

URBAN CHURCH of HUAXIANG

Christian Presence in the City Centre

Fuzhou, China, 2015 – 2018



Dr.-Ing. Dirk U. Moench is an architect and academic researcher. He possesses a unique expertise in the field of *Chinese Christian* sacral architecture – in the People's Republic, this is still a sensitive topic, which requires the architect to constantly and strategically navigate not only between the architectural and theological – but especially the legal and religious-political expectations of the congregation and its environment. To this day he has planned over ten churches for congregations of diverse denominational and cultural backgrounds.

Moench obtained his PhD with a dissertation on the re-emerging construction of churches after the end of China's Cultural Revolution, and served as an Associate Professor at Fuzhou University, teaching architecture and urban design. His book "China's New Churches: The Evolution of Contemporary Church Architecture between Christian form and Chinese Conceptions of Architecture" will be published in the course of 2024.

REPRESSION AND REBIRTH

When Fuzhou's old Huaxiang Church was built by the Methodist Mission in 1938, its steeple was the only vertical structure emerging from an ocean of traditional Ming-style residences. Since then, its congregation became witness of the radical transformations in both, city and society: From decades of urban deterioration to an unprecedented era of prosperity and development; from the complete suppression of religious activity during the Cultural Revolution to a miraculous ten-fold growth in the number of Christians since 1979. Today, the little building finds itself at the bottom of a veritable maze of shopping malls and office blocks. In dire need for additional space, the congregation decided to build a supporting church on a plot of land adjacent to the historical building.

CONFLICTS & CONFUSIONS

The challenges imposed on the project were indeed extraordinary. To begin with, the congregation's functional and spatial requirements were substantial, including not only a main service hall for 1500 believers, but also two smaller ones for 500 people each, catering to the needs of specialized services for the elderly and the youth. Combined with an array of class rooms and rehearsal spaces, a library, offices and even a basement carpark, the total of 7500 sqm GFA was challenging the height and area restrictions imposed by the heritage authority.

Additionally, the isolated character of the site – surrounded by an uncommunicative set of buildings high and low, modern and traditional, Eastern and Western – determined that only upper levels would be visible from the public streets nearby. Against this backdrop, the community was deeply confused:

- How could a Christian place of worship actually fit into this commercialized neighbourhood, and would it be able to convey any sense of Christian presence and identity at all?
- More importantly: there was disagreement regarding the conceptual emphasis of the future church – what was its mission? Some believers stressed the significance of connecting with history as a symbol of the congregation's resilience and to uphold the memory of struggles past. Others hoped the project would attract young people.

- Previous proposals ranged from a Gothic cathedral to a Romanesque Basilica – yet none of these seemed to align with the community or the essence of the modern city centre. Moreover, they had been repeatedly squashed by the responsible authorities. After a long series of rejected permits, Huaxiang Community decided to dare the unorthodox and commissioned us with the project.

THE CHURCH AS URBAN COUNTERPOINT

Our radical solution: to move away from such ideal-types and to seek identity not in literal adherence *to*, but in bold interpretation *of* architectural tradition. A first step would be to envision the church no longer as an autonomous being, but primarily as a city component – an architectural counterpoint if you will, that would harmonize the disparities of its heterogenous environment with a careful adjustment of shape and proportion, whilst establishing a distinct presence through the effective use of colour and material:

- Subtle foldings in the new building’s roof would break its volume down to smaller fragments, organically extending the historic church’s pitched roof motif over the new structure, and bring the relationship between old and new into a right balance.
- Simultaneously, two amphitheatres would emerge, providing the community’s youth with much needed outdoor areas for activities and open-air services, and allowing them to escape the confinement of the church’s claustrophobic back-alley situation.

IDENTITY / RE - JUVENATED

The design was well-received by both Christians and authorities alike, leading to the fast-tracked issuance of a construction permit. Only the question of the façade remained a point of debate:

- We proposed to use a granite akin to that of the historic church, however, we departed from the idea of heavy blocks, choosing to finish the exterior in a pebble dash technique once typical for the region. By breaking down the granite into gravel and then deburring it, its dull brown hue would give way to a soft pink, infusing the new church with a youthful aura adequate for the congregation’s new start. In a religious sense, the infinitude of pebbles would translate into matter the dual nature of the word “church”, which refers not only to the single building, but also to the sum of all individual Christians which compose a congregation.
- “But how can this be,” pondered some believers immediately, “this is how we used to build when we were poor and had nothing better!” Others cherished the idea of breathing new life into the memories of a humble past, and smiled at the thought. We took our time. We had a full-scale mock-up built and plastered at the entrance to the old church; and just as we had anticipated, curious crowds would gather after each service, running their hands over the pebbles and engaging in lively discussions. Not long before a positive – and unanimous – decision was reached and the construction could proceed as planned!

IDENTITY / RE - CONNECTED

In a different approach, the interior layout of the main sanctuary seeks to honor the (living) tradition of its Methodist congregation by establishing direct links to denominational conventions and even to the missionary past:

- Despite the site's irregular shape, the Urban Church boasts a perfectly rectangular service hall facing a wide preaching platform. In a spectacular move the platform is backed by the city's first church organ – an echo of the model favored by 19th century American methodists.
- Throughout the building, the orientation and opening of the interior spaces shows a deep engagement with the surrounding. In order to raise the awareness for the historic dimension of the place, deliberate visual connections are established:
 - to an old Chinese mansion, visible from the entrance foyer of the service hall;
 - to the old Mission Church, visible through the 3 rear windows of the main service hall;
 - and finally, to the city's historic centre across the road, visible from the publicly accessible roof top areas.

Six years have passed since the Urban Church of Huaxiang has been completed. Today, the building stands not only as a symbol of the city's considerable Christian population. Its characteristic pebble dash façade has coined its unofficial name, "The Pink Church of Fuzhou," making it a popular destination for both locals and tourists, and even attracting nationwide attention by generating tens of thousands of likes on social media platforms such as Weibo, Little Red Book, and co.