

New School of Urban Design, Wuhan University Campus Wuhan, Hubei Province, 2016–2020

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Abstract: The New School of Urban Design at Wuhan University addresses the architectural challenge of designing an educational building within a historically and environmentally stratified campus while asserting its role as a contemporary institution dedicated to architectural and urban education. Rather than pursuing iconic visibility, the project establishes a calibrated dialogue with its surroundings through controlled massing, material continuity and careful integration with topography. Conceived as a reflexive architectural condition, the building operates simultaneously as a place for teaching architecture and as a spatial instrument through which architectural culture is transmitted. Through a compact linear configuration, staggered floor levels and interconnected classrooms, the project reinterprets the conventional academic typology, transforming circulation and sectional variation into active pedagogical devices. Architecture here is not a neutral container but an operative framework that shapes daily practices, collective interaction and learning processes, positioning educational space as a critical component of disciplinary formation.

Keywords: *Educational architecture, University campus, Learning environments.*

The New School of Urban Design at Wuhan University is defined by its relationship with an exceptionally stratified context: a historic campus characterised by dense vegetation, complex topography and a constellation of significant buildings dating from different phases of Chinese modernity. Unlike the other projects discussed in this series, the school is required to negotiate its presence within an already formed academic and cultural environment, establishing continuity without erasure and distinction without rupture.

Located at the geographical centre of the campus, between Luojia Mountain and East Lake, the project confronts a dual condition. On the one hand, it must integrate into a landscape shaped by trees, slopes and historic buildings; on the other, it must assert its role as a contemporary institution dedicated to the future of architectural and urban education. The architectural problem is therefore not one of iconic visibility, but of

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calibrated dialogue: how a new building can belong to its surroundings while declaring its own temporal and disciplinary specificity.

This responsibility is heightened by the building's programme. As a school dedicated to architecture, urban planning and design, the project embodies a reflexive condition: architecture is here both the subject taught and the medium through which teaching takes place. The building is not merely a container for educational activities, but an active participant in the formation of spatial sensibility, disciplinary awareness and collective practices. In this sense, the school operates as a vehicle for cultural transmission in the most direct and material way.

The site assigned for the project lies at the southern foot of Yingyuan Garden hill, in a compressed and irregular plot bordered by student dormitories and vehicular roads. Rather than dispersing volumes across the site, the design responds with a compact, linear block whose complexity becomes legible primarily through section and roof plan. Four rectangular volumes are articulated through slight shifts, overlaps and offsets, producing a layered configuration that is only partially readable from elevations and plans.

The main entrance is marked by a recessed courtyard carved into the building mass, organised around an existing camphor tree. This gesture simultaneously preserves a natural element and establishes a public threshold, introducing a small plaza that connects the campus circulation system through the building at ground level. The rotated volume framing this space represents the only deviation from the otherwise orthogonal grid, signalling entry without resorting to monumentality.

The building closely follows the site's topography, using slopes and level changes to mediate height differences and generate a continuous pedestrian experience. Although the total floor area is distributed over no more than five levels in compliance with campus regulations, the internal organisation avoids conventional stacking. Instead, floor slabs are staggered and interlocked at varying heights, producing a spatial configuration that recalls Adolf Loos's Raumplan: spaces are arranged according to function, use and relational importance rather than by repetitive horizontal strata.²

This strategy becomes particularly evident in the façades. While neigh-

2. For the formulation of the concept of Raumplan in Loos, see Heinrich Kulka, *Adolf Loos: Das Werk des Architekten* [The Architect's Work], Anton Schroll & Co., 1931, pp. 85–93.

bouring campus buildings typically present regular grids of stacked windows, the new school displays a sequence of protruding and recessed volumes at different levels. The southern elevation, dedicated to teaching spaces, unfolds as a stepped composition of terraces, each corresponding to a shifted floor slab; the northern elevation, housing offices, features framed window modules and a series of vertical voids accommodating staircases within open-air loggias. Through these differences, the building asserts its identity by deviation rather than contrast.

Materially, the project establishes continuity with the campus through the exposed concrete structural grid, infilled with red brick walls and metal window frames. This language resonates with numerous institutional and residential buildings constructed in China from the 1960s onward and with several structures already present on the Wuhan University campus. Inclined columns supporting overhanging volumes further reinforce this dialogue, recalling both the projecting eaves of modern Chinese buildings and, more subtly, the branching of nearby trees. The gently sloping green roof and the turquoise sun-shading screen along the northern façade echo the colours and geometries of traditional glazed roof tiles found throughout the campus.

If the building's external form negotiates integration and distinction, its interior spaces articulate a more radical position. At first glance, typical floor plans suggest a conventional organisation: a central corridor serving classrooms to the south and offices to the north. Yet closer inspection reveals subtle connections between adjacent teaching spaces, where steps replace partitions and floor levels shift by approximately 1.5 metres. As a result, classrooms interlock vertically and horizontally, occasionally merging into shared volumes that exceed the scale of a single room.

These interconnected, multi-level spaces redefine the typology of the classroom. Rather than enclosed units organised around a fixed pedagogical hierarchy, they function as flexible platforms for workshops, exhibitions, critiques and collective work. Integrated furnishings, movable desks and display surfaces support multiple configurations, while variations in ceiling height and glazing improve natural lighting and spatial continuity. The result is an environment that encourages interaction not only within individual classes, but across different years and disciplines.

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cal hierarchy, they function as shared spatial platforms for workshops, exhibitions, critiques and collective work. Variations in floor level and spatial continuity encourage informal interaction and appropriation, allowing learning to extend beyond the boundaries of individual classrooms. In this sense, educational space is conceived not as a neutral container, but as an active pedagogical environment.³

This spatial flexibility responds to a specific constraint—the need to maximise usable teaching space within a limited footprint—but transforms it into an opportunity to rethink educational space itself. In doing so, the building assumes an active role in shaping teaching methods and learning practices, particularly in disciplines where collaboration, experimentation and spatial awareness are central.

More explicitly than in the other projects discussed, the cultural value of the New School of Urban Design does not reside in a protected artefact or curated content. It lies in the architectural space itself, conceived as an operative framework that influences daily practices, modes of interaction and forms of knowledge production. Architecture here becomes a pedagogical instrument, not by representation, but by use.

References

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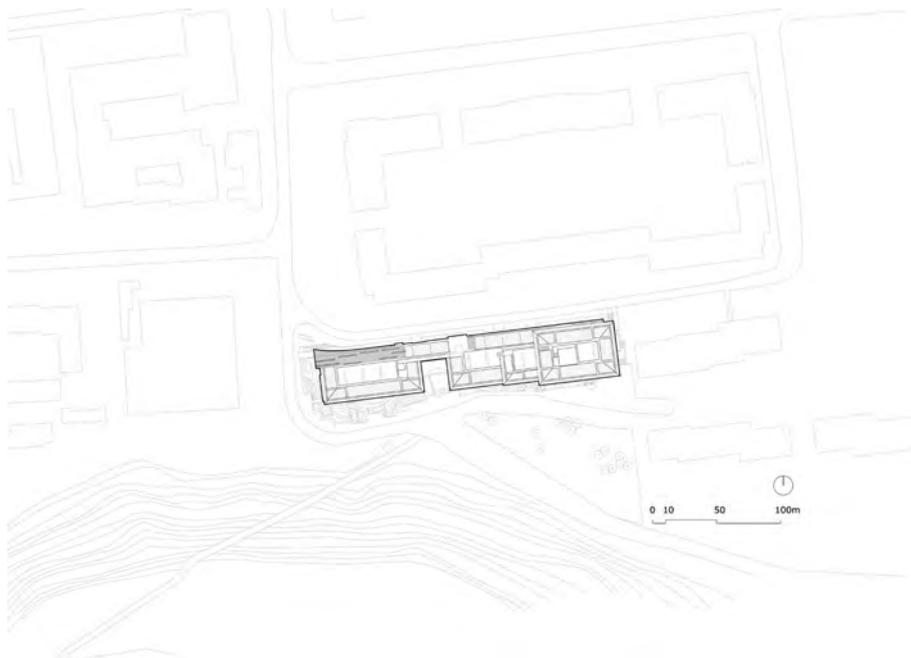
HERTZBERGER 2008

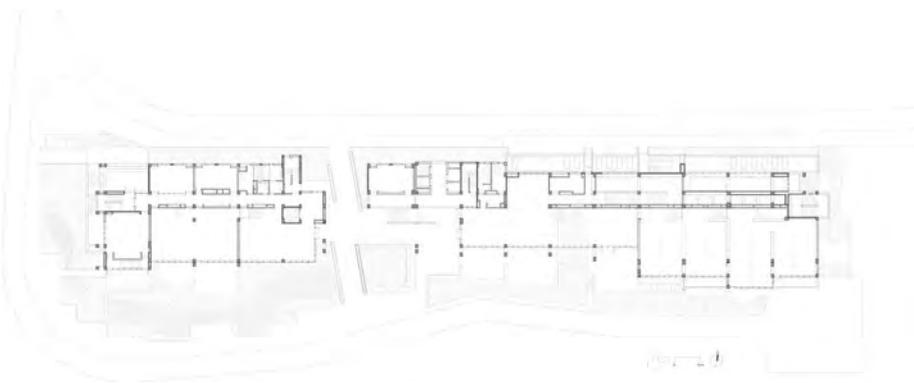
Herman Hertzberger, *Architecture and Education*, 010 Publishers, 2008, pp. 13–23.

3. HERTZBERGER 2008, pp. 13–23.



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Fig. 2. New Building rooftop.*



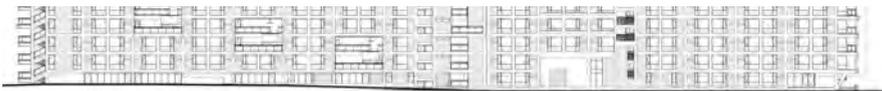
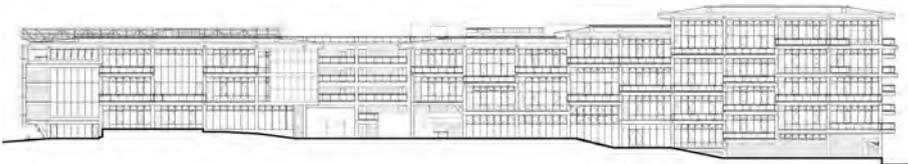


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Fig. 3-6. Center of the Campus, Campus Overview, Master and Roofplan, Ground floor plan.*



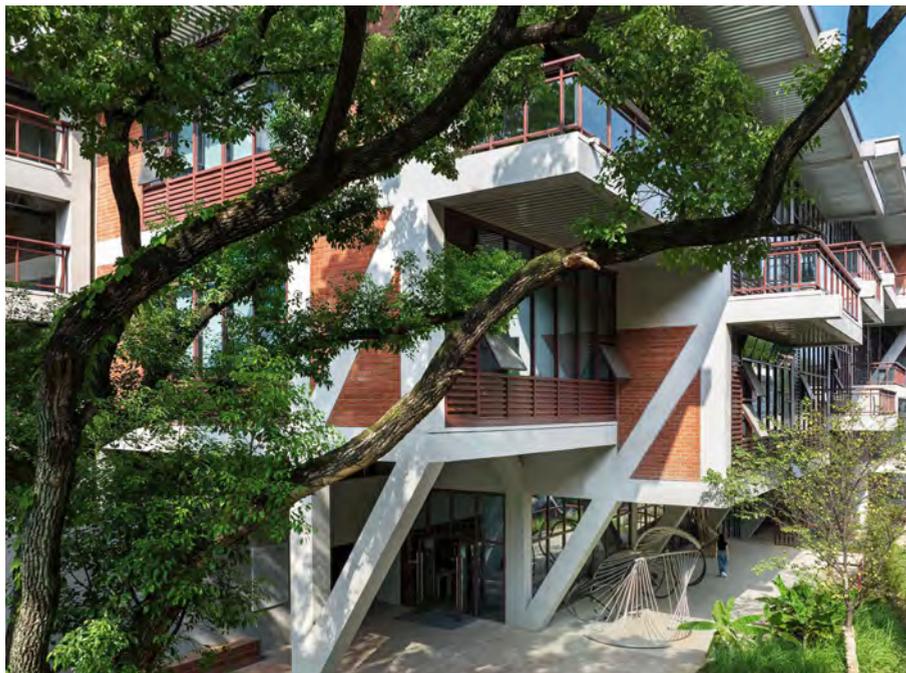


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Fig. 7-10. Main entrance, plaza, by South Road.*



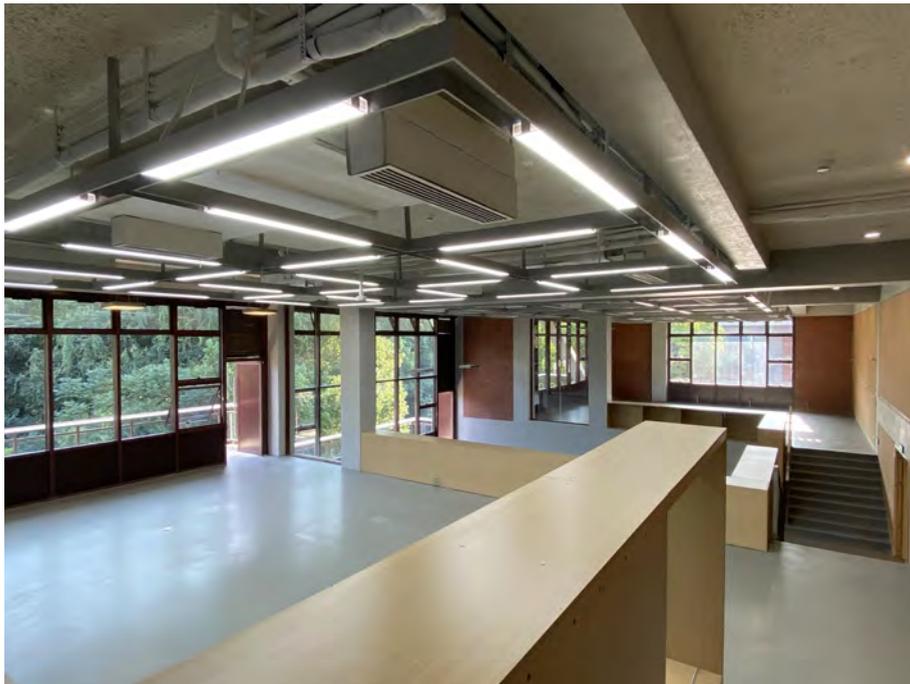
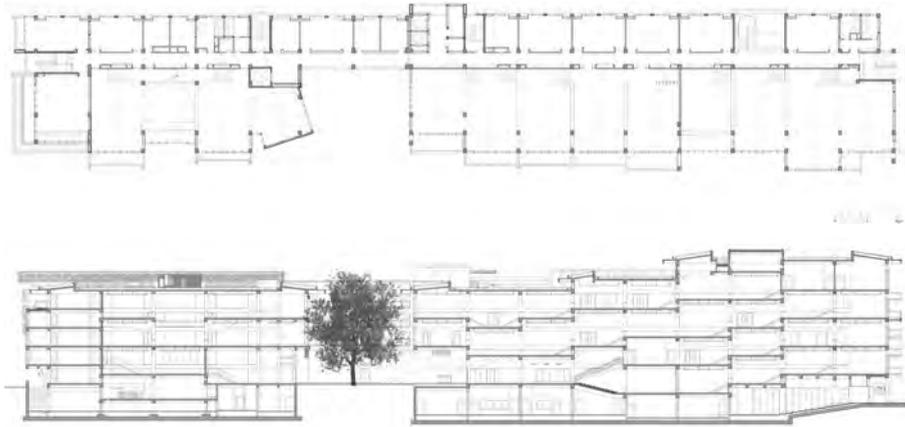


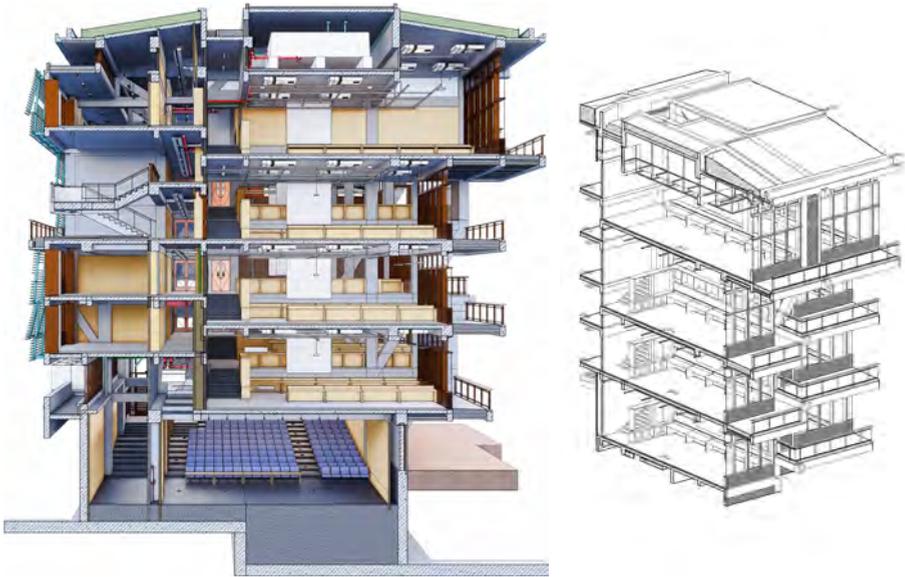
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Fig.11-14. South East corner, Sections, Elevations, North facade.*





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Fig. 15-18. South facade, North East facade, North West rooftop and corner.*





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Fig. 19-23. Typical Plan, Section, Classroom spaces, Sectioned model.*