

Gong Dong and Stefano Pujatti – in conversation with Davide Tommaso Ferrando 1

SUMMARY.

Born in 1972, Dong Gong can be considered a fifth generation of Chinese architects. Compared to the fourth generation of Chinese architects, the fifth generation had a much 'smoother' educational journey. Dong Gong received his master's degree in architecture from Tsinghua University in 1999 and then continued his master's studies at the University of Illinois in the United States, where he received an architectural education from both China and the West. In addition, Dong Gong's experience working in international architects' offices has contributed to his focus on the essence of architecture and his understanding of architectural quality, which has further translated into the bottom line he has always adhered to. The firm has been on a stumbling journey for twelve years, from the early stages of its inception, to gradually reflecting and correcting its architectural stance in practice, to accumulating wonderful design works, and to being widely noticed by the world today. Dong Gong has led Zhixiang Architecture in its relentless exploration in practice and continuous reflection in its creation, rooted in the local area but also in the international arena, abandoning the highly recognisable 'traditional' symbolic forms and then building with ease, epitomising the efforts of the fifth generation of contemporary Chinese architects.

Dong Gong, like all architects educated in Western architecture, has been fiercely conflicted by the difference in formal language between modernist architectural design methods and localised regional architecture. From his early exploration of 'temporary' architecture to his study and practice of the lived experience of time and place. In the Sanlian Library, the choice of wood and the integration of regional elements are all part of the search for formal unity between the two. With the completion of the Yangtze River Museum and other buildings, we can increasingly feel this contradiction diminishing in Dong Gong's works. The renewal of Dong Gong's strolling ideas and the mature use of formal language seem to have formed the Dong Gong scheme in localised design.

EXTENDED BIO.

Two years after the completion of the Seaside Library, another work by Dong Gong, The Captain's House, was completed at the end of 2016. What links the two projects is the location of the site, which is also by the sea. In contrast, however, the differences between the two buildings seem to be stronger than the similarities. Most intuitively, the Seaside Library floats alone on the beach, the building parallel to the shoreline, displaying a silent relationship with each other, while the Captain's House stands on a reef surrounded by dense residential buildings, pointing perpendicular to the shoreline, with a confrontational 'fortitude' that speaks for itself.

Unlike the Seaside Library in its almost natural 'tabula rasa' state, the Captain's House as a

renovation project can only be attached to the existing building, subject to a complex physical and social environment. In the Seaside Library the identity of the owner is weak, with little intervention in the building. It is mainly the building that is in constant relationship with its users. The owner of the Captain's House is the user, from family composition to personal interests, and Dong Gong has to deal with a more 'concrete' architectural issue. He has spoken of a key insight in the Seaside Library that architecture can be more 'concrete', and the Captain's House actually provides a better starting point to parse this idea. The traditions, realities and aspirations of the family are already embedded in the old house, and it is up to the architect to respond to them in a new way. In a way, there is an important distinction between the rationalist (seeking a single solution to a universal) and the functionalist (seeking a specific solution to a specific problem), as Adolf Behne pointed out. In contrast, the independent self-sufficiency of the seaside library may be more in favour of the former, while the Captain's House should undoubtedly be classified as the latter. As Bain explains, the 'function' here goes deeper than the everyday understanding, "every function that is fulfilled is an apparatus for the creation of new and more perfect human beings." It is no longer about abstract data, but about the bodies and feelings of each family member.

The Captain's House is a very distinctive expression of what we might call the 'metaphorical atmosphere' that is at the heart of Dong Gong's recent work. Although the Captain's House is much smaller than the Seaside Library, it has more complex conditions and offers more opportunities to relate to different architectural themes, thus injecting many metaphorical connotations into the house. Examples include foundations, crowns, lighthouses and boats, as well as architectural archetypes such as the classical architectural tradition, Le Corbusier and Con. Although differing in degree, the Captain's House shares the same characteristics as the Seaside Library and also the Seaside Church to the side: the main elements of the building are relatively complete rooms that are strongly coloured by atmosphere, and these atmospheres underline a more definite metaphorical reading. In the Seaside Library this reading is that of a cave; in the Seaside Church it is that of a tall hut; in the Captain's House it is that of a boat. The combination of atmosphere and metaphor has given Dong Gong's recent work a more intriguing depth than his previous work and has garnered a wider public response. Dong Gong's metaphors are different from those of the bottle and the trousers because he has chosen thicker metaphors that touch on fundamental issues.

The Seaside Library responds to the loneliness and avoidance felt in the face of an uncontrollable reality, while the Captain's House expresses the classical wisdom of resisting "the sea still craves figs". The two buildings respond to the threat of the 'sea' in somewhat similar but different ways. Whereas the former tries to resist with hard walls, the latter relies on a more intangible state of mind, where the library can combat nothingness with knowledge, the Captain's House resists the temptation to sail away with the peace of family. The sea itself is an absolute metaphor for infinity, disorder and unknowability, to which the architect responds with the metaphors of the cave and the boat on the shore. These two stories are far from exhausting the possible relationships between man and the sea.

The year 2022 marks the fifteenth year of Naoto Architecture's existence. In the past fifteen years, its architectural works have fully demonstrated a rigorous and unique construction logic, and have always insisted on "place-making" as the main design intention. Through the use of a modernist architectural vocabulary, Directly Oriented Architecture has been able to observe and reflect on different social and natural environments, integrating humanistic concerns and emotional experiences of the building site, presenting architectural features that "value the spirit of place, respond to the laws of space, focus on the experience of place, and innovate construction methods".

The value of “place-making” design theory is that it makes up for the lack of “humanized” and “living” spatial emotion and spirit of place in modern architectural design methods. It considers the relationship between architecture and environment, architecture and users, and pays more attention to the needs of people. The creation of special atmosphere space requires not only rigorous design logic and construction methods, but also continuous innovation of spatial forms, materials and construction methods to create “personalized” architectural works with unique spiritual connotation and place atmosphere.

Since the China Resources Land Sales Center in Guang’anmen (Beijing, 2008), the design principle of “logic and rationality” at the beginning of the project has been put into practice, with a tendency to solve problems objectively and directly, believing that architecture should be as logically rigorous as the results of mathematical derivation, involving only the phenomenological concepts of intuition and consciousness. The expression of “spirit of place” is not yet obvious. Tianjin Zhangjiawo Town Huaxu Primary School (2010, Zhangjiawo Town, Tianjin) is a mature work among the early projects of Straightforward. While focusing on logic and technology, it introduces color and spatial light changes, slightly suggesting “place”. Later, through the Kunshan Organic Farm series, Naoto began to think about the relationship between architecture and site, because the characteristics of the natural site caused Naoto to pay more attention to the architectural site and place, and architecture began to play a role as a medium between site and people, blending into the site and making people re-examine the beauty of the site. In the Taoyuanju Community Center (2012, Chongqing), the relationship between architecture and site is more obvious, as the unique texture of the mountain and human activities in the park stimulate the direct creative potential, and the architecture reveals a more multi-layered “spirit of place”. Until the completion of the Sanlian Seaside Library (2015, Beidaihe New District), Naoto fully expressed the experience of place and the spirit of place in his work, attracting countless people to experience the “spirit of place” and becoming a representative work of his fame.

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Gong Dong and Stefano Pujatti – in conversation with Davide Tommaso Ferrando 2

SUMMARY.

Stefano Pujatti is an Italian architect, founder of *elasticoSPA*, was born in Aviano in 1968. He graduated in Architecture at the University Institute of Architecture in Venice and the Master in Architecture at Sci-Arch in Los Angeles, California. After collaborating with Coop-Himmelblau in Los Angeles and Gino Valle Architetti in Paris, he was co-founder of the Elastic Studio in 1995. From 2004 to 2013 he was a university lecturer at the Faculty I of Architecture at the Polytechnic of Turin and from 2014 to 2016 at the UOT (University of Toronto – Canada), course of “Architectural Design”. During the same years he was invited internationally as a speaker and guest critic in several universities, including RMIT – Melbourne, Hoesi University – Tokyo, Academy of Architecture – Mendrisio. Today Stefano Pujatti is head of the ELASTICOSPA studio, based in Chieri (TO), and from 2016 he can count on ELASTICOSPA + Inc, based in Toronto, for the development of projects in North America. The work of the studio has been presented in many books and magazines both nationally and internationally and has been invited to major international events such as different editions of the Venice Biennale, the Brasilia Architecture Biennale and the London Architecture Festival. He has won numerous awards such as the Inarch-Ance Award as a young professional (2006), finalist of the Mies Van Der Rohe Award (2012), The Plan Award category Hospitality (2015), Premio Architetto Italiano (2016), Premio Archmarathon category Visioning (2017); he was also selected to represent Italian architecture in the traveling exhibition “Piccole Utopie”.

EXTENDED BIO.

Pujatti’s main qualities - his inexhaustible formal generosity, combined with a desire to experiment beyond national borders, and his ability not to let his guard down even in the face of the most difficult problems. Dedicated to processing and complicating the often banal and incomprehensible imagery of his clients, Pujatti has a magical ability to complicate it, if not as a psychoanalyst in this form, Pujatti succeeds in conducting unusual experiments in each family: Use material, space and technology concepts.

He has been involved in issues related to the recovery of urban areas and abandoned structures since he was at university, “the idea of occupying the territory again, without thinking about a second life for the existing structures, does not seem to be a very wise solution, but it is above all costly. It is something that not even the teachers understand very well, and to illustrate this I quote an argument I had with Franco Purini, who in 2010 made a Biennale where he invented a new town between Verona and Mantua, called VEMA. This area of the Po Valley is one of the few with reduced lighting, reduced built-up area, so in our proposal, we illustrated a building that was an infrastructure, i.e. a school that could accommodate

houses and services on the roof. If we are to occupy a territory we should try to do it with structures that enclose various functions, without invading other spaces. If we have to design something from scratch, it should be designed to have a second life, in addition to the function for which it is built.” It is this philosophy that unites the projects managed by the study, from the transformation of a silo, once used to hold the compacted earth, into the headquarters of Fornace Carena (2005) to the more recent 1301iNN (Slow Horse). The project involved the partial demolition of the existing sports hall, keeping only the ground floor, and set itself the objective of restoring a building that represents the identity of the place through a formal poetic playing with the typical elements of the surroundings.

For ElasticoSPA design is science-fiction rather than just a science. It's a balance between form and function, it's innovation and realism, it means jumping forward keeping in mind what's behind. ElasticoSPA is precisely that, “Elastic” in its approach to design and architecture, and elastic in its approach to customers, manufacturers and end-users. Elasticity means flexibility, and ensures that networking tensions are always kept to a minimum. Elasticity means security: think of the net below the trapeze artist. Elasticity means strength: think of David and Goliath. We frequently see ourselves as trampoline artists. Our job is to keep our balance when everything around us is in a state of elasticity. To fly high you must keep calm, start and finish with your feet on the ground. Design requires practical skills: it's fine bouncing ideas around, ours stand up to the test of reality too.

A story of aggregations and disintegrations not unusual in Italy, which interests us, however, only to introduce the character in many ways more brilliantly versatile than Italian architecture and that perhaps, through the changes in the name of the studio, has kept the term Elastico as a company name, not only not to make its brand unrecognizable, but because no other name – besides Elastico – could have represented its intimate nature. The ability to organize and synthesize, precisely elastically, the most varied suggestions that give body to their architectural production.

Starting with training. Stefano Pujatti, in fact, studied in the faculty of Venice and graduated with Gino Valle, a designer who lives in full the traditionalist Venetian climate, but who has an undoubted sensitivity for materials. Valle, who in those years was working in Paris, offered him the opportunity to follow a project consisting of a stitching, restoration and reconfiguration of a block located in the city center. The French experience is followed by a stay in Los Angeles, where Pujatti meets Tom Mayne of Morphosis and Wolf Prix of Coop Himmelb(l)au, both protagonists of deconstructivist architectural research, who teach him to work with space, even at the cost of fragmenting the construction (those were the years when Morphosis and Coop Himmelb(l)au were still hard, very hard to digest, the spectacularization will come later).

Pujatti does not deny either one or the other. Even at the cost of producing an abnormal conceptual monster. How is it possible to combine the refined and postmodernist eclecticism of Valle with the restless and violent experimentalism of Mayne or Prix?

The road is found in the Italian tradition. Not the one that is fashionable in the academies – neorationalist – but in the one that many deny the organic tradition. What could be more elastic than organic deconstructivism? Deconstructivism provides spatial agility, conceptual openness, formal restlessness. The organic perspective is the relationship with the context, the love for materials, the good detail and the openness to construction techniques, such as the Italian ones, not particularly advanced.

So equipped, Pujatti is ready to go with everyone always remaining inside and out, in a position that for others would be opportunistic but for him is one of comparison, growth, reflection. And in fact it does not hesitate to participate in that unspeakable combination of

architectural forms that was the ideal city of VeMa proposed by Franco Purini when the Roman architect was entrusted with the curatorship of the Italian Pavilion on the occasion of the Venice Biennale in 2006. Pujatti managed to participate without leaving, like others, with broken bones for having sacrificed the reasons for research to those of the neo-academy. He proposed to insert the residences, even kitsch and banal, made independently by each inhabitant, within a structure capable of canceling their impact. The idea, in reality, is not new: it has antecedents in Le Corbusier's Obus plan in Algiers and in the macrostructures designed by radical architects in the Sixties and Seventies. With great skill, precisely elastic, he takes them up, adapts them to the context and characterizes them with that fluid spatiality that constitutes the characteristic feature of his architectural production.

The impact with private clients is also versatile. "The purpose of my work," he confesses, "is to pull out of everyone's dreams. Only in this way will architecture be able to emerge from that mediocrity to which conformism and cultural stereotypes force it".

Working on the often banal and twisted imagination of the client and making it complex with magical skill, if not as a psychoanalyst of form, Pujatti manages in every home to produce an unusual experimentation: with materials, with spaces, with technological inventions.

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