

## **Towards a New Spatial Tactics: O-office's Architectural Practice in the Pearl River Delta**

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### **Abstract:**

Architecture reconstructs itself in the process of the interaction of the ever-changing conditions and its own evolutionary strategy today. From the analysis of the O-office's architectural practice in the region of Pearl River Delta, this paper reflects the social and economic conditions of China under the process of re-urbanization. It has also unveiled a pliant tactic undertook by some young Chinese architects, who attempt to reposition the ethos of architecture in order to maintain certain sense of criticality and depth in relation to the context. The responsiveness of the building process might point to a new tendency that the development of architectural autonomy opens to a more complicated domain.

**Key Words:** Pliancy, Autonomy, Responsive, Tactics

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Figure 1: The urban village in the Pearl River Delta Region where No. 8 Port Apartment is located

The three buildings in the Pearl River Delta Region designed by O-office Architects were completed almost at the same time. They are located at inconspicuous sites: one is built inside a chaotic urban village, one lies in the edge of suburban woods and another is situated within an existing greenhouse. The inextricable relations between these buildings and their surroundings could be both physical and operational, so it is hard to distinguish which part of the building belongs to itself and which does not. The elevation of buildings resolves into narrative space. It is difficult to understand the overall architectural concept via a proper visual perspective from outside of the buildings. The language of architectural representation is transferred to inner space, with which the symbolic image of buildings is replaced by fragmented spatial experience. Through movement, the viewer might focus on different parts of the routes, which might generate series of collage images of formless architecture. The three buildings are expected to achieve the coexistence of culture and ecology via coping with extremely chaotic surroundings (Figure 1).

With the development of modern cities dominated by industrial manufacturing, commercial operations and consumer culture, whether architecture is able to reposition itself in order to maintain a certain sense of continuity and depth in relation to the overall context? Can architecture respond to the complex and ever-changing environment? Can it maintain a critical manner to reality? Whether the utopian theory (Adorno, 1970) or the statement from external

conditions (Foucault, 1969) should be adopted in the critical exploration of architecture to deal with the contradiction of modernity? Or escape from disciplinary society by the practice of everydayness (Lefebvre, 1974)? Or return to poetic dwelling (Heidegger, 1951)?

These issues may be inevitable for architectural practice in the urbanization process of China. However, the question may not be which architecture style or ideal “architectural language” can prevent architecture from becoming a tool of capitalism, but it can still maintain the inherent logic and autonomy of itself. Because such questions have already presupposed a specific mode of thinking to some extent. According to this mode, we have to go back to Plato. In Plato’s dualism, the opposition between essence and representation, being and becoming depends on such way of thinking. In the context of multiple complex modernity of contemporary China, the new architectural strategy may be just outside the way of this thinking mode. In the exploratory practice of O-office in the Pearl River Delta, it did not ignore “the ideological criticism of architecture, the complexity and contradiction of architecture, and the aggravating of differentiated cities”. Instead, they face the complex urban context, put architecture into complicated, subtle and multi-layered interlaced conditions, and use the strategy of pliancy to deal with the force of homogenization, abstraction and unification caused by capital, economy and social relations. This does not mean that their designs are merely a tool of economic diagrams, or become symbols and products of consumption. In terms of thinking about autonomy and internal logic of architecture, they prefer to transform external conditions as positive factors, while the positive side of capital is the force to transform any ordinary things into a flow of movement. Therefore, for them, pliancy means not only resistance, but also entering the external logic and interrupting the place where capital appears, and to rethink architecture at this moment.

## 1. NO. 8 PORT APARTMENT

The pluralistic structure of modern society have made the lives of more and more individuals migratory, ever-changing, mobile. In everyday life the modern individual continuously alternates between highly discrepant and often contradictory social contexts. Not only have an increasing number of individuals in a modern society uprooted from their original social milieu, but, in addition, no succeeding milieu succeeds in becoming truly “home” either.

Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner (1974:184)

My first stay in Guangzhou is located in Tangxia Urban Village, where various people live happily regardless of the terrible conditions. Anyway, most people regard their

residence there temporary, without much expectations placed and regrets left. I never thought that I would participate in the renovation design of the urban village after I left. This participation revokes much thoughts and makes many starts just as what I imaged but not expected, for either architecture or myself.

Nimu (2017) 4

As a tenant in Tangxia Urban Village, words from Nimu truly reflects the “homeless mind” as mentioned by Peter Berg and others. Urban villages are an outcome of the rapid expansion of cities, the dual ownership structure and the maximization of land and housing rents. In the Pearl River Delta, these unplanned urban settlements have become a temporary residence for villagers, citizens and migrants. Homesteads, industrial lands and commercial lands are intertwined in villages. In a way, they are a part of a city and surrounded by the city, rather than a village in the strict sense. However, their extremely marginalized identity is not recognized by the city, as citizens won’t stay in villages and villagers will leave if there is a chance. Owners, managers and tenants of urban villages are forced to get separated from the systematic ties of traditional rural society and turn into individuals in such an extremely alienated urban environment, where they feel loneliness, anxiety and self-deflation. With the growing of cities, urban villages’ development is not subject to urban norms and regulations, so a low-rise and high-density urban texture is formed. Buildings in villages are adjacent to each other closely, the gaps between connected buildings are filled with facilities such as wires, air conditioners and pipes. Social and cultural significance endowed to or assumed by buildings are unpractical, as well as the standard of “objective purposiveness in natural form”<sup>5</sup> proposed by Kant. Space is quantified as a benefit of capital. The footprint of building is defined by its boundary of property rights. There are only walls dividing different property rights and internal spaces, with no façade in the orthodox sense, so that architecture cannot be comprehended from the theory of Vitruvius. For the countless irrelevant parts of the whole, the proportion, size and the relationship between appearance and function cannot be judged as a whole, as the aesthetic standard of traditional architecture is in a state of aphasia (Figure 2).

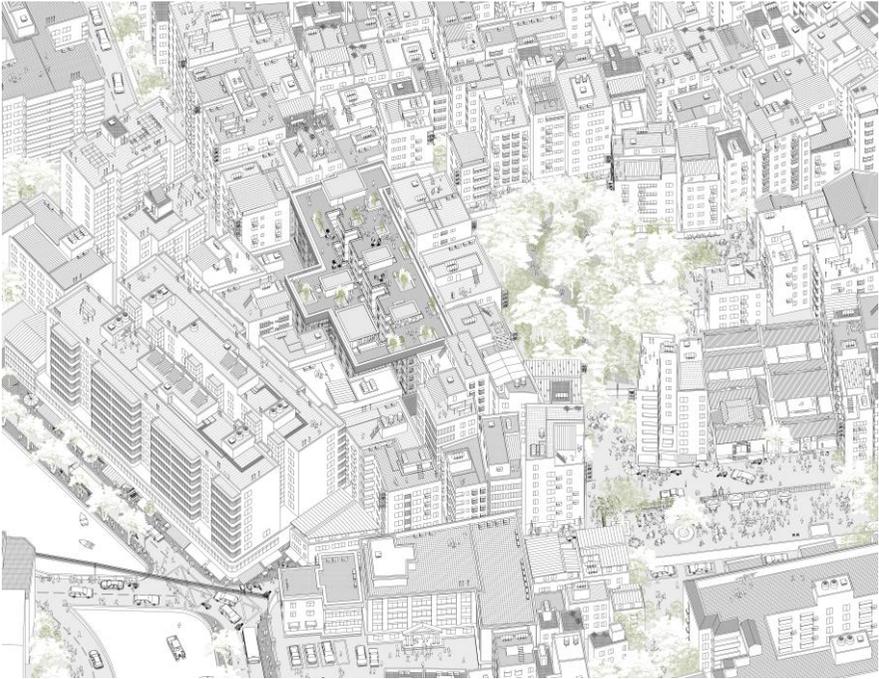
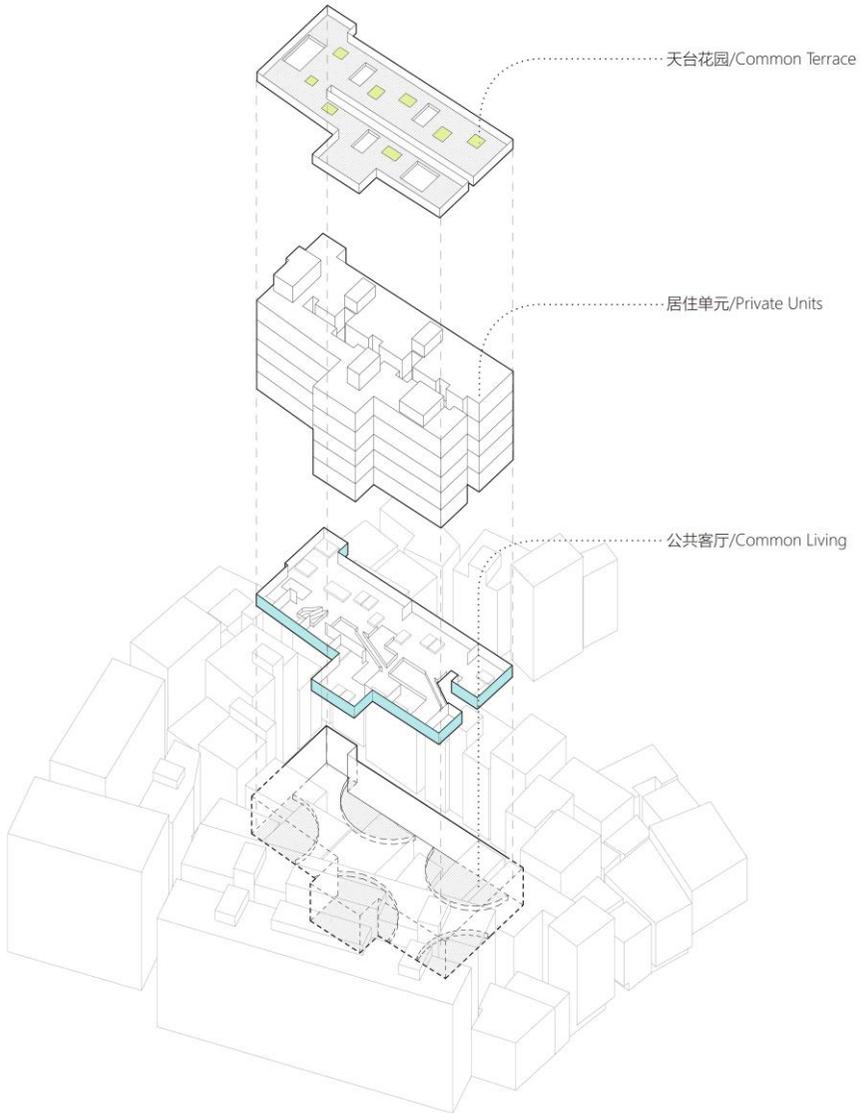


Figure 2: Isometric drawing of No.8 Port Apartment, a building which doesn't have façade

Located right in the middle of the urban village, the renovation project consisting of five conjoined U-shaped 7-storey residential buildings were developed independently by the village committee of Guangzhou Tangxia No. 8 Residence Village. As typical “handshake buildings”, they were only one to two meters away from surrounding buildings. Vanke, the developer, intended to transform the five buildings into a micro-community for young people to live, work and socialize. After renovation, the buildings were turned into a Sandwich-style vertical 3D community (Figure 3), with the “bottom” and “top” as the public activity zone, the “middle” part retained as the private units for residence. The 3rd to 7th floors for residence were modified subtly with the existing layout maintained, without much changes to the wall and mosaic finish for remaining the features and locality of the buildings. Various metal burglar meshes outside windows were replaced with stainless steel woven meshes that connect the upper and lower new wall blocks to improve the security. They have also provided a potential for becoming vertical greening elevation.



“三明治”社区/“Sandwich” Community

Figure 3: Diagram of “sandwich” community of No. 8 Port Apartment

The architects turned the first floor into a purely two-story-high space with a roof added to increase publicity. The height difference of the ground is classified by arc lines in different directions to make the space well defined and guide people from the lobby to different vertical

circulation hubs. The interfaces of different functional spaces in the hall are deliberately designed in different colors or materials to reorganize the chaos and clarify the ambiguity of the original building. The existing external wall of the ground floor was removed and replaced by a new wall which is made up of permeable concrete grass block pavers. It creates a unique texture for the inner surface of the entrance lobby and exposes the tectonics of wall construction (Figure 4). Secondly, the space is penetrated by three light-structured overpasses wrapped by aluminum mesh, with the skylight sprinkling from the ceiling of the second floor to form a narrow atrium. Thirdly, brightly colored sofas and seats are placed randomly in the space bordered by arc terrace lines, with special interfaces of various functions distinguished clearly by light blue ceiling and the parapet on the second floor and light gray circulation hub. Three lightweight steel bridges wrapped by aluminum mesh as the balustrade hanging high in the entrance hall to constitute a narrow atrium, with the skylight sprinkling from the above ceiling (Figure 5).

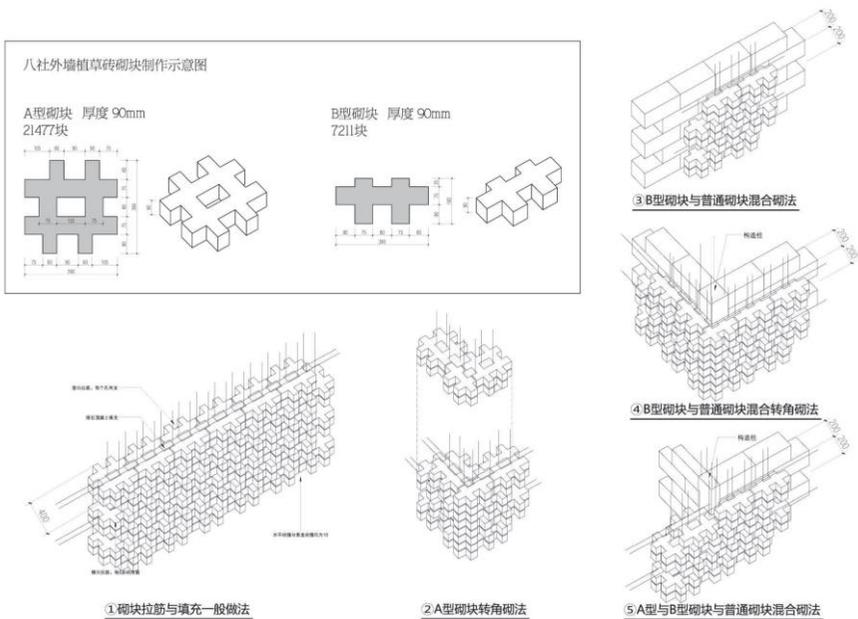


Figure 4: The tectonic diagram of brick-laying of the boundary wall on the first floor of No. 8 Port Apartment



Figure 5: The narrow atrium of No. 8 Port Apartment

Through this series of design tactics, the poor lighting and ventilation on the first and second floors of the existing building can be eliminated, and the entrance hall is transformed into a semi-public place completely separated from the surrounding environment, which can make people in it temporarily forget the clutter and darkness around (Figure 6). The rooftop is another important place for public living and communication in the community. The entire roof is paved by wooden deck, and air conditioners are removed to the top of the lift machine room, thus maximizing activity space. The deck dotted with sporadic flower beds, adding a touch of green to the high-density environment. This refine roof provides the tenants a different world to enjoy sunset and stars in the crowded and noisy urban village (Figure 7).



Figure 6: The private unit of No. 8 Port Apartment

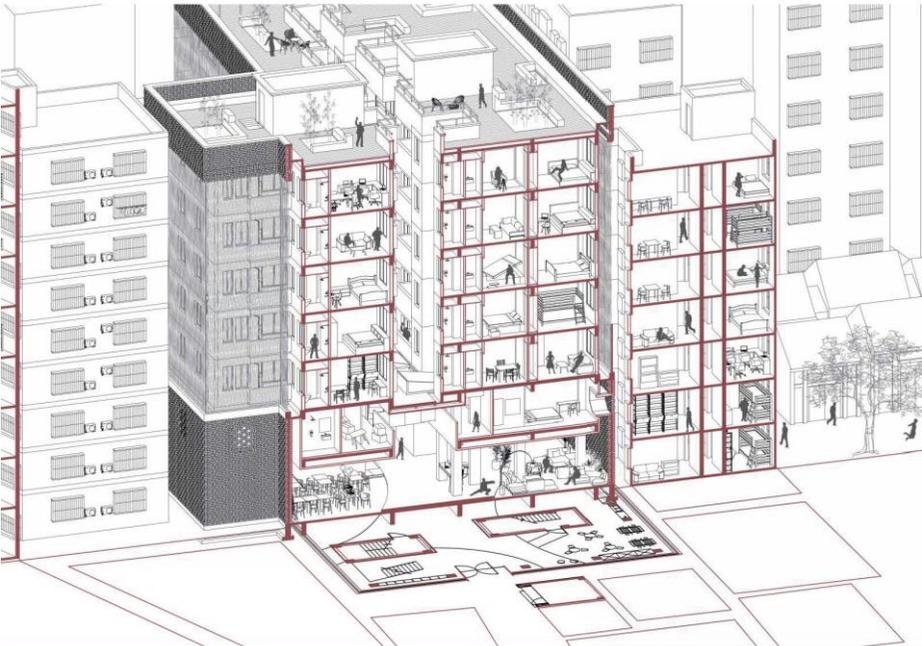


Figure 7: Isometric drawing of No. 8 Port Apartment

## 2. CASCADE COURTYARD HOUSE

What is the state of dwelling in our precarious age? On all sides we hear talk about the housing shortage, and with good reason... However hard and bitter, however hampering and threatening the lack of houses remains, the real plight of dwelling does not lie merely in the lack of house... The real plight lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they must ever learn to dwell.

Martin Heidegger, (1951[1971]:143-162)

As Martin Heidegger has pointed out, the problem of dwelling in modern society is not only in housing shortage, but also in the reconstruction of self-identity, the integration of fragmented modern space and the continuation of tradition in modern society. The owner of the courtyard house is a Chaozhou native who loves bonsai art and is also the owner of a construction company. He is a nostalgic person for traditional lifestyle who once worked and lived in different cities in the Pear River Delta. He expects to have a house in the suburbs of the city, where family and friends may gather in their spare time. At the meantime, he hopes that the house as a semi-public place can be rented periodically to increase usage. This is common in the Pearl River Delta, as buildings can be used as a private house, a club or a gathering place with multiple functions according to



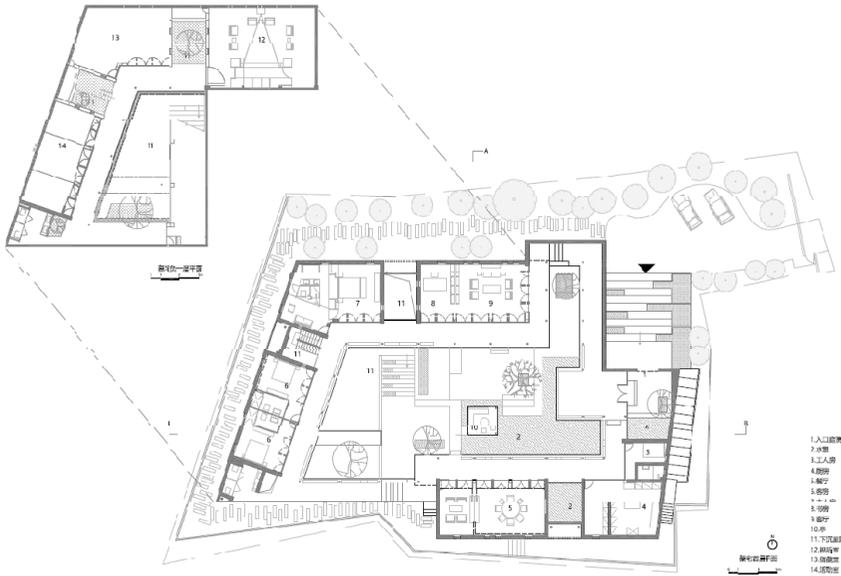


Figure 8: The floor plan of the courtyard house

specific situation. The uncertainty of use and users determine the abstract and independent character of each individual space, because only in this way, can we meet the needs of different timing and scale of use. The holistic significance of traditional Chinese courtyard house is decomposed into flux and adaptive state.

The cascade courtyard house, located in the suburbs of Guangzhou, is adjacent to a technical school. The courtyard house's base, covering an area of about 1,000 square meters, is on a natural hillside that descends from west to east. It is surrounded by lush subtropical vegetation and a great variety of trees, with condescending campus dormitory buildings located in the east and the south. The slope is steep. The terraces of the north, west and south side of the building are in the same level with roofs in the cascade courtyard. You can ascend westwards step by step from the entrance at the east. Seen from a high place, buildings among trees are inlaid into the dent of slope. However, it is observed closely that there is a 2-meter wide pathway between the external wall and the retaining wall of the surrounding slope as a clear boundary of the buildings and the surrounding massif. The site is fully taken by the architecture, in order to obtain the largest space of the cohesive courtyard. The building massing around some large trees on the site, along the contour changes to form a double "U" interlocking loop. The sharp high external walls with concave strip window openings to provide limited ventilation and lighting for the building. In order to maintain privacy, the number and size of windows are quite moderate. Inside the courtyard, with a long tortuous open corridors and large size metal-

frame floor-to-ceiling windows/doors form a transparent elevation of the house. The contrast between the hard exterior closure and soft interior interface indicates the detachment from the earthly world and a yearning for idyllic life (Figure 9).



Figure 9: The central courtyard and veranda of the house

While keeping in line with the owner's utopian imagination of traditional pastoral life, the architecture possesses flexibility to keep pace with modern needs. Two spatial paradigms infiltrate, organize and juxtapose by means of "transparency": the spatial organization of traditional compound academy in Lingnan region is decomposed by synchronic overall planes and diachronic fragmental sections, with a courtyard of heterogeneous space reconstructed based on modern living conditions. The traditional cloister-style academy is laid out based on climatic characteristics and ritual rules, as the main hall situates in the north facing the south, with open corridors on both sides of east and west, or with secondary residential rooms outside the corridor. Instead of following the traditional etiquette restriction, the design of the courtyard house is developed based on topography, the scenery and the experience of promenade in the courtyard. Traditional ritual axis is reorganized into a series of relationships between walking, viewing and scene interaction. The primary and secondary system of traditional halls and compartments have also been dismantled into daily life spaces connected by semi-outdoor veranda. The construction mode of traditional large mansion is presented by the combination of load-bearing masonry and independent column array on the plane—solid gables on both side of the hall provide both load-bearing and lateral rigidity, while the wood column array in the center of the hall provides open space and vision for the interior. The layout of the courtyard house is based on its interior landscape. All living spaces are loaded by three masonry walls,

and only open to the side of the inner courtyard. On the open side, in the direction of adytum, a rotating screen landing door system is used in reference to traditional mansion, to ensure the introversion of the space. In order to distinguish the degree of publicity, two different kinds of screen-turning systems are used: glass screen doors are used in public places, such as reception, dining and living spaces, while wooden systems with upper screen-turning are used in private spaces such as bedrooms or study rooms (Figure 10).



Figure 10: guestroom area of the cascade courtyard with veranda

The architect develops a new conception of materiality and representation of traditional Lingnan culture and modern life to achieve co-existence of these two seemingly contradictory matters to a certain extent. The courtyard house is constructed by an open veranda supported by independent columns, and series of living spaces defined by grey brick masonry. As a whole, it constitutes the physical structure of the building and the non-physical structure of space/time scenes. The veranda is both an interface and a connector, both an extension of daily life and an independent scenery journey. Wandering in it, with lights in different seasons and climates, the view inside the space shows various forms, near or far, familiar or strange, real or visional. The veranda is both an interface and connection of secular world and nature, both an extension of daily life and an independent scenery journey. Wandering in it, with lights change in different seasons and climates, the view shows various forms, near or far, familiar or refresh, real or illusory.) Between the veranda and the foundation sidelines lie serial daily living spaces built of strict modulus masonry, which are rhythmically placed. Inside the central courtyard, the tiered landscape cultivated by natural landforms are defined, including hard and soft textures.

The landscape system is connected to the internal scenery upward from the building entrance, and to a quieter space downward from the middle of the courtyard, extending the vertical layer of the scenery (Figure 11).



Figure 11: Living room of the courtyards with veranda

In addition, a series of "locations" interspersed between cascaded buildings and landscape systems are anchored in these locations by borrowing scenery and opposite view, immersing and interacting, real and imaginary experiences. Such as podocarps facing the entrance, opened pavilion in the middle of the pond, overhanging platform on the west side of the courtyard, limpid pond, departing from daily order, these non-functional locations embellish the composition, attract people's attention, and bring them into the gaze of the picturesque, inducing them to watch out of the picture while being watched. Through seeing and being seen, subject and object constantly reverse their roles. The form of space becomes diffuse, and the overlaying of different systems has generated new spatial mechanism. When the constantly exchanged views gets refracted through winding "transparent" space, viewers blend into the scene, and in the process of self-restructuring, obtain a moment of escaping from modern urban life, enabling their minds resonance with the objective images (Figure 12).

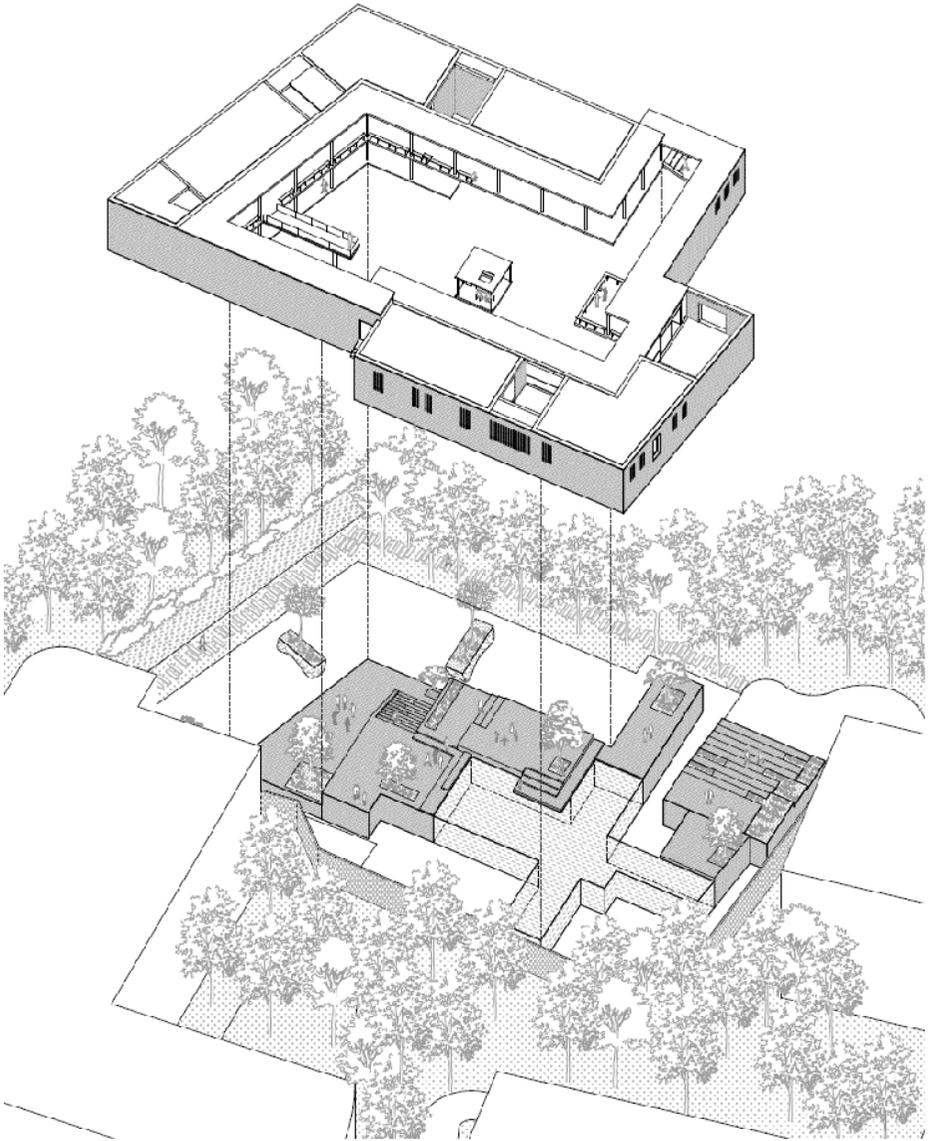


Figure 12: Isometric drawing of the Cascaded Courtyard House Plant House Studio

There is no longer the sense of a single complex or a single composed entity but rather a sense that the incentives of globalization, economics, and the market economy have produced a relentless competition between each and every element... where each change in any of its components necessitates the conceptual adjustment of the entire system...

Rem Koolhaas (2001:184)

Rem Koolhaas put forward the concept of “City of Exacerbated Difference” in his study of the Pearl River Delta. The strong power of capital, economy and politics has led to huge contrast and heterogeneity of urban environments. The autonomy and monotony of architecture have been challenged. Traditional building typologies are unable to meet the contradiction between architectural form and the growing complexity of programs. Hybridization and mix-use have become necessary strategies. Plant House Studio is exactly presented in such a hybrid and mixed form. The newly-completed building is located inside Guangzhou Academy of Agricultural Sciences. It is renovated from an abandoned greenhouse once owned by the Academy. To avoid unnecessary troubles that might be caused by the renovation, the project was outsourced to a developer, who then subleased a part of the greenhouse to a design firm. Therefore, the design firm is the nominal entrusted client of the project, while the rest of the greenhouse is sub-contracted to other companies for rent or renovation respectively. Inlaid in the middle of the south-facing part of the greenhouse, the renovated studio is surrounded by a veranda with the typical style in the 1980s. The architect changes the entrance of the studio from the atrium in the existing greenhouse to another side, connecting it to existing veranda outside the greenhouse. Via the existing structure, the narrative of the context was incorporated into the experience of the renovation studio. A narrow courtyard space has been enclosed between the external facade and the veranda. Through the juxtaposition of different local elements and flips of the external and the internal, the psychological distance and experience of the building has been expanded. For this reason, although the studio is not far from urban environment, it is still serene and peaceful (Figure 13).

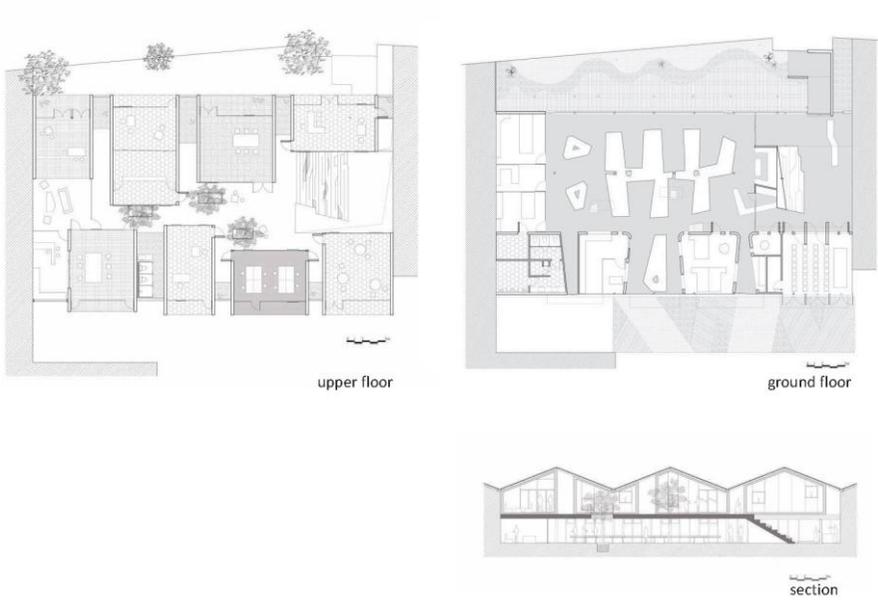


Figure 13: Floor plans of the Plant House Studio

Compared with the eternity and monumentality feature of traditional architecture, the permeability and transparency of the renovation reflects the transience and instability of modern life. Instead of choosing local materials and construction methods, architects adopted transparent and smooth surface and light-weight materials to define the character of the studio: adaptive structure and flexible internal space. Different parts of the existing greenhouse are juxtaposed in different forms with the new one. The spatial organization and material usage of internal construction show a craving for light and air. With the original light weight structure, architects have rebuilt a well-proportioned office space of rural cottage-like scale. The refurbished roofing thermal insulation materials and transparent capron are retained integrally, providing the new space with all-day natural lighting and the multiple light conditions of different seasons and climates (Figure 14).



Figure 14: Lobby of the plant house studio

In the meantime, newly implanted cabins on the first floor are permeable semi-outdoor free space. The fine detailing of handmade wooden doors and windows with hot-rolled steel skeleton strengthens light and transparent features of space. Natural ventilation and daylighting make the interior a garden for plant growth. Three trees dotted in open office space on the ground floor extend upward to the first floor, making the two office spaces with different functions begin an interesting dialogue (Figure15, 16).

A large pedestal seat with polished prefabricated concrete in the entrance hall connects the upper and lower floor of space, dotted with some colorful succulents growing in the slots of concrete blocks. Various lights and shadows form interesting diffuse reflections between galvanized steel sheets and overlapping glass surfaces, scattered in all corners of studio spaces. Natural sunlight and ventilation make people feel as if they were outdoor when they are inside the building. Apparently, the renovated part of the greenhouse is like a partial component of a building, or more like taking the interior section of the greenhouse as the external façade (Figure 17). This seems to indicate a new strategy of architectural design in the Pearl River Delta, that is, the juxtaposition of different programs of the same building generating a new spatial pattern. Thus, it is also demonstrated from a practical sense the reason why the differentiation is aggravated is that the difference is more mutually reinforcing and benefiting rather than exclusive and competitive (Figure 18).



Figure 15: The second-floor office of the plant house studio



Figure 16: The first-floor office of plant house studio



Figure 17: the section of façade of the Plant House Studio



Figure 18: Isometric drawing of the plant house studio

### 3. CONCLUSION

In these three projects, O-office does not attempt to develop an overall and united architectural language and method. On the contrary, its works show certain pliancy in design strategy: In real estate development and speculation, it absorbs original vitality of architecture, takes the uncertainty of function and the ambiguity of space of different interest groups as the clue of strategy, and conceives potential space and form by the flexibility of building use. Such kind of openness and hybrid strategy, to a certain extent respond to contemporary architects in the Pearl River Delta under the rapid changes of urban development. The diversity of urbanity, as well as its differentiated geography and cultural history, make the architecture generated by it not have any encapsulation, independence or autonomy. The architecture is neither a direct whole nor a definite whole. It is not the result of the intrinsic metaphysical significance, but with a force and value beyond known experience and change. It is not generated in the direction of some anticipated purpose, but only for the sake of facing changes and difference. The state it presents is the criticism and complexity of reality and the adaptation to ever changing conditions. In newly complete projects, O-office attempts to analyze the prominent or hidden value in the process of dealing with specific conditions: site, history, climate, functions, users, operations, and potential for future development can all be taken into account for design. Thus, external conditions that people are accustomed to are decomposed into differentiated and perceptible form, through which the meaning and aesthetics can be conveyed. Through transformations between the meticulous condition of the No. 8 Port apartment, the viewing mechanism of the Cascade Courtyard House, the transparent spaces of the Plant House Studio, the reconstructed space is separated from daily uses, which disconnect spatial experience from the origin of being identified and signified, during the process of which the daily and ordinary connections between the context and experience have been broken. It is through the redesign and combination of the dull and tedious surrounding environment that space becomes eloquent, diverse and open.

### 4. NOTES

1 In the book named *Architecture and Utopia—Design and Capitalist Development*, Manfredo Tafuri has supplemented his previously-published *Towards the Criticism of Architectural Ideology* and proposed to study architectural history from a new perspective with the tools and methods of ideological criticism. In particular, when it comes to the study on modern architectural history, researches have been done to study the impact of capitalist ideology on cities and architecture, and different ways that the avant-garde criticized it.

2 In the book named *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1996), Robert Venturi has elaborated that in a society driven by economic interests, the subjectivity of architecture has been undervalued and even neglected. He criticized the simplicity of modern architecture,

thinking that it might damage urban contexts, architecture should embrace the colorful mass culture and various phenomenon in the consumption society, and the neon signs of low-level bars and on the street should be considered as a new form of Utopia.

3 The Great Leap Forward (2002) by Rem Koolhaas is the studies on the topic of urban development performed by a group of Harvard graduate students under his guidance since 1996 and the Pearl River Delta has been taken as example. The purpose is to discuss the possibilities of architecture under such acute changes of modern cities. In the book, the concept of “cities with increasing differentiation” has been proposed. Different from the European and American cities, the Pearl River Delta in China is exploring a new model of urban development: urban expansion is not to fight for the limited urban space. Instead, the focus has been shifted from the fighting for living space to common leap and progress of different interest groups. As a result, people of all levels are actively involved in the process.

4 Nimu is a staff of O-office project. He once lived in Tangxia urban village and participated in the renovation project of No. 8 Port Apartment.

5 In the aesthetics of Kant, there are two opposite aesthetic forms: one is pulchritudo vaga (free beauty), the other is pulchritudo adhaerens (adhered beauty). In “Critique of Judgement” (1790), he proposed that free beauty is pure and direct happiness, which can be found in the object form, so it is “objective and purposeful”, such as the classic and harmonious aesthetic form. However, the apriori principle of aesthetics is not enough to explain the aesthetic status of higher levels, so the “subjective and purposeful” aesthetic experience has been put forward.

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## IMAGE CREDIT

Figures 1, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16 and 17 are from Zhang Chao, while the rest are provided by O-office.