

# Silent Architecture: Comments on the Bidding Schemes of the New National Art Museum of China

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes two bidding schemes of the New National Art Museum of China proposed by designers from different countries, namely designers from the Atelier FCJZ Company of China and Jean Nouvel's team from France. The author explains that the contemporary China urgently needs "silent architecture" with cultural symbols, and points out that the essence of architectural design should be the creation of new possibility by the integration of culture, structure, space and construction, rather than the intentional graphical design based on image accumulation.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the construction of art museums in China is in the ascendant and is facing a "period of great development". Art galleries have sprung up all over the country; typical examples include the Today Art Museum in Beijing and the Long Museum in Shanghai.

The New National Art Museum of China is the most important landmark building after the Beijing Olympic Games. Known as the largest art museum in the world, it aims to promote cultural exchange, introduce contemporary Chinese art, and set a model for Chinese architecture in the 21st century. But it is evitable for us to worry about the bidding competition of such an important landmark building, since Chinese people are more likely to be attracted by the superficial surfaces of objects. They prefer appreciating collage and superimposed images, rather than exquisite construction; they pursue the sense of collapse in space, rather than the long and profound culture features. So do we need a quiet architecture and a quiet space today to experience the joy of art works and galleries?

As a type of architecture, the art museum is an ideal example in the comparative study of architectural forms. <sup>[1]</sup> This kind of architecture can detect the difference in architects' understanding between the architectural art and the art of living. The National Gallery in Berlin designed by Mies is an example. The dominant force of the building concentrates on the steel structure technology; many inherent contradictions and conflicts are brutally exposed in the completed building. The New National Art Museum of China designed by the Atelier FCJZ Firm confronts the solidified prototype presupposed by modernist architecture and the practice of regarding architecture as a "work of art" while neglecting the essence of buildings.

## 2. Art Museum Integrating Urban Life

The New National Art Museum of China is located in the Beijing Olympic Green as a national-level public activity center. The urban function of the northern part of the Olympic Green is composed of three longitudinal axes. As the three groups of longitudinal axes in the area of art museum are transversely cut off by several urban roads, areas of the cultural complex and the central axe are relatively separated. The project of the Atelier FCJZ Firm improves the urban design of the art museum area from four aspects: urban axes, urban interfaces, urban skyline and urban public space to provide an open and popular art museum. The arch shell at the bottom of the building is 14 meters high while the entrance hall caves in 25 meters. The outer ring space is open

to citizens. The East Hujing Road and the Cultural Square pass through the bottom floor continuously, while the distribution area is built overhead under the roof of the first floor. Open exhibition halls are scattered on the first floor, forming several art-themed public squares which provide shelters for citizens. The bottom space has a variety of use patterns; spaces provided for the public is not only limited at the ground floor. The third and fifth floors of the museum continue the concept of square and strengthen openness. The scheme also provides a landscape and overall designing plan for surrounding areas. There is a revival plan for the aerial shadeway corridor erected to the west and a visual corridor opened from the main axis of the Olympic Green to the gallery. On the west side, relying on the dragon-shaped water system, mountains are built by the lake to block the entrance of underground vehicles, forming a landscape ink color; on the east side, the Shadeway Culture Axis is connected to gather citizens for leisure. Art Museums reflect the reverse of contemporary people's real material life; they satisfy citizens' desire for knowledge beauty and their possession of visual beauty. But the city is the gathering and overlapping of individuals' life. Without the public life, there would be no such things as art galleries, not to mention all kinds of derivative social behaviors. From this point of view, if the art museum cannot successfully integrate into the city, it is only a model living in the shop window.

### 3. Analysis on the Scheme of the Atelier FCJZ

From the perspective of architecture, the building must be reasonably supported. The basic idea of this scheme is to find the starting point of design from the essence of art museums.

The collection theme of the New National Art Museum of China includes three kinds of contents, which require two different display spaces. The scheme draws lessons from the space layout of The Orsay Museum and the Center Pompidou in Paris. The space division of the Orsay Museum is relatively fixed and clear, while the Center Pompidou has flexible space and changeable exhibition modes. The front square is the focus of public life. The scheme transforms the typical quality of Pompidou and Orsay in the space concept, and arranges the Orsay and Pompidou overlapping in organization, so as to realize the organic reconstruction. Visiting large art museums can easily lead to aesthetic fatigue of space and art works; visitors need to constantly overcome the constraints of single space. Thus, it is necessary to make changes in the space. Creating surprises is an important way to allaying visual tiredness, especially in the key nodes of the space such as starting and transiting points. Therefore, in the design of the Atelier FCJZ, the first, third and fifth floors transform the space quality of Center Pompidou into a square-like large space with the free and open style. The second, fourth and sixth floors are transformed into the space quality of Orsay Museum as typical rooms in radial series with the classic and elegant style. The basic space shape of the museum is composed of three-storey arch bridges and a three-storey square (Figure 1).

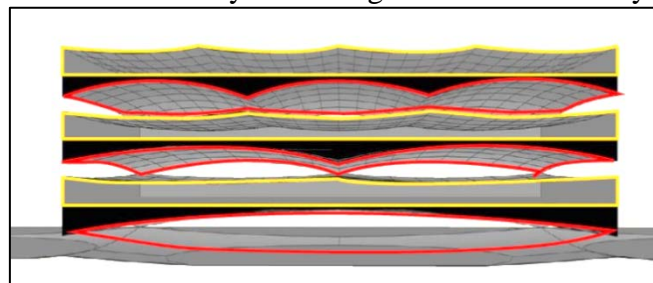


Figure 1. Schematic diagram on the spatial transformation of the museum <sup>[4]</sup>

In this scheme, the concept of logical space in the structural design creates a new possibility for the museum to be established through the close integration of structure, space and construction. The process of structural innovation is also the process of architects' exploration of the pluralistic development of space, materials and construction. The structural concept of this museum is arch bridges which continuously overlap upwardly. The structural logic is to design the spans of bridges according to the needs of the architectural space. The spans decrease from the bottom to the top, because the museum needs to provide public space from large to small from the bottom to the top.

Clear structural and spatial logics are closely integrated, as well as the practical significance and the aesthetic value judgment of structure.

The first, third and fifth floors need to transform the space quality of the Center Pompidou, namely the square space. Therefore, the first, third and fifth floors are arranged in archways under bridges. The column free space provides great flexibility for the exhibition layout. In addition, the slightly undulating grounds and ceilings of the first, third and fifth floors imply an outdoor feeling and provide a square-like interactive space. At the same time, the open corridors on the first, third and fifth floors strengthen the concept of square and can be used for outdoor exhibition and leisure (Figure 2).

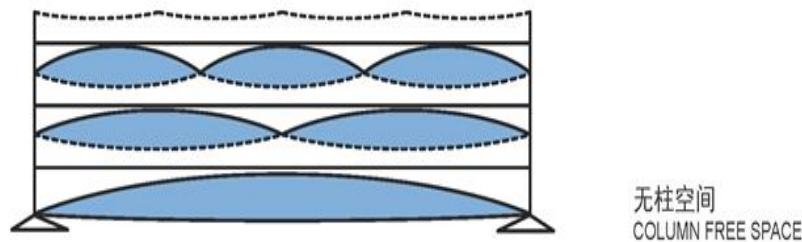


Figure 2. Schematic diagram on the column free space <sup>[4]</sup>

The second, fourth and sixth floors need to be transformed into the space quality of the Orsay Museum, namely typical rooms in radial series. Therefore, the second, fourth and sixth floors are placed on the bridge decks and are supported by sub-structures to provide flexible, large-span exhibition halls. The rectangular rooms provide precise space and flat walls; the moving lines are simple and concise; natural light diffuses into the room through holes on side walls and ceilings after filtering, creating a high-quality light environment; the slightly fluctuated roofs convey implicit spatial interests (Figure 3).

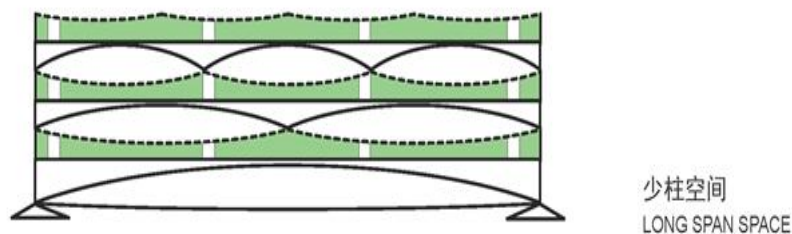


Figure 3. Schematic diagram on the long span space <sup>[4]</sup>

As a result, the architectural structure and spatial functions have achieved close integration; six bridges are divided into three groups, with the two bridges in each group stacked together. The slightly undulating ground and roof space defined by the archways under bridges provide the open landscape space of Pompidou, while the flat ground and roof space defined by the bridge decks are the closed building space of Orsay.

In terms of the expression of building materials, the scheme chooses the concept of traditional Chinese art materials, ink and water, and generates five different building facade materials. Distinguishing from other exaggerated architectural images and removing redundant architectural expressions, the high-quality exhibition space naturally forms the architectural image. The gradual “black-grey” tones of facade materials are the expression of material changing, which is the least core but the most narrative design.

#### 4. Analysis on the Scheme of Ateliers Jean Nouvel

According to information published on the official website of Ateliers Jean Nouvel, the northern facade of the museum encloses an indoor garden with a hollow wall. Therefore, with the changes of time and weather, different lighting effects can be produced inside the garden; flowers and trees in

the garden can also change with seasons like the outdoor natural scenery (Figure 4). According to Jean Nouvel, this indoor garden has detached power, reflecting geography, history, colors, different plants, different horizons and different shadows. In addition, there is a huge terrace facing the sky for people to walk and experience the blending of nature and humanity. Particularly noteworthy is that a huge golden painted ceiling suspends in the indoor summer hall. According to the explanatory text of the design scheme, the golden ceiling shows the theoretical image of Chinese painting history from the 15th century to the present and even to the future in chronological order. Works of great influence created in various historical periods form a glorious picture of Chinese culture in this summer hall.



Figure 4. Effect picture of Jean Nouvel's design

(data source: <http://ideasgn.com/architecture/namoc-jean-nouvel/>)

Looking at this dazzling render graph, the glittering and translucent hollow wall, bunches of volume light, and the feeling of Chinese gardens make people feel relaxed, happy and deeply attracted. But the reality is, Jean Nouvel and his team are still exploring how to present the same effect in the real world. In Jean Nouvel's design of the National Art Museum of China, all beautiful pictures displayed are similar to a 3D projection screen or a sand painting performance, which is composed of a series of space screens. If the series of "space screens" are removed, the real building content is very simple, and can only belong to the scope of "usual design". The Chinese-style "indoor garden" and the "summer hall" with golden ceiling demonstrate in the effect picture are merely the reconstruction of cultural images. In addition, most of the large public buildings Nouvel designed belong to narrative construction. In the construction of narrative architecture, construction should be the basis of the whole design; narration is only the gorgeous external clothes. That is to say, narrative should be something that closely interacts with the construction. But for Nouvel, to show the romantic scenes he imagined in the New National Art Museum of China is more important. That is to say, the imaginary romantic scene in the building is realized through the 3D projection screen and the sand painting performance. Since there is no gravity or real material, it is easy to produce beautiful and fantastic scenes. But the romantic scenes may have nothing to do with the building. The aesthetic results are achieved through pictures and animation, rather than the architecture. Since there is no expression of gravity or real materials in the early stage, it will be extremely difficult to achieve the desired results in the later stage even if a lot of money and efforts are invested.

Usually, from competitive bidding to the completion of building is a "three-step" process from "design" to "transformation" and "construction". The second step is how to transform a good concept into a good implementable building. If the transformation deviates, even the best conceptual design and the most exquisite construction cannot achieve good results. Some of masters' works are destroyed in the process of transformation. For example, the Paris Philharmonic Hall dominated by Nouvel is an example of perfect design and failed construction, which is the contradiction between the intention of the architect and the real world.

Good plans are common, but good buildings are unusual. Frequently, we can find a completely new concept, or a nearly perfect competition plan that is amazing. But when the project comes to the implementation stage, the design becomes increasingly normal, and eventually ends in a mediocre building. This is not a problem of “design” or “construction”, but a problem of “transformation”. The famous architectural critic Palasma once wrote, “Miracle is the accumulation of capital to level of image, and the accumulation of image to level of capital.”<sup>[2]</sup>

## 5. Conclusions

Nouvel’s design shocks us with its striking animated images and formal cohesion, but the images are just some strange and absurd repetitions. The scheme of Atelier FCJZ pays more attention to the close integration of spatial logic, structural logic and construction logic, as well as the sensory interaction, rather than just idealization and conceptualization. True architecture is neither an aesthetic doll nor a novel expression; it helps us to re-recognize ourselves, and understand our society as well as our culture through a quiet attitude. Contemporary China is speeding up on the road to “civilization”; the ecstasy brought about by the explosion of social wealth seems to result in the loss of social judgment. Civilization, in addition to the original sense of civilize, also includes the contents of common sense, which is the basis of civilized cities. On the basis of common sense, cities of western Europe develop their differences, and then they have their own characteristics and urban cultures. However, the problem of Chinese cities is that they have no basic standards of common sense. They jump out of the differences and turn cities into theme parks. Foucault said: “Our culture has unfortunately abandoned a lot of things; silence is one of them.”<sup>[3]</sup> Years later, when we look back at these buildings, we should see the core value of this new social civilization.

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