

# Guangzhou Yue Show Theater

Interview with Steven Chilton Architect

by Karl van Es



History, or the study of past places or events is something that as humans we are inherently drawn to. It tells us where we've come from and is the collective memory of our species. In architecture, we use history to tell us what materials work well in a specific climate, who used the space and why, and how our built form came to be. When done well, architecture is a symbol of a place's past while speaking to a present, using the materials, space and society around it to inform its design.

What makes Guangzhou Yue so interesting is that its form is not traditional, but its experience and the elements within in still harken to the past. When construction is completed, the theater will become a living piece of history that speaks to a new generation of Chinese people in Guangzhou—one with a hunger for expression and individuality in a country that has historically opposed it.

Guangzhou Yue Show Theater is the second of four theatres in China that we will be taking an in-depth look at with its designer, noted British architect Steven Chilton. I hope you enjoy the interview as much as I did.

**When I look at the Yue Show Theatre, I feel as if there's an organic movement to it that whisks my eyes around its deep folds and vibrant colours. How was the building's design influenced by the area's surrounding culture?**

Guangzhou has been an important trading port for thousands of years and was the starting point of the so-called Maritime Silk Road. Silk originated in China in around 3500 BC and has been traded in

the region from the time of the Han Dynasty. As a product of its place, and the medium through which so much of traditional Chinese culture's most precious and beautiful achievements have been expressed, it seemed to us to be a natural choice to draw inspiration from when we started to explore the design of the theatre.

**The sense of arrival at this building is markedly different than what you would typically see in most theatre designs. I don't get the feeling that there is one place to enter – instead, I find myself looking for the entrance through the reveals within the folds. Is entrance, or circulation for that matter, an important element of the design?**

One of our goals when we started to define the surface geometry of the building was to explore the folding quality of the material and utilize those properties when defining elements such as the various entrances and the function of canopies. We were able to combine the openings and the need to shelter them by seemingly tucking the material in on itself until it met a more conventional vertical wall of glass or cladding that contained the practical doors into the building.

When you look at the building in plan, you will notice there are 10 distinct folds in the surface. The position of these folds responds directly to the requirements of the internal planning of the building, and where the various openings need to be. We were able to adapt the geometry of the surface until late in the development of the plan by building it parametrically. This helped us ensure we were always able to keep the opening in the zone where the valley of the fold meets the ground level, so as to avoid creating awkward looking openings on the apex.

**The exterior rain screen is a combination of light and dark colours that use light and shadow in a playful way (dark colours are used in areas of shadow, and bright colours are used where you would expect to see light). Could you speak more to the materials and elements that are used to accentuate this?**

The façade design went through two distinct phases, you are probably more familiar with the first phase, which has recently been published, and shows the surface geometry formed in rows of rectangular tiles, the majority of which are either flat or curved in one direction. There is a small percentage of double curved panels that slit along the apex of the folds and where the surface tucks into itself around the various entrances. At this stage, we were proposing to use anodised aluminium as the main cladding material due to its unique specular qualities that closely resembled those of real silk.

During phase two of the design we were asked by the client to redesign the surface using flat triangular panels to reduce costs. It was also around this time we started to look at patterning the surface and started exploring a traditional myth often illustrated on silk tapestries from the region called 100 Birds Paying Homage to the Phoenix. It represents an allegory that speaks of the importance of leadership and presents the Phoenix as a symbol of virtue and grace. The myth symbolises the client's aspirations for the theatre to become a leading venue for the performing arts, whilst reflecting and celebrating the artistic tradition of the region.

The artwork we eventually developed for the surface used figures drawn by a renowned local artist called Zhang Hongfei. We wanted the art to enhance the sense of the surface being silk, but at the same time wanted to find a way of presenting it with a subtly contemporary edge. We found our inspiration for the compositional style in tattoo culture which has been exploding in China amongst the younger generation through their desire to express an individual identity. Within the vintage genre of tattooing, there is a tendency to place discreet motifs over the body in an almost random, uncoordinated manner - a kind of anti-aesthetic. We adopted a similar principle with the placement of the Phoenix and bird figures on the surface of the theatre, we have reverted away from creating a regular pattern of finely composed frieze, towards a treatment that embraces randomness and self expression.

**The theatre, which holds 2,000 people, has been designed to accommodate a variety of theatre companies. How was the layout of the building considered to accommodate the different ways it could be used?**

That's a great question with an unusual answer. The building was originally designed around the technical requirements of one specific show in much the same way as Wuxi and The Han Show. However, during the construction phase, the client changed their mind and decided to open the theatre up to multiple uses and theatre companies. There was a hiatus whilst the team figured out a way of making this possible and they have since managed to achieve their goal. Interestingly, the first use of the theatre is going to be as a studio for a locally produced television show

*Karl van Es is an architect and travel writer. Since 2017 he has been the founder and editor of the architecture and travel blog [AVONTUURA](#).*

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## **Sunac Guangzhou Grand Theatre by SCA | Steven Chilton Architects**

Located in the Huadu District of Guangzhou, China, the 'Sunac Guangzhou Grand Theatre' is the recently completed, 2000 seat purpose-built theatre, designed by London based practice SCA|Steven Chilton Architects.

Guangzhou is the birthplace of the 'Silk Road on the Sea' and has been a significant centre for the arts and trading since the Han Dynasty. Inspired by its traditional and contemporary artists, the concept for the theatre has been informed by silk embroidery the illustrations of artist Zhang Hongfei. The theatre is scheduled to open in 2021.

### **Credits:**

Architect: SCA | Steven Chilton Architects

Client: Sunac Group Holdings Ltd.

SCA Project Team: Steven Chilton, Roberto Monesi, Chuck Wang, Paula Isabella Saavedra Rosas, David Rieser, Natalie Dillon

Architecture and Design Management: Sunac Group Holdings Ltd.

Auditorium Concept Designer and Technical Consultant: Dragone

Concept Engineer: Buro Happold Engineering

Theatre Consultant: Auerbach Pollock Friedlander

Concept Engineer: Buro Happold

Artist: Zhang Hongfei

### **About SCA | Steven Chilton Architects:**

Established in 2015, SCA | Steven Chilton Architects is a London based group of highly skilled practitioners connecting cultural insight and the creative use of technology to achieve an unexpected architecture that seeks to embrace, captivate and surprise.

### **External link**

[www.sca.design](http://www.sca.design)

<https://www.instagram.com/steven.chilton.architects/>