

SHENZHEN FEVER

IN RAPIDLY GROWING SHENZHEN,
THE ARCHITECTS OF URBANUS
FOCUS ON THE PUBLIC SPACE AND
OTHER UNPOPULAR CHALLENGES.

TEXT LINDA VLASSENROOD
PHOTOS URBANUS

ABOVE LEFT TO RIGHT: MENG YAN,
LIU XIAODU AND WANG HUI.



THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE TOP
DAFEN'S URBAN-DESIGN PATTERN IS
PUNCHED IN AN ABSTRACT FORM IN
THE FACADE. A NUMBER OF SQUARES
CONTAIN WINDOWS, OTHERS SERVE
AS SUPPORTS FOR PAINTINGS. THIS

MAKES EVEN THE FACADE AN
EXHIBITION SPACE, AND IN THE
BEST-CASE SCENARIO, GIVES
THE BUILDING A CONTINUALLY
CHANGING EXTERIOR.

DAFEN ART MUSEUM SHENZHEN 2005-2007

THE DAFEN ART MUSEUM HAS BEEN DESIGNED AS A COMMUNITY CENTRE IN THE HEART OF THE ART-PRODUCING DISTRICT OF DAFEN AND ACCOMMODATES POPULAR AS WELL AS HIGH ART. THE ROOF IS PIERCED BY SEVERAL VOLUMES, WHICH SERVE AS LIGHT SHAFTS ON THE INSIDE, WHILE FORMING A LANDSCAPE DOTTED WITH PLAZAS ON THE OUTSIDE; TOGETHER, THE VOLUMES REPRESENT THE DISTRICT'S URBAN-DESIGN PATTERN.



ABOVE A PLAZA ON THE SECOND FLOOR IS SURROUNDED BY STUDIO WORKSHOPS.

DURING THE OPENING DAYS OF THE FIRST Shenzhen Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism in 2005, the architects of Urbanus, like inveterate tour guides, drove groups of – mainly Chinese – professional visitors in their brand-new car around the most chaotic, dilapidated and over-built neighbourhoods in the city. The contrast between the picture-snapping architecture tourists and the local populace, in spite of all the good intentions, was stark – and characteristic of the growing gap between rich and poor. Urbanus has been focusing on these 'villages in the midst of the city' for a number of years, out

of a fascination for their vitality, but also out of anxiety about the social problems that are likely to arise as soon as these neighbourhoods are razed.

The concern expressed by Urbanus raises the question of how critical an architect can be in China. How much freedom does he or she have in practising architecture and generating a substantive discourse? At the moment, discouraging reports about the position of the architect, buried at the bottom of the pile in a profit-seeking building sector, tend to predominate. There is typically little respect for authorship, the level

of implementation is far below par, there is virtually no time for reflection, analysis or research and the idea of long-term solutions is not even broached.

Over the last few years, with a limited number of projects, a small group of talented architects has injected greater quality into the current architecture practice, simultaneously calling this practice into question. The creation of difference has taken place through construction, mainly by positively and creatively bending the multitude of limitations, rather than through the presentation of thoroughly researched and critically



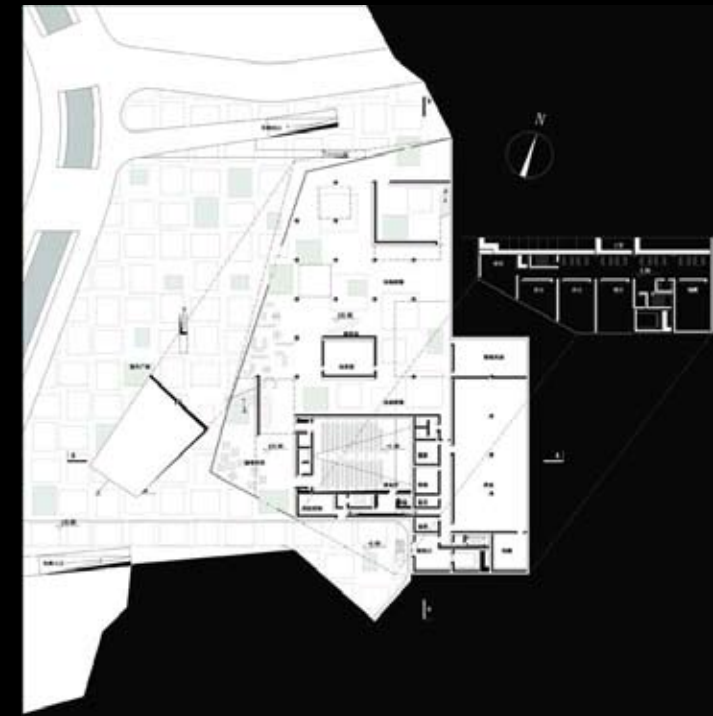
ABOVE / WE ARE LOOKING FOR AN ARCHITECTURE WHICH RESPONDS INNOVATIVELY TO LOCAL CONDITIONS, SAYS URBANUS PARTNER MENG YAN.

written analyses. Although a select group of Chinese architects, researchers and critics are making a case for sustainable building, social housing and more attention to cultural history and public space, little of this is apparent in everyday architectural practice. This is not all that surprising, since the government and project developers usually see little profit potential in these areas of concern. In addition, the mood of the day provides no time for independent research.

Initially, the attention of the Chinese avant-garde focused on completing an architectonic object of high quality, as an isolated demonstra-

tion of good architecture. Gradually, its attention is shifting to the role that architecture can play in the transformation of the urban fabric. Urbanus has taken on a leading role in this. Ever since its founding in 1999, the firm has considered the city, changing at an intimidatingly rapid pace, as its work arena, focusing on the configuration of the public space. In the last two years, it has increasingly committed itself to unpopular challenges, like urban regeneration and social housing. The three Urbanus partners – Liu Xiaodu (b. 1961), Meng Yan (b. 1964) and Wang Hui (b. 1967) – are evidently unusually adept at

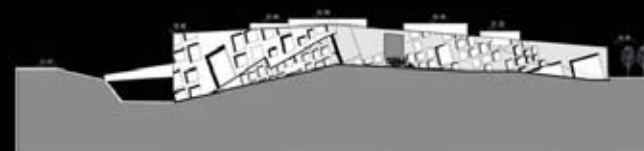
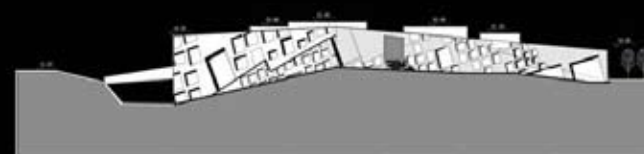
striking the right note and finding suitable clients, making it possible to broach issues considered delicate by Chinese standards. Meng Yan: 'Urbanus believes public space and public interest are of special importance in the context of China's sweeping urban development. This is a much more urgent issue than building fashionable or simply high-quality buildings. We also feel strongly that we have a social responsibility to create high-quality public spaces for ordinary people, including low-income groups, at a time when most private developments seem to target only the rich and the established.' In this regard,



ON THE GROUND FLOOR IS A MARKET THAT SELLS PAINTINGS, CAFÉS AND OTHER PUBLIC FACILITIES. THE MARKET HAS A SEPARATE ENTRANCE.



FROM THE FORECOURT, AN INCLINE LEADS TO THE MAIN EXHIBITION GALLERY ON THE FIRST FLOOR. ADDITIONAL EXHIBITION SPACES ARE ARRANGED ALONG A LINEAR TRAFFIC SYSTEM.



ELEVATIONS.



THE SECOND FLOOR HOUSES A COURTYARD WITH CAFÉS AND STUDIO WORKSHOPS. THREE BRIDGES CONNECT TO THE SURROUNDING STREETS, MAKING THE BUILDING PART OF PUBLIC PEDESTRIAN ROUTES.



ABOVE BY MAKING THE MUSEUM AS ACCESSIBLE AS POSSIBLE, IT SHOULD IMPROVE THE EXISTING URBAN STRUCTURE AND PROVIDE A POSITIVE IMPULSE TO COMMUNITY SPIRIT.



ABOVE FOOTBRIDGES ANCHOR THE COMPLEX IN ITS SETTING.

Shenzhen is undoubtedly of decisive significance as a base of operations (although the firm also has an office in Beijing). In 1978, this fishing village located right next to Hong Kong was given Special Economic Zone status, and its population has grown from 30,000 to an unofficial estimate of over 10 million in a mere 25 years. It is this unique political status, but also its absurdly rapid growth and recent history that have provided more manoeuvring room in this city on an urban-design and political level.

Over the last year, Urbanus had an impressive number of projects under construction. Sungang Central Plaza is its most recent (and ninth) contribution to the configuration of the public space in Shenzhen, and the Dafen Art Museum – also

in Shenzhen – was completed in May under the most hectic of circumstances (hundreds of workers labouring around the clock), in order to be finished in time for the Shenzhen International Cultural Industries Fair. The structure was built in less than 10 months; a huge number of defects had to be corrected later. Currently, a social housing prototype is being built in Guangzhou at a record pace – a housing project targeted at the lower-income population of the Pearl River Delta. These three projects are an illustration of the increasing complexity and the growing social awareness within Urbanus's approach and range of projects.

The architects see the development of new urban-design strategies as their main task. This

provides the firm with a solid grounding in reality and a clear-headed yet positive outlook on the rapid transformation of the urban environment and all its attendant consequences (including negative effects). Meng Yan: 'We are looking for an architecture which responds innovatively to local conditions. We have been looking in our immediate surroundings for something active, sometimes ugly and chaotic, yet real and energetic. Digging deep into reality is the only effective way for us to find the right strategy.'

The architects realize that Chinese cities are looking increasingly global, neutral and chaotic, but at the same time they sense the emergence of a unique urban identity. It is within this schism that their most significant motivation for devising



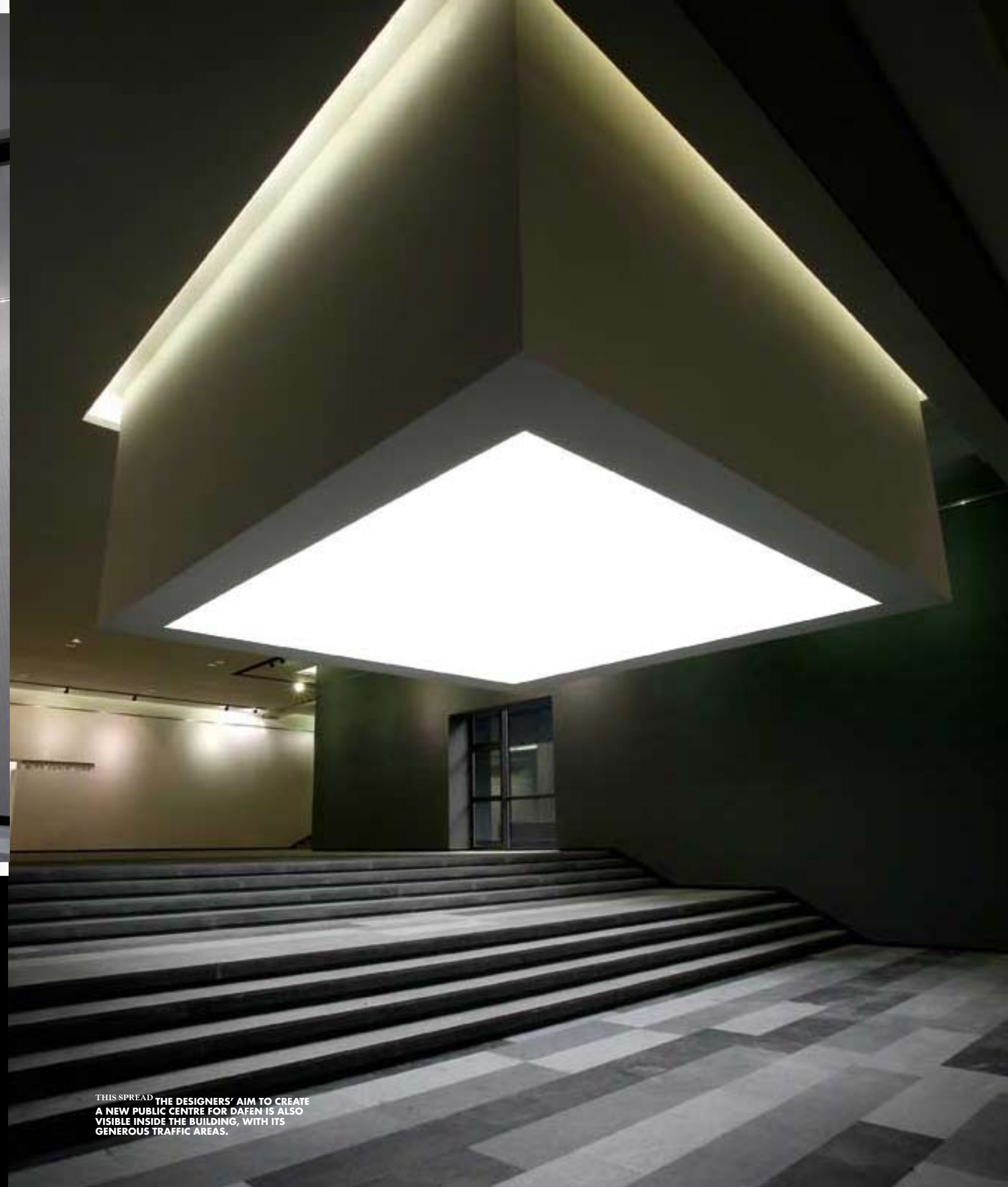
a 'different' form of urban design undoubtedly lies. Aside from supplying high-quality architecture and urban design, their buildings, parks and plazas are consistently used as intermediaries to call a provisional halt to the increasing fragmentation of the public space and the disruption of existing urban structures. In addition, these sites serve as oases within a completely commercializing environment and society.

The growth of commercial public space, with its shopping centres, restaurants and cafés, means that an increasing proportion of the population is being excluded, simply because it

cannot afford it. Urbanus considers it their job to design well-integrated public spaces, accessible to all, that can serve as a platform for society. Sungang Central Plaza is an example. The plaza is situated above a parking garage and is designed as a generator of urban activities. A pattern of lines is broken up by multiple islands, intended to serve as resting places within the chaos of the city. The design is highly outspoken in colour as well as form and exudes a clearly dynamic, metropolitan ambience. With this design, the firm has applied an idiom that, according to its architects, is 'easily comprehensible and acceptable

to the Chinese.'

The Dafen Art Museum stands out through a similarly low-threshold design. The project is the result of research into the conditions of the 'villages in the midst of the city'. In its drive to expand, Shenzhen has swallowed dozens of villages, among them Dafen; the surviving village sections, because of their deviating structures and government neglect, have quickly decayed. In these crowded neighbourhoods, the poorest elements of the population, including immigrants, live in extremely primitive conditions. The number of dilapidated houses is high, there



THIS SPREAD THE DESIGNERS' AIM TO CREATE A NEW PUBLIC CENTRE FOR DAFEN IS ALSO VISIBLE INSIDE THE BUILDING, WITH ITS GENEROUS TRAFFIC AREAS.



ABOVE SUNGANG CENTRAL PLAZA IS SITUATED ABOVE A PARKING GARAGE AND IS DESIGNED AS A GENERATOR OF URBAN ACTIVITIES.



ABOVE A PATTERN OF LINES IS BROKEN UP BY MULTIPLE ISLANDS, INTENDED TO SERVE AS RESTING PLACES WITHIN THE CHAOS OF THE CITY.

are serious fire hazards, and the water and electricity supply is inadequate. The city considers these neighbourhoods highly problematic and would love to be rid of them. As an answer to the standard tabula rasa method, Urbanus analysed the existing urban and social structures and submitted proposals to preserve most of them. Safeguarding continuity was the guiding priority. The Dafen Art Museum was built after its design won a competition for a new museum building in this village.

Dafen is famous throughout China for its large-scale production of hand-painted copies

of oil paintings (it accounts for 60% of the world market). While its urban and social conditions, thanks to the thriving art trade, are not bad, its high building density remains an issue. With this museum edifice, the architects attempted to improve the existing urban structure and provide a positive impulse to community spirit by creating as accessible a building as possible, with an extremely varied programme. In this district, workshops, galleries and shops happily coexist. The museum's design is inspired by these existing urban and cultural conditions. The programme consists of a market for selling paintings, galler-

ies, exhibition rooms, shops, workshops, cafés and other public facilities. In addition, public walking routes have been incorporated in the building. With this museum, the designers aimed to create a new public centre.

Urbanus initially had qualms about taking part in the competition. The municipal authorities had no clear budget, no programme and no collection, making the justification for a museum highly dubious. However, the chance to make a genuine contribution to the urban regeneration of one of the villages was ultimately the deciding factor. Meng Yan: 'The strategy was to make this

SUNGANG CENTRAL PLAZA SHENZHEN 2005-2007

CONSTRUCTION HAD JUST BEGUN ON AN UNDERGROUND TWO-STOREY PARKING GARAGE TOPPED BY A PLAZA WHEN THE CLIENT DECIDED TO ENGAGE A DIFFERENT DESIGN TEAM FOR THE PLAZA. THE CONCEPT BY URBANUS THEREFORE WAS ONLY DEvised DURING THE BUILDING PROCESS. THE PLAZA MEASURES 9,500 M², INCLUDES A GREEN ZONE ON THE SOUTH SIDE AND CONNECTS TWO SITES SEPARATED BY TRAFFIC.



ABOVE THE PLAZA WAS BUILT IN LESS THAN 10 MONTHS; A HUGE NUMBER OF DEFECTS HAD TO BE CORRECTED LATER.

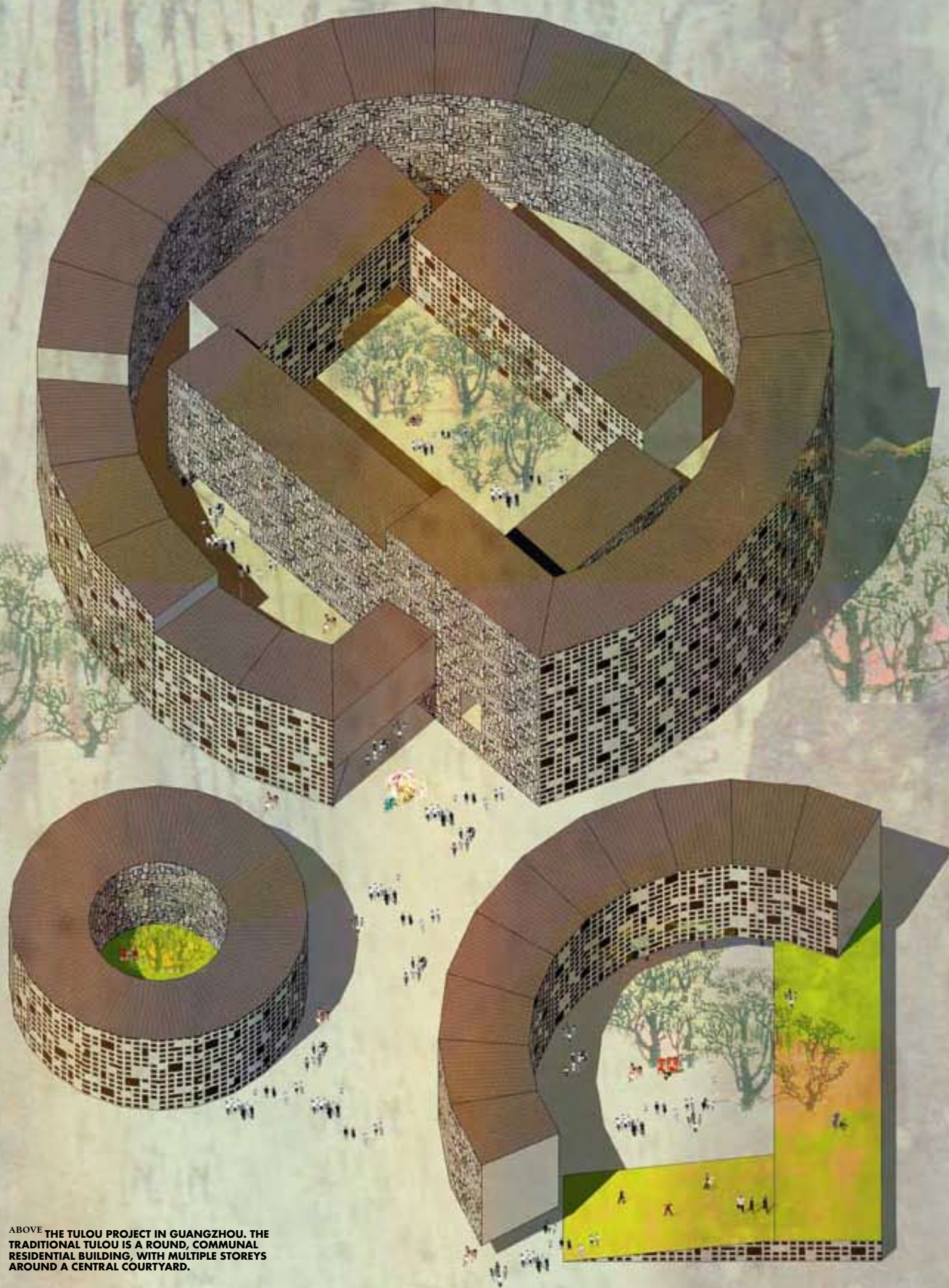
museum an ignition device for Dafen's oil-painting industry. This museum is not a common one: it has to strongly identify with its surroundings, it should not be a museum used only by a small section of the art community, it should be a special public space which serves the ordinary people who live around there.' The money issue, incidentally, has been thoroughly resolved. The museum now receives more than \$1 million a year for its collection, in addition to a subsidy for its fixed expenses.

It is difficult, at a distance, to accurately gauge the impact of the research into the 'villages in the

midst of the city' on public opinion and the political establishment. The proposals were first presented during the first Shenzhen Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism (2005). Since then, multiple renovation processes are underway in Shenzhen, in which Urbanus has a substantial share. Implementation, however, has run into unforeseen problems. It is not the city, but the somewhat more well-heeled inhabitants who are holding up design decisions with their demands for (financial) compensation. However practically oriented they sometimes are, Urbanus never factored this sort of social considerations in its

research. This shows that the firm, until now, has mostly predicated its designs on form, paying limited attention to the feasibility of its plans within a changing society. Evidently a new orientation in thinking is still needed.

The architects of Urbanus, however, are skilled in strategy. Forging the right alliances is a priority in order to actually achieve projects with exceptional levels of ambition. Lines of communication with the authorities are short. Meng Yan: 'We have built good working relationships with government authorities to promote better urban solutions. The "villages in the midst of the city"



ABOVE THE TULOU PROJECT IN GUANGZHOU. THE TRADITIONAL TULOU IS A ROUND, COMMUNAL RESIDENTIAL BUILDING, WITH MULTIPLE STOREYS AROUND A CENTRAL COURTYARD.

TULOU SOCIAL HOUSING GUANGZHOU 2006-2007

TULOU IS A PROTOTYPE FOR PUBLIC HOUSING IN THE CITIES OF THE PEARL RIVER DELTA AND IS INSPIRED BY THE TRADITIONAL HOUSING TYPOLOGY OF THE SAME NAME. URBANUS STRIVED FOR A MODERN INTERPRETATION OF ITS USUAL DIMENSIONS, SPATIAL PATTERNS AND PROGRAMME AND HAS ALSO ADDED CONTEMPORARY URBAN INGREDIENTS INTO THE MIX. THE RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS ARE INTENDED FOR MARGINAL URBAN AREAS ALONG MOTORWAYS AND BY VIADUCTS.



ABOVE URBANUS IS LOCATING TULOU-INSPIRED BUILDINGS IN ALL SORTS OF MARGINAL URBAN AREAS. THE FIRST COMPLEX WILL BE COMPLETED AT THE END OF THIS YEAR.

RIGHT THE BUILDING IS RELATIVELY CLOSED ON THE OUTSIDE, IN ORDER TO KEEP OUT NOISE AND SUNLIGHT.



is only one of the topics we have discussed and worked on together to change the view commonly held both by the city and the general public. The city used to try to have them all removed, now it has changed its stance and has begun to make an effort to improve the conditions and renovate them with a realistic renovation plan.

Urbanus maintains a similar relationship with the innovative project developer Vanke, which does not shy away from experimentation. The Tulou project in Guangzhou is one of these experiments. A tulou is a traditional housing typology in the Hakka community. It is a round,

communal residential building, with multiple storeys around a central courtyard. The building is relatively closed on the outside, in order to keep out noise and sunlight; the dwellings, guest quarters and storage spaces are located inside. A tulou houses dozens of families that can make use of a number of communal spaces. There is significant social cohesion. Urbanus has given this form of architecture new life and put it to use in social housing, aiming to improve the living conditions of poorer sections of society and reduce their social isolation. Urbanus is locating tulou-inspired buildings in all sorts of marginal

urban areas, not coincidentally the cheapest land. The first complex will be completed at the end of this year.

The Urbanus architects go on working, within the frameworks of virtually uncontrollable growth and chaos, on better conditions for a true urban way of life. An ambitious design challenge they clearly are not ready to abandon any time soon.

www.urbanus.com.cn