

For Love, Or Other Reasons

By Ole Bouman

One skill may be the essence of the amateur spirit: the skill of improvisation. It is never mentioned in any profession's playbook. Those books are always full of rules, protocols and things you need to know. They require study, preparation and obedience. Professionalism is about making things predictable, manageable and, most of all, correct. But what about when doing things properly does not work? There are choices to make: You can impose your rules, do whatever it takes and become a tyrant. You can abandon the case and become a deserter. Or, you can improvise.

Wang Shu gives me a terrific example, about a group of workers asked to distribute multi-coloured, recycled materials for the walls of a new project. He wants the workers to find a kind of automatic masonry, making a polychromatic surface based to some degree on sheer hazard. But they don't get it. They want to rely on the drawing and go from there. They want to follow a straight line between design and execution. No hazard, no surprises, please. Wang has to show up a zillion times. He doesn't know what to do to instil a sense of risk among these risk avoiders. Then, a clue to improvisation occurs to him: he tells them not to check the drawings on paper anymore. From now on the drawings are in the skies. Watch the clouds, he says. Put the bricks and the tiles and the cobbles together as if you were picturing the rapidly changing colour patterns in the air. Let the clouds be your teacher. And off they go.

The man who is happy to hand over his authority to the clouds is now exhibiting in Humlebæk. I am glad to pay him a visit in Hangzhou, the city that brought him his fame, and retrieve some more thoughts for our interview. But first, I go look at some of his work. One of his close collaborators in his studio shows me around. He tells me about dedicating his life to his office family and how much he enjoys the camaraderie while making great things. We are on our way to Fuyang, on the Fuchun River in Zhejiang Province, to see the recently opened municipal museum. The landscape is

calm and the air is gray. We drive and have a good time discussing our love of architecture.

Love, is that what is meant by Amateur Architecture? At least that is what I assume given my Western pre-conception of true amateurism. Not necessarily associated with low quality, as some definitions go, but more like a practice that stems from sheer pleasure and that would be pursued even if it was unpaid. Or if it wasn't taught. Purely as an act of love, defying the system. In fact, this kind of amateurism goes much further. This love can be blind. For instance, when no one else can see its beauty, and it still has to be made. Or when there is no claim to authorship, simply because sharing love is always a form of generosity.

Later, Wang Shu tells me about a few moments in his life when love was, indeed, more important than career, money or recognition. When he left Shenzhen, for instance, after it became an investment hub in the early eighties. Or when he decided to stay small, after winning the Pritzker Prize in 2012, to remain close to his colleagues and work. Or when he explains the role of Lu Wenyu as the one who best understands that design quality depends on cultivating human connections.

My driver likes the associations I make but seems to have others concerning amateurism – Chinese thoughts. Obviously, they are not quite the same as mine. So, ever since that conversation, I have been thinking about the attributes of Chinese amateurism and have tried to find patterns in which amateurism is not just an ethical, aesthetic or personal choice but becomes a cultural statement or even a feature of the Chinese nation.

In an age of disruption that has broken down entire systems and paradigms, might the real reason behind China's global success be its ability to easily adapt to this disruption? China's practice of cultural production stems from a pragmatic mindset and a completely contextual approach rather than from a set of rules. China may owe its success to an antenna for potential rather than the arrogance of professionalism.

Perhaps China finds its creativity not by policies but by discovering the power of its own mindset. This has nothing to do with official aspirations. This is about China as a ubiquitous historical condition that becomes manifest to the world.

But this is just associative thinking. My conversation with the driver is about the meaning of two words. What is the Ye Yu, in Ye Yu Jian Zhu –Chinese for amateur architecture (业余 建筑)? To be unimportant, I am told. By that definition, I can perhaps better understand the power of this work. How can such an achievement equal unimportance? Later, I ask around about how to use this wording, and the answers are revealing. Love is only one of the meanings of Ye Yu. More important is the derivative meaning of being not important, not respected, not acknowledged, not sophisticated, not famous, not symbolic, not orthodox, not theoretical, not standardized, not powerful, not fixed, not ready. In sum, Ye Yu goes against any paradigm in which artistic skills and academic status are highly esteemed. It is beyond the system. While denial and negation were once considered to be bad exceptions to the rule, here the term is given such a consistent denial that it becomes a rule in its own right. The rule of free making and, thus, the drive to make things free. I remember a quote from a text by Wang Shu, in which he explains amateurism. It reads, “Amateur architecture is not an architecture of knowledge, but something that seeks knowledge.”

My companion cannot wait to show me this freedom at work. As the project architect, he is glad to share his achievement, carefully staging the ride to the project. We drive by a gigantic cement factory, a structure so big it could easily be a protagonist on a propaganda poster. He tells me that this monster sits opposite the museum, across the river, and I fancy a sublime opposition of characters. But once we cross the bridge, the river turns out to be so wide that the factory soon becomes a detail on the horizon. Fuyang itself is rather sleepy, if I may say so, until we reach the site itself.

Having parked the car, we walk towards the museum, which is on the other side of a narrow canal that looks more like a gutter. At its edge, a group of school children is

getting drawing lessons. Third graders sit in a row on the grass, their eyes mediating between what they see and what they want us to see. They all draw the same thing: Amateur Architecture's Fuyang Museum, its wavy roofline dancing with the hills behind it. But no child draws it the same way. They interpret, reading the clouds, like the workers did. The students are amateurs in the true sense of the word. Maybe they don't love what they are doing, but they surely un-finish the architecture, undo its shape. Instead, they engage with the energy that brought it into being. They intuit, rather than apply knowledge and thus they redo. They are learning to become strong minds.

Later that day, I ask Wang Shu and Lu Wenyu a few questions. Not about becoming but about remaining strong minds. I am assuming that they must be struggling with the paradoxes of their own spirit, now tested by the scarcity of time and the abundance of fame. This is what they tell me:

How do you remain an amateur when you get older?

“Getting older does not affect an amateur spirit. Maybe this is very Chinese, but for us getting older does not mean losing flexibility. On the contrary, as life time goes by, it will give you more preparation for change. Older people know that real life is only about change, that nothing is fixed. In China, young people know how to pass an exam. Old people know how to do things. In China, aging is about getting younger.”

How do you remain an amateur if you get better at what you are doing?

“Getting better can never be about losing the capacity for risk and the lust for experiment. On the contrary. What we gain in expertise, we can use in new experiments. This way we can only become better amateurs.”

How do you remain an amateur if you get very successful?

“Of course, becoming better is not automatic. We deliberately keep our practice small. We keep time for research. We don't even publish this research. It is always related to individual works. We don't believe in codifying our method. There is not even an

overview of our oeuvre. That would make it official, and that is exactly what we want to avoid. We don't want many people to know us. Amateurism cannot reach a big scale. It is a real attitude. Not a style."

Can you lose this attitude if you get too famous?

"A little bit," Wang Shu admits. "So many people want to share their secrets with us now. Sometimes it feels like they are in a race to get my attention. Those moments – every two secrets I go for a smoke, to keep them precious."