

Despite a significant number of compromises, the Shangduli Leisure Plaza in Zhujiajiao represents a milestone in recent Chinese urban development.

# Shopping for History

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→ Atelier Deshaus extended its lava-stone façades up to the roof ridge. The weather quickly ages the material (hence the whitish-grey spots), reducing the contrast with materials present in the old town.

# Z

**Zhujiajiao is an ancient waterside town west of Shanghai. It is here that Chinese architecture practices Atelier FCJZ, Atelier Deshaus and Mada s.p.a.m. have realized the Shangduli Leisure Plaza, a complex consisting of a shopping mall, two hotels and several service flats. The historically sensitive, high-profile site made the plaza important to both the architects and the developer, Hongda Group Shanghai Real Estate, which accepted the job as its first project. All parties involved made significant compromises during design and construction phases that spanned eight years. Nevertheless, the result is a milestone in China's recent urban development, thanks to the reintroduction of a small-scale methodology coupled with respect for local identity.**







According to archaeological findings, there was a human settlement on the construction site as many as 5,800 years ago, at the time of the Songze culture. Zhujiajiao stands out from other waterside towns because it still possesses numerous relatively intact edifices from the Ming and Qing dynasties, as well as infrastructure marked by the Jiangnan characteristics typical of this region: narrow lanes, alleyways, courtyards and locally common materials, colours and architectural details. Over the past ten years, the town has evolved into a major tourist destination. Its highlight is the Fangsheng Bridge (1571, Ming dynasty), with its five arches the largest in the southern Yangtze Delta and the local equivalent of the Ponte di Rialto. Like Venice, Zhujiajiao gained in importance thanks to water. Gondolas now ply the canals amid cargo ships. The narrow streets are crowded with day-trippers from Shanghai and, increasingly, with tourists from other provinces or neighbouring countries like Taiwan, Korea and Japan.

As a consequence of rampant urbanization, Zhujiajiao is now part of Qingpu New City, one of the more important new cities in Greater Shanghai. In 2002 Sun Jiwei, then vice head of Qingpu New City, decided that this should not become a generic urban landscape. His goal was a ‘new-style water town’, which would respect the regional Jiangnan culture without preserving or imitating the existing buildings, and which would also make room for modern and international influences.

Adjacent to the Fangsheng Bridge, Shangduli is an extremely vulnerable spot but also one that presents opportunities. The project is intended as a buffer between the old section of Zhujiajiao and the inescapable modern developments right next door. The location was once the cradle of the local food industry, including a factory for the manufacture of cooking oils and fats. This history was brutally erased from the city’s memory in the

1960s with the construction of a cement factory intended for the serial production of concrete housing units. Only a merchant’s residence and a few metal oil tanks were spared.

In early 2004 Sun Jiwei asked Mada s.p.a.m. to draw up a schematic master plan with suggestions for a programme, building density and atmosphere. Dividing the area into five parts to be developed by designers from different cultural backgrounds would satisfy the desire for small-scale architecture and for variety. Under the supervision of Mada s.p.a.m., Atelier FCJZ, Atelier Deshaus and Mateo Arquitectura were invited to participate. Shanghai-based Taiwanese architect Kunyan Deng was recommended by UNESCO and by the local government, which set scarcely any conditions for the preservation of existing heritage structures – a show of confidence in the expertise of the designers selected.

The first phase of the project, by Atelier FCJZ, borders directly on the old main street. Its scale and texture are a continuation of the intimacy and atmosphere of the old city. The architects used subtle modifications to integrate their design into the existing situation. Instead of imitating the ‘ivory walls and indigo tiles’ of the old houses, for example, they used darker- and lighter-washed sandstone for exterior walls, which harmonize better with the weathered, grey façades of nearby historic buildings. Selected for

the bottom 2 m of these walls was a locally sourced brick whose rough texture reinforces the atmosphere of the past.

The second phase, on the road to the regional bus station, was designed by Atelier Deshaus. It is a collage of volumes, an almost random sequence of private courtyards linked by narrow streets and passages. Instead of traditional timber-framed and tiled pitched roofs, the designers opted for a contemporary framework and both flat and pent roofs. In

the latter type, the material used for exterior walls extends right up to the ridge of the roof. The main courtyard was designed to include an existing tree. Something went wrong during construction, however: uninformed construction workers cut down the tree for practical reasons, and a new one had to be planted. Another idea that wasn’t implemented was the architects’ plan to extend the traditional golden Jiangnan brick of the street paving into the outer walls and roofs of buildings in this part of the complex. In order to make the project dovetail with the phase completed earlier by Atelier FCJZ, and because of the ‘more commercially interesting allure’, the architects switched, at the developer’s request, to black lava stone, used in a rough variant by FCJZ and in a polished version by Deshaus.

Taking responsibility for the third phase, Mada s.p.a.m. inserted long, narrow alleyways running north to south between largely blank firewalls, with sightlines to the water. Three diagonals lead pedestrian traffic to a central ‘marketplace’. A glass curtain wall covers the façades created by these diagonals. For purposes of maintenance and fire safety, the developer replaced timber frames proposed by the architects for the remaining, orthogonal façades with ‘wood printed’ aluminium. As a central element in this part of the plan, Mada s.p.a.m. suggested new copper cladding for the somewhat dilapidated merchant’s house, built around a courtyard. Building regulations made the proposal unfeasible, and the same construction crew that had cut down the tree eventually demolished the house as well. With the help of a specialist – found only after a long search through rural surroundings – the house was rebuilt in the traditional style.

In all three completed sections of the plan, architects subtly engaged in a visual and morphological analogy that links new-build to old city. As often happens in Chinese construction, the client and the Design Institute, the body responsible for construction drawings, made several modifications to material selection and detailing without consulting the designers. To maintain the integrity of their designs and to provide builders with

some direction, the three firms were forced to revise detail drawings in their own time.

The project also encompasses a fourth and a fifth phase, which have not yet been implemented. The fourth phase, in the hands of Kunyan Deng, includes such elements as a karaoke club that will repurpose the oil tanks. His plan received a great deal of criticism at style-control meetings organized by the local government, not so much because of his narrative design language – seen from the air, Deng’s scheme represents a dragon playing with balls – but mainly because of the huge expanse of the roof. At the moment, Kunyan Deng has withdrawn to a monastery in a mountainous area, and his absence is seriously hindering communication and the progress of the project. There is no alternative plan, as the developer has already run up too many expenses.

Along the way, the collaboration with Mateo also came to an end, owing to communication problems caused by geographical distance and cultural differences. As an alternative for the fifth phase, which entails high-end apartments, Atelier FCJZ has delivered a new plan. The firm is also currently working on North Shangduli, an ambitious project for the opposite side of the river.

Changes in the local political power structure reduced the influence of Mada s.p.a.m. as supervisor, leading the firm to withdraw early on, in 2006. In spite of concessions in material selection and detailing, the concept

nevertheless survived, thanks to broad outlines strategically established at the start of the process, which allowed for some flexibility. In Mada s.p.a.m.’s view, broad outlines are more relevant than details in this kind of project. The result, within the Chinese context, is still exceptional because of the small-scale atmosphere geared to traditional street life, with pedestrians, handcarts and small shops that open directly to the street. All parking spaces are located below ground level. Solutions for the fire department and emergency services were achieved by skirting rigid construction regulations after long negotiations. The structure of the old town and that of Shangduli flow almost seamlessly into each another. →



## ‘The project by Atelier FCJZ maintains the intimacy and atmosphere of the old town’

↖ Rendering of Shangduli Leisure Plaza, as seen from the Dianpu River.

← Covering exterior walls along the three diagonals in Mada s.p.a.m.’s plan are glass curtain walls.

↗ Atelier FZJC’s part of the plan features upper floors with sandstone-clad façades and a ground floor with rough, locally manufactured ‘85 bricks’, a term that refers to the 85-mm width of the bricks.

→ Highlighting the north façades of the section by Mada s.p.a.m. are frames inspired by local traditions.







← In spite of all the stumbling blocks, the project has succeeded as an act of resistance against the dominant Chinese trend towards massive projects that usually feature a burlesque classical design language. Literally a stone's throw away, however, immense malls are under construction, forming a new threat to the authenticity and small-scale ambience of Shangduli. In the past few years a process of gentrification has also been initiated in the old town, whereby many original residents are renting or selling their homes or businesses to Shanghai's wealthy middle class. Very few permanently occupied homes remain, and after sunset the streets are so deserted and dark that the developer is hesitant to include new housing in the plan. Shangduli was supposed to focus on local culinary specialities, but Starbucks also seems a serious candidate now.

Among the designers, there are mixed feelings. Although in favour of an improved standard of living for local residents, they are less enthusiastic about commercial interests and large-scale projects that continue to threaten local identity. With faith in the small scale and gradual growth promised by this project, the architects have tried to unravel the enormous programme and volume of Shangduli and to rearrange it in a way that is revolutionary for China. In doing so, they have provided the resistance that is so sorely needed in this country. ←

fcjz.com  
deshaus.com  
madaspam.com

## Site Plan



- Phase 1 - Atelier FCJZ
- Phase 2 - Atelier Deshaus
- Phase 3 - Mada s.p.a.m.
- Phase 4 - Kunyan Deng  
(in development)
- Phase 5 - Mateo Arquitectura  
(in development)

← Small street between the section of the project by Atelier FCJZ (left, sandstone) and the part by Atelier Deshaus (right, black lava stone). Visible at one end is the shell of Phase 4 by Kunyan Deng, put on hold for an indefinite period.