

# Han Show 'Red Lantern' Theater

Interview with Steven Chilton Architect

by Karl van Es



In ancient China, lanterns were used quite commonly in warfare, for transmitting secret messages, signalling an intended action across a battlefield or simply lighting the night sky when laying siege on a city. In more recent times, lanterns have become more popular as a decoration for parties and festivals, and while the circumstances for its use have inarguably improved, lanterns still transmit a message to those that see it in the night sky. At Han Show, that message is one of spectacle and wonder, and something you cannot help but feel a part of it in the moment as its bright red colours fill the night sky above.

Han Show 'Red Lantern' Theater is the last 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.

**The theatre is located on the edge of Donghu Lake in Wuhan, China. What is the purpose of the theatre and how does it connect back to the greater context of the city and its lake system?**

The theatre was created as a key destination within the Dalian Wanda Group's Wuhan Central Cultural District (WCCD) development, a city-wide programme providing waterway connections between Wuhan's six lakes. The WCCD is unusual in that it is in the centre of the city, not on the outskirts as most of Wanda's other Cultural Tourism developments have been. This centrality allowed them to weave the development into the existing urban fabric and create high density

business, commercial and residential accommodation in a location that connected and served existing population centres.

One of the key connecting routes is Han Street, a 1500m pedestrianised thoroughfare stretching between Lake Shahu and Donghu Lake. The Han Show Theatre sits on the western edge of Donghu Lake and marks the entrance point into the WCCD. The purpose of the theatre and the other tourism destinations along the route such as the Zhenggang Art Gallery and Movie Culture Park have been to activate the new centre with cultural offerings aimed at stimulating interest in the region's heritage and traditional culture.

### **What was the inspiration behind designing a theatre based on a Chinese paper lantern?**

I was introduced to the project in 2010 by the late Mark Fisher who commissioned my studio to create a concept that he could present to the Chairman of Wanda whom he was in discussions with to design the theatre building. Having studied the site on the edge of the lake and understood the clients desire to infuse a new appreciation of traditional culture, I was immediately drawn to the idea of a Chinese lantern for its ubiquity and historical significance within Han culture. Secondly, as objects they are structurally fascinating and embody the balance of the compressive and tensile forces of their constituent materials with a simple, beguiling elegance that I believed held the potential to be transferred faithfully into a modern and sophisticated architectural proposal using contemporary building and design techniques.

### **There is a wonderful depth and interplay of colour, light and shadow within the façade. What was your process of material selection like, and how does the structural system come together?**

The first images my studio created contained the core elements that would inform the development of the design over the next 3 years. The lantern structure would be defined by a series of interlocking, concentric steel rings, suspended from the auditorium walls and the surface defined by a series of rhomboid and triangular surfaces manufactured from a prestressed tensile material or net.

During the design development phase that I led after joining Mark's studio following the Chairman's approval of the concept, the lantern and auditorium were lifted onto a drum shaped podium that was defined by a circular array of irregularly spaced, slender columns that symbolized the hanging tassels often found on traditional lanterns. The primary structure of the lantern was composed of 8 intersecting steel rings supported by struts fixed to the auditorium walls. We proposed a series of cable nets to create the minimal surfaces in the voids between the intersecting rings, and developed a disk-shaped cladding element that fixed to each structural node based on ancient Chinese Bi-disks. Each node incorporated a bespoke LED light fixture that illuminated the outer surface of each disk in 4 independent quadrants. The 18,000 lights transformed the lantern into a large drum shaped digital wall capable of hosting low resolution artwork that could augment the structure through simple, monochromatic animations.

### **The auditorium is quite innovative with respect to how the seating can be reconfigured or rearranged based on the intended performance - I understand that there is even a pool available should the program call for it. Can you explain more about some of the design features of the auditorium space and how it functions?**

The design of the innovative moving seats within the auditorium is down to the late Mark Fisher, the concept was established sometime before I came on board. Essentially, the 2000 seats are arranged into 4 segments, that when the audience enters are arranged as stalls and a balcony in an end on proscenium.

Halfway through the show, the two stall segments split and rotate outwards to reveal a 10 million litre pool containing enormous wet/dry lifts. The void they leave below the balcony is then filled by the lowering of the upper segments until they all sit at the same level around the pool or 'in the round'. The pool is accessed via the main stage which itself is dominated by three 6.5m x 11m LED screens supported and controlled by massive, cantilevered robot arms.

A large sunken garage located below the seating can feed huge props onto the lifts underwater before lifting and revealing them to the audience in typical Franco Dragone style!

I cannot imagine another auditorium like this will be built for sometime; the complexity of the technology and sheer size of the various moving elements within the auditorium are ground breaking and spectacular, and were only possible due to the clients trust, ambition and willingness to invest in Mark Fishers pioneering ideas. It is a superlative space and a testament to his immense and inspirational skill and vision.

*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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## **Han Show 'Red Lantern' Theatre by SCA | Steven Chilton Architects**

Situated on the edge of Shuiguo Lake in the city of Wuhan, China, the Han Show 'Red Lantern' Theatre is nearing completion. The 'Red Lantern' building concept was created by Steven Chilton of Steven Chilton Architects, who was inspired by the rich symbolism and structural elegance of the humble Chinese lantern.

The innovative 'wet/dry' auditorium was created by Mark Fisher of Stufish Ltd, who was inspired to create a space that would engage the audience with the live performance at an unprecedented level of visual and physical immersion.

### **Project History**

In November 2010, Stufish Ltd were commissioned by the Dalian Wanda Group to design a new, purpose built theatre to house a new wet/dry show from 'House of Dancing Water' creator, Franco Dragone. At the same time, Stufish commissioned London based architect Steven Chilton Architects to help them create a concept for the building that would be worthy of its prominent location on the edge of picturesque Shuiguo Lake in the city of Wuhan, China.

### **Credits:**

Theatre Architect: Stufish Ltd.

Architect for theatre building: Stufish Director of Architecture Steven Chilton

Architect for theatre auditorium: Stufish Partner Mark Fisher

Project Designer : Jenny Melville

Design Team: Dan Dodds, Chihming Huang, Austin Hutchison, Jasna Jevermovic, Ric Lipson, Adrian Mudd, Alicia Tkacz, Sharon Toong, Stefan Tribe and Maciej Woroniecki

Theatre Technical Advisor: Franco Dragone Entertainment Group

Theatre Consultant: Theatre Projects Consultants

Acoustics consultant: Jaffe Holden Acoustics

Theatre Site Technical Coordinator: Sandman Associates International

Local Design Institute: Guangzhou Pearl River Foreign Investment Architectural Designing Institute co. ltd.

Interior Design: Hongtao

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.

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