed to parametric design. After working at Hadid Masters, he decided to return to China and transplant the technology to China. [2] They are good at using parametric design to create an exaggerated, smooth, futuristic imaginary form (see Harbin Grand Theater, figure 3), which has been well received by the owners and has been successful in China. However, MAD Architectural Office also has strong Hadid characteristics. It is not easy to get rid of Hadid’s influence, but MAD has been very successful in general. However, more young architects are not as fortunate as MAD. They neither enjoy the favor of the owners nor the professional advantages in the type of architectural design. They can only base themselves on the design of small buildings and think deeply about the origin of the building, hoping to give the building more personal labels. They generally pay attention to the application of building materials. Through manual operation and low-cost, low-precision construction, they try to give the building a more design sense, so as to increase the personality of the building. Among them, the relatively well-known is the Standard Construction Architects. They are based on the local area, use local building materials and construction methods, and combine the thinking about construction culture to achieve an architectural vision that blends with local architecture. Their works have a distinctive personalized feature. For example, the project of their “Micro Warren” uses wood, tile and other local building materials to “micro” transform and renovate the community, which not only preserves the original mechanism and culture, but also meets the needs of community development. This work has its personalized

Figure 1. Dongjiangyuan environmental education center renovation (I).

Figure 2. Dongjiangyuan environmental education center renovation (II).
characteristics and profound social significance, and it won the 2016 Akahan Architecture Award (see figures 4-5)\textsuperscript{[3]}.

3. Independence

The emphasis on independence is a distinct feature of young architects today. Independence here not only refers to the independence of the economy, but also the independence of thought. Although the creative and unique views they hold may be less mature, the spirit and courage reflected in it is outstanding. Emphasizing independence means keeping a certain distance from the mainstream or the trend. The architects must first have the courage to stay away from mediocrity and the courage to be the pioneer. This is what traditional Chinese architects lack. Secondly, the architects must be knowledgeable. Only by reading books and fully grasping the knowledge related to architecture can they have sufficient knowledge reserve and insight into the future of architecture. In the end, the architects must learn how to stay alone, how to stand up to loneliness and how to go on without being affected by the outside world. In a society where all economic interests are paramount, it is not easy for young architects to realize the above three points.

The young Wang Shu owned such characteristics. When he was still a student, he was independent and could insist on his own ideas. In the most developing decade of China’s construction industry, Wang Shu lived in Hangzhou and thought independently. His self-cultivation has allowed him to

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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{harbin_grand_theatre.jpg}
\caption{Harbin Grand Theatre.}
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\begin{minipage}[b]{0.48\textwidth}
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{micro_warren_birds_eye_view.jpg}
\caption{Bird’s eye view of “Micro Warren” project.}
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{micro_warren_interior.jpg}
\caption{Interior of “Micro Warren” project.}
\end{minipage}
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remove all distractions and touch the origin of the building. [4] Wang Shu was different from many contemporary architects not only because of his knowledge. There were also many smarter and knowledgeable people in that era. However, Wang Shu was extremely “courageous” and dared to explore the world of himself independently while ignoring criticisms of others. This style of character was precisely most scarce in this era. Suppose he was as slick and sophisticated as SOM and KPF who could use the techniques of modernist configuration skilfully, he might become famous and popular in the Chinese market and lead the business trend. On the contrary, in reality, Wang Shu maintained independent thinking and rustic architectural emotions, and selectively kept a certain distance from the mainstream. For this reason, Wang Shu’s works “Xiangshan Campus” is not as beautiful and exquisite as modernism, and is not over-decorated with postmodernism. His works is filled with less orthodox “ugliness”, and even with some imperfect architectural functions that looked “awkward” (see Xiangshan Campus of the Chinese Academy of Art, figure 6). [5] However, it is his independence that does not depend on the mainstream that allows him not to be overwhelmed by this wave of commercialization that has swept the country and to keep some innocence in this false society, thus letting him find a path of his own.

![Figure 6. Xiangshan campus of the Chinese Academy of Art.](image)

![Figure 7. Xishu bookstore.](image)

4. Pioneering
Pioneering is a gesture of young architects to strive forward. Although young architects of the new generation have received a complete modernist education and are more open-minded, they are still constrained by the rules and regulations of the society. Only by continuously advancing, breaking constraints and maintaining a certain degree of advancement can architects make up for other deficiencies, gain a firm foothold in the over competitive construction market in the country, and obtain opportunities for in-depth development. In the past ten years, a large number of young architects studying abroad have returned to the country, and the critical thinking of European and American education has benefited them for life. They are unwilling to follow the steps of the older generation. With this pioneering consciousness, young architects strive to break the stereotypes in the architectural concept and lead the trend of the whole society. This is valuable. For example, FCJZ Studio does not follow the stereotypes but has always maintained a pioneering attitude. From the early Xishu Bookstore (see figure 7) and Split House (see figure 8) to the nearest Museum Bridge (see figure 9), the works maintain a new attitude and reflect exploratory research on new forms and spaces. The self-renewing architectural concept is actually a pioneering attitude. Facts have also proved that this pioneering spirit has given the architects an opportunity in the country where all neglected tasks
are being undertaken. It has also promoted the development of domestic architecture to varying
degrees. [6]

While affirming, we should also point out some deficiency of this pioneering spirit. In fact, some
young architects took advantage of the time difference between the domestic and European and
American development stages and introduce foreign ideas to Chinese architectural creation by
applying the information synchronization brought by the Internet, repeating the techniques learned
from the West. On the surface, the architectural work of young architects is lively, and we seem to be
closer to the world. However, many architects have just copied the “fundamental techniques” from
abroad and went all the way. They are too busy to study, have no courage to abandon what they have
learned, and treat the old-fashioned knowledge as the “golden rule”. As a result, they tend to stay at
the stage when returning to China and are unable to upgrade themselves, let alone creating their own
theories. In the end they have become obstacles of the new trend. Over time, some of the pioneers of
the year unconsciously fell into the shackles of Western architectural ideas.

5. Self-Staring
Under the traditional system, most of the architects of the older generation focus on practice instead of
publicity. Except for some architects who often publish articles in magazines, architects of the older
generation do not have many opportunities to publish their opinions in national magazines, or even
promote themselves. But young architects are completely different. In order to survive, they must
seize every opportunity to promote themselves and build themselves into stars in the construction
industry, so as to promote their business. Therefore, young architects pay great attention to the
interaction with the media. They not only contributed to well-known formal academic journals and
websites at home and abroad, but also strengthened their influence through such self-media as WeChat
and Weibo. They are good at both cross-border operations to actively cooperate with art groups, such
as fine arts, industry, clothing and performance, and creating a small circle culture. By participating in
influential exhibitions, they try to promote their ideas, enter their own academic circle and increase the
right to speak, to as to realize self-staring. [7]

Awarding is another important way for architects to become stars. Architectural design awards
within the system are divided into different levels including city, province, ministerial, national and so
on. Architects in the system could get promoted through these awards. They are basically complete
their careers along the route of senior engineers, professor-level senior engineers, survey and design
masters, and academicians. However, most architects stop at senior engineers. There are too many
restrictions on such awards, affecting the participation of architects. These awards have slowly
become a way to allocate design power within the system. It is difficult to be open and inclusive and
many freelance young architects have little opportunity to enter the system. As a result, it has become
a circle of self-talk, and its audience level and influence have also declined to varying degrees. For
example, before Wang Shu won the Pritzker Prize, he rarely received provincial, municipal, ministerial or national prizes “in the system”. This explains the closedness of the award ecosystem to some extent.

This phenomenon will inevitably bring about new changes in building evaluation. As a result, some more transparent and open awards have appeared in China. The “Architecture Media Award” of the Southern Metropolis Daily and the “WA Architecture Award” of “World Architecture” came into being. The evaluation criteria of these awards are different from traditional awards. It does not pay much attention to the scale and importance of architecture, and returns the focus to the value of architecture itself. It emphasizes the consistency with international standards, is fairer and more open, and has greater influence. This kind of architectural awards, both at home and abroad, which pays more attention to the originality of the building, has made many obscure young architects famous, and young architects more opportunities. From the several winners and candidates of the “Architecture Media Award”, it can be seen that the emerging young architects have almost become the protagonists. It’s interesting that there is little overlap between these award-winning works and the award-winning works in the system. Obviously, they belong to the two distinct ecosystems, which have become a peculiar architectural cultural phenomenon. This also proves from the side that domestic young architects have always held different values and practice models than architects in the system.

In short, whether it is article promotion, various exhibitions, or awards, they all gain attention by gathering popularity and frequent exposure, and then obtain a certain identity label to achieve self-staring. This new type of propaganda method allows architects to attract higher attention, which is conducive to promoting their ideas. However, there are also many shortcomings. For example, some young architects pay too much attention to their fame, thus promoting some less mature works and enter the small circle prematurely. Some people even think that such a small circle is a “karaoke” in academia, which is playing and singing at the same time. What’s more serious is that these architects are easily affected by trends or assimilated by other people’s values, which not only is not conducive to their own thinking, but also loses independence by pleasing the audience.

6. The Dilemma Faced: Learning from the West and Being Limited by the West

In terms of office formation, young architects learned from Western architects by emphasizing the leading role of the founding architects. Their works have distinctive characteristics, which accelerate the internationalization of local architects. Young architects gradually become the most active group in China and have become one of the main promoters of China’s architectural culture innovation. However, the introduction of western architecture offices into China also has many problems. First of all, most young architects’ offices are too small. Although it can bring controllability and flexibility, it is not conducive to technological upgrading. It may even stagnate the design level and eventually affect the completion of their works. Secondly, the higher access system of the architectural design industry and the lack of support for architectural design qualifications are still an important negative factor for young architects. At present, the country’s requirements for the qualification of partnership-based design enterprises have been greatly reduced and the policy that an independent first-tier registered architect can set up a Grade A office has been proposed, which facilitates individual architects to participate in design competition. However, such a partnership enterprise means unlimited economic responsibility, which greatly reduces the positive effect of this policy. Thirdly, the Chinese architectural design market has already fully competed. Many young architects are still in a disadvantaged position in the market. They are not yet mainstream in the market, and even the design fees are not guaranteed. Therefore, young architects need more policy support, and it is recommended that the government optimize the qualification mechanism and entry barriers for young architects’ offices. Of course, while the young architects themselves are introducing the western architects, they also need to integrate Chinese characteristics to achieve localization and gradually evolve from academic protagonists to industry leaders so as to change and realize their own architectural ideals [8].

At the academic level, we did not form a complete discipline of architecture before modern times, and our education system was transplanted from Europe and the United States. Therefore, we have to
mention the Western theory for a long time. The West is a mountain that stands in front of Chinese architects. Young architects tend to walk in front of this mountain, and quickly absorb western architectural theories and new skills to maintain a relative “pioneering nature”. However, whether pioneering and internationalization means Westernization? These are worthy of our young architects’ thinking. We should not just be satisfied with transplanting theories from the West to be a star architect in the small circle that only exist in China. Because, even the brightest stars will fall, and will soon be replaced. Moreover, in this noisy and impetuous era, there is no shortage of stars. What is missing is a thinker who deeply thinks about local culture and has his or her own theory. The feasible way for young architects is to seize the opportunity to publicize in a timely manner, at the same time keep a certain distance from the media, critically absorb the advantages of Western architecture theory, and continue to maintain in-depth thinking on contemporary Chinese architecture development, so as to reborn and get rid of the shackles of Western architectural thinking. [9]

7. Conclusion
In summary, contemporary young architects have attracted widespread attention in China, with their activeness and influence gradually surpassing traditional architects. This is of course due to the introduction of western office systems as well as the Western architecture theories they have learned abroad. These offices are distinguished from traditional architectural institutes, and are characterized by miniaturization, technology, pioneering and self-staring, which have greatly improved the domestic design level and accelerated the internationalization of domestic architecture industry. However, these young architects give over-emphasis on evaluations that meet Western standards, are involved in cross-border media too early, and unknowingly fell into Western cultural discourse, making it difficult to produce truly original ontological architecture theories and works. This further explains the shortcomings of domestic young architects in imitating and following Europe and the United States, and they have fallen into the architectural theory system built by the Western countries and cannot extricate themselves. In the future, these young architects can truly create a sky that belongs to Chinese architects only if they can get rid of these rules, break through the theoretical system constructed by Western architecture, and return to the native land.

Source. Figures1-2 are from reference 1. Figure 3 is from MAD architects’ website. Figure 4 and 5 are from reference 3. Figure 6 is from the author. Picture 8 property from http://news.xinhuanet.com/home page. Figures 7-9 are from www.ikuku.cn.com.

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