

# Puzzle Ball Theater

Interview with Steven Chilton Architect

by Karl van Es



In my travels throughout Asia and China specifically, what has come to stand out more than anything is the sheer magnitude of its cities and the rate in which they are changing: the small village where the feeling of a time passed by still lingers against the backdrop of a new super-structure which represents its future. It's a clash of new and old worlds living together in an uncomfortable way, while life goes on around it.

What's most beautiful about the old world is the simplicity of it all; the beauty in its craftsmanship and to a singular way of living that is lost in the contemporary world. The puzzle ball, an ancient Chinese art form is just one example of a time and craft gone by as we seek more technological forms of pleasure in our lives. And yet, it's this feeling of the past that gives wonder and beauty to the present. Puzzle Ball Theater is the third 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.

**Puzzle Ball Theatre is a conceptual design you envisioned for a theatre in China. What led you to creating its design?**

It was one of the concepts we developed for a competition to design a performing arts venue for the site in Guangzhou where our Silk inspired theatre now sits. When we were invited to compete, the brief required that we submit multiple concepts for the client to choose from for the final phase; the Puzzle Ball was one of the ideas we developed that didn't make the final cut.

**Often referred to as “The Devil’s Work Ball”, the puzzle ball is well-regarded in Asia and Europe for its impeccable craftsmanship and attention to detail. What consideration went into its overall form and materiality in your design?**

As you rightly observe, puzzle balls are highly revered for the craftsmanship and artistry they embody and the mystery provoked by the seeming implausibility of their very existence as seamless concentric spheres, free to roll one within the other for 10 to 15 layers. Traditionally they were crafted from a single block of jade or ivory as these materials were suitably precious and capable of being intricately carved.

During the planning stage, it became apparent that the auditorium and layout of the theatre for the original show would benefit from being enclosed by a free-standing outer shell to accommodate the necessary roof span and distribution of column free space in the back of house. A subsequent study of geodesic domes coincided with the discovery of a beautiful puzzle ball in the Guangdong Museum in Guangzhou and we immediately recognized the potential of how their respective properties could work together as a proposal for the theatre.

**The building’s exterior is comprised of deep voids and light geometric patterns. What influenced the shape and geometry of these patterns?**

Having established the geometry for the primary geodesic structure, we set about identifying a geometry for the cladding that would co-ordinate with the underlying triangular grid, whilst being flexible enough to tessellate across the surface without repetition. We achieved this by using shapes inspired by geometric patterns found on wooden window shutters originating from the region. These rhombus and trapezoid shaped panels could be combined in a variety of orientations and scales whilst following the global setting-out geometry as defined by the primary structure. The team automated the tessellation stage by developing a ‘Grasshopper’ parametric script to generate a variety of solutions that responded intelligently to the various program requirements of the building program, e.g. allowing natural light into the foyer and offices and creating openings for side entrances and the back of house.

**I can’t help but stare at the way you’ve rendered people and places into the images (there’s a group of people taking an exaggerated selfie in one image, a labour or work crew in another, and people doing back-flips off of dilapidated housing) - it’s a bit of a puzzle onto itself and I’m curious what message you are trying to convey about the type of people that may perhaps use or interact with it when it’s built.**

There are consequences for the community and neighbourhoods, and a social reality that you come to experience and appreciate whilst working on projects such as these. With the images you are referring to, we have simply chosen not to erase or mask these consequences and to include instances of life carrying on as we have witnessed firsthand. I often find the discordant quality of our projects compared to the sometimes decaying, half demolished world that exists around them surreal and mesmerising and as a transient by-product of large-scale development, a state to be explored and shown.

We are not being judgemental or deliberately provocative as some observers have suggested, however I do understand the negative feelings some have expressed, though I have a theory as to why the reaction has been so polarized.

I read a perceptive comment recently that said, had our images been photographs taken by a street photographer, they would be accepted without question. The unwritten rules of the street photography genre dictate that life be shown unfiltered and the viewer expects to be shown the truth, however unpalatable. The opposite is generally true in the field of architectural visualisation. Images in this genre are created to sell a product where aspiration is the goal, and perfection is the means to achieving it, be that the hue of the sky, the shininess of the materials or the attractiveness and diversity of the people.

By adopting the rules of street photography within the genre of arch viz, some viewers may have found the challenge to their unconscious expectations disconcerting and a problem to accept. If true, this is fascinating and will be an area we continue to explore in our images and illustrations.

*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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## **Puzzle Ball Theatre by SCA | Steven Chilton Architects**

Located in the Huadu District of Guangzhou, China, the Puzzle Ball Theatre takes its inspiration from the ancient art of puzzle ball carving. The 2000 seat proposal is designed to house an original and permanent show inspired by the local Yue culture.

### **Credits:**

Architect: SCA | Steven Chilton Architects.

Client: Dalian Wanda Group.

Architecture and Design Management: Wanda Cultural Tourism Planning & Research Institute Co. Ltd

Concept Engineer: Buro Happold Engineering

Theatre Consultant: Auerbach Pollock Friedlander

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)

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