



arc en rêve centre d'architecture bordeaux

Making Places Huang Sheng-Yuan Fieldoffice Architects, Taiwan

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adaptation of the exhibition
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Leonardo Lella, architect
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Travelling exhibition in Europe
curatorship
Juhani Pallasmaa
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Chiu Chen-Yu
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Practicing architecture is like an endless process of adding layers of human knowledge one by one.

Huang Sheng-Yuan

You operated for quite some time in the US but nevertheless established your studio in Taiwan.

Why Yilan?

Huang Sheng-Yuan: When I was young, Taiwan was under the strict governance of martial law. I was part of the generation who was seeking freedom to live a life without lies. That was my main motivation for going to study abroad. My experiences in the US seemed to nurture my individuality and encourage me to be different yet part of the society. When working for architect Eric Owen Moss in California I had the chance to meet different architecture personalities such as Frank Gehry and Wolf D. Prix of Coop Himmelb(l)au. These experiences made me realize the distance from my family, friends and the soil of Taiwan. I also realized that these things related to Taiwan became the foundation for me feeling the “reality” of everyday life as well as the “freedom” of my profession.

In Yilan, the society is very equal. People's attitudes are quite different from those of the people living in Taipei, the capital city of Taiwan, in particular. In Yilan people talk and listen to each other regardless of their social status or profession. People in Yilan seem to have a better understanding of the word “equality” and they have more patience to share their thoughts about everyday life. Every year Yilan faces the harsh winter monsoon and the summer cyclones. Houses are destroyed and then rebuilt. Surviving is a crucial issue and collaboration is the key. This seems to nurture the general attitude of the Yilanese.

In your opinion what are the most important aspects of architecture?

H. S-Y.: To me practicing architecture is like an endless process of adding layers of human knowledge one by one. It forms a solid foundation for us to connect everything in our life and to make everything related. It makes our life an unseparated whole and closer to “reality”. Thus, we can find and appreciate the positive side of life and society. This allows us to keep and enlarge the good and right and prevents us from doing wrong and destroying. Architecture is an important channel for me to contribute to society. This profession seems to secure my “freedom” to live the life I prefer. Through my work architecture may allow more people to live the life they prefer. Thus, you can see practicing architecture as a gentle process of a socio-political movement.

The exhibition *fabriquer des lieux* [“Making Places”] is devoted to the work of the Taiwanese firm **Fieldoffice Architects** founded by **Huang Sheng-Yuan**. Born in Taipei, Huang has chosen to live and work in Yilan County in the northeast of the island, where he set up his firm in 1994.

When I visited Yilan in 2017, Huang Sheng-Yuan explained that it is a very special area of Taiwan with many specific cultural and historic features. Its system of governance is more transparent and less corrupt than in the capital, and it is more closely connected to nature and the landscape than more heavily built-up areas.

Huang Sheng-Yuan has a profound attachment to the area in which he lives, and he and his colleagues refuse international projects, focusing solely on local commissions. They have decided to approach their work not only from the point of view of the architect but also from that of the inhabitant and the user. “Once a project is completed, we become simple residents and users of these spaces. I like this change of position, which reminds us why notions of equality and respect matter so much to us”, says Huang Sheng-Yuan.

Over the years, Fieldoffice has rooted itself in the life of the local community, and each project is the result of extensive public discussions and debates. The forty or so buildings it has completed during its 25 years of existence are no more than 30 minutes away from the firm by car. Its offices are in the middle of the Yilan plain, in a house surrounded by rice fields between the water and the mountains. Creative chaos reigns inside. The workspaces reflect a continuous creative process set in motion by the architects. The family atmosphere is friendly and collaborative.

This state of mind is embodied in all of Fieldoffice's output, which involves “making places” via ad hoc interventions which are developed over time and take shape across the Yilan plain. In addition to his work as an architect, Huang Sheng-Yuan passes on his ideas and initiatives to others. His constantly evolving projects draw their strength and remarkable quality from his in-depth experience and his single-minded, humble, generous approach, forging close links between buildings, people and the environment.

Francine Fort director, arc en rêve centre d'architecture

Is it correct to say that your work doesn't emphasize any personal architectural style?

H. S-Y.: I think that through formulating an articulated personal or artistic style, an architect's work is easily recognizable both by the public and by fellow architects. However, this so-called “style” will as easily be forgotten.

Our work may be recognized as Fieldoffice architecture in East Asia, but not because of an artistic style but rather for the attitude. Jokes have been made on us saying: “They always make their projects very complicated, relating to endless issues and concerns, and this makes most of them look unfinished. That's why their way of practicing architecture is like fighting on a battlefield.” Indeed, sometimes we are the troublemakers challenging the existing limits of the profession because in our opinion there should be no boundaries in the field of architecture.

What are your methods of teaching architecture?

H. S-Y.: There is a delicate difference between education and reality. The students should be somewhat protected against the harshness of the real world. I always consider how much “reality” we should put into education. Sometimes the realities may become a tool to correct some pure ideological discussions and ambitious theories in the classroom. Every summer our office takes many interns. We live, eat, play and work together. I believe that the young students, my staff and myself should be equal. That's how we can inspire and encourage each other and that's the meaning of teaching to me.

You have been commissioned many public projects by the Yilan county government. Why haven't you, unlike most Taiwanese architects, undertaken residential projects initiated by developers?

H. S-Y.: I have never participated in any real estate developer's projects. In my opinion the housing situation in Taiwan is quite unfair. Most people buy a house from a developer and end up spending their life savings on an extremely expensive house of very low quality. I don't want to partner with these developers and I don't want to work for them. I know it is the common way for an architect in Taiwan to earn their living but freedom and the reality of life are much more important to me. I want to be treated equally. I don't want to be subjected to developers and money.

For me, Yilan is the right place to live and work. Yilan's power structure is transparent and less corrupt. We seem to have fair architectural competitions more than anywhere else in Taiwan. In many of our projects the client is the Yilan county government. After the project is completed, we in turn become clients of the county government. I enjoy this process of shifting positions because it demonstrates how we should treat everyone equally and show respect to each other. Through amplifying the idea of “equality” and “respect” I can see our work playing a positive role in the process of making Yilan a better place to live.

What would be your dream project?

H. S-Y.: I believe that in our everyday practice we already are, little by little, approaching our dream project. We try to find and amplify the advantages of Yilan. We also aim at saving the best of this town and protecting it. The process is slow and gentle, but it doesn't mean the dream cannot be realized. The final status of our dream project is unpredictable because the boundaries of our architectural work cannot be clearly defined and the power of human knowledge is unlimited.

Interview conducted in 2015
by **Chiu Chen-Yu**, architect.

Huang Sheng-Yuan was born in 1963 and grew up in Taipei. After studying architecture at Tunghai University in Taiwan and obtaining a masters degree in architecture from Yale, he was project manager at Eric Owen Moss Architects and taught at North Carolina State University before returning to Taiwan in 1993. In the 1990s, Yilan, a rural region that is a two-hour drive from Taipei, was trying to establish a new local identity through an architectural reform programme. Unlike Taipei, which urban growth had made into a laboratory for architects, the unique situation of Yilan attracted Huang Sheng-Yuan, who decided to move there in 1994 and set up his firm, Fieldoffice Architects. Over the past twenty years, Huang Sheng-Yuan and Fieldoffice have carried out some forty projects, almost all in the county of Yilan.

