

Four Projects of Institutional Architecture in China (2012–2022)

ANDREA GIANNOTTI¹

Abstract: This essay examines four public and institutional projects completed in China between 2012 and 2022, focusing on heritage protection, cultural dissemination, and architectural education. It situates these works within the framework of a highly centralised state system and large state-affiliated design institutes. The analysis highlights the advisory and strategic role of architects throughout complex institutional processes. Protection and promotion emerge as shared objectives, linking cultural preservation with economic and social development. Together, the projects illustrate the operational dynamics of contemporary public architecture in China.

Keywords: *Chinese institutional architecture, heritage, museum, school.*

The aim of this essay is to provide a temporary snapshot of architectural practice in contemporary China, focusing exclusively on public and institutional architecture. Four recently completed projects are presented and examined, each addressing issues related to the protection and valorisation of cultural heritage, cultural tourism, and university education. The projects span a time frame from approximately 2012 to 2022.

This period is particularly significant: for public investments of this scale, ten years represents a realistic duration within which complex institutional processes – from initiation to completion – can unfold. During this time, projects are often exposed to the risk of suspension, delay, or even partial restart, due to shifts in political priorities at both local (municipal and provincial) and national levels. Although architectural design might initially appear to play a secondary role within such a complex institutional framework, the analysis of these projects' development reveals a different picture. In all four cases, architects were involved from the earliest stages, participating in pre-design meetings and strategic discussions. Public commissioning bodies – whether municipal, provincial or national – often lack the technical tools to visualise outcomes in terms of time, cost and performance.

1. Andrea Giannotti, Architect (arch.giannotti@hotmail.com).

Within this context, the architect's professional expertise becomes essential throughout the entire process, extending well beyond the production of drawings and assuming an advisory role during decision-making phases. Culture constitutes the common ground shared by all four projects. The nature of the cultural content addressed – whether tangible heritage, symbolic landscapes or educational institutions – has profoundly influenced both the design approach and the final outcome in each case. When interventions concern the protection and enhancement of historical and artistic heritage sites recognised at national and international levels, the visibility of the project extends beyond local boundaries, aiming for international recognition. A defining characteristic of these projects is the uniqueness of their sites. There is no other location comparable to the archaeological remains of the Peking Man Cave or the Thousand Buddha Cliff of Guangyuan. Although the type “protective shelter” might theoretically be adapted to similar contexts, the specific historical, geographical and morphological conditions render each architectural response necessarily singular. By contrast, project types such as a science museum or a university building – while no less significant – address forms of intangible cultural heritage related to knowledge production and transmission. In these cases, architectural responses can be compared with similar institutions worldwide.

Nevertheless, the specificity of the context in which each intervention is conceived, together with the conceptual framework established well before the first design sketch, plays a decisive role in shaping each project. The Rizhao Science and Technology Museum, for instance, derives its distinctive character from its foundational premise: the exhibition and public dissemination of the work of the internationally renowned physicist Samuel Chao Chung Ting. As the only museum dedicated to his scientific legacy, its uniqueness is intrinsic. Similarly, the School of Urban Design at Wuhan University was required to achieve a particularly high level of quality, not only among newly built schools of architecture in China but also in an international context. As the environment in which future architects and urban designers are educated, the building was expected to embody exemplary standards of modernity, liveability, accessibility and sustainability.

These projects must be analysed within the broader context of con-

temporary China, where the People's Republic operates as a highly centralised state. Commissioning bodies are directly linked to central government institutions or to local governments at municipal and provincial levels. Public funding is subject to strict financial control and closely tied to broader economic conditions.

Although the involvement of multiple governmental levels can complicate development, three of the four projects examined here were completed within four to six years to the satisfaction of all parties. The fourth project is currently undergoing final approval procedures. Taken together, these cases suggest that the model of public investment in projects of national interest can be considered largely successful.

A significant contribution to this outcome lies in the role of the selected design institutes. In all four cases, the projects were entrusted to state-owned or university-affiliated architecture and design institutes. The protective shelters for the Peking Man Cave and the Thousand Buddha Cliff were designed by the Cultural Heritage Conservation Center (CHCC), part of the Tsinghua University Architecture Design and Research Institute (THAD). The Rizhao Science and Technology Museum and the Wuhan University School of Urban Design were designed by Land-Based Rationalism D.R.C., part of the China Architecture Design and Research Group (CAG). These large multidisciplinary institutes, based in Beijing, have played a distinctive historical role since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, when they were the principal institutions responsible for architectural design and urban planning. Despite subsequent reforms and the gradual opening of the market, they have remained technically advanced and institutionally influential, maintaining close connections with central government bodies.

Given that all four projects belong to the public sphere, economic considerations play a crucial role not only in defining initial budgets but also in evaluating outcomes. The design task extends beyond compliance with building codes and technical requirements, encompassing broader economic and social objectives. Protection and promotion emerge as the key themes shared by these projects, and their integration constitutes a central measure of design quality. In each case, the architectural response seeks to balance these objectives, preserving cultural value while making it accessible and meaningful for present and future generations.

Beyond their technical capacity, these institutes operate as mediating structures between political decision-making and spatial implementation. Their scale and multidisciplinary organisation enable them to coordinate architectural design, engineering, heritage conservation, cost control and administrative procedures within a single framework. This organisational model reduces fragmentation and allows continuity throughout long and complex development processes. In this sense, the architectural project becomes not only a design exercise but also a managerial and institutional operation, in which spatial decisions are inseparable from governance structures and public accountability.



*Protective Shelter for the archaeological site of Peking Man Cave, Zhoukoudian, Beijing, 2013-2018.
Overview from North*