

Re-made in China

EMMANUELLE BORNE

It was in 2012 that the explosion came: Chinese architect Wang Shu, from Hangzhou, won the Pritzker Prize, five years after being awarded by the Global Award for Sustainable Architecture. While the Nobel Prize of architecture is usually given to well-known architects, that year it had the merit of bringing to public attention an architect barely known even within the profession. With Wang Shu and his wife and associate Lu Wenyu, China began the restoration of its architectural image, which has long suffered with buildings tending to gigantism and pastiche. With their Ningbo museum in Zhejiang Province, the founders of Amateur Architecture Studio revealed to the world the beauty of the 'wa pan' technique, consisting in salvaging and reassembling fragments of brick and ceramic tiles, a process developed by farmers to enable quick reconstruction after typhoons. These architects have succeeded in overthrowing Europe's reductive vision of Chinese architecture, generally summarised to pale copies of Western models. Defying imitation, Wang Shu and his colleagues have built architectures that now have their own identity and ones that, at last, can be learned from. The architect from Hangzhou is not alone: Yung Ho Chang, Liu Jiakun, Zhang Lei, to name just a few of the same generation, have also given credibility to Chinese architecture. A point in common to them all is that they often work away from big cities, in rural zones that are threatened not only by the country's galloping urbanisation, but also, more recently, by a policy of gentrification encouraging the development of tourism. In their wake, a generation of younger architects, often trained abroad, is working to the same end. Nonetheless, these worthy representatives remain too few in the face of the wave of practices producing the roughshod 3D images that flood the web under the banner 'Made in China'. But then again, doesn't it only take a few to start a revolution?