

Wuxi Taihu Show Theater

Interview with Steven Chilton Architect

by Karl van Es



There's a spiritual connection we all share when we walk through a forest; the filtered light, the smell of morning dew, and the sounds of critters nearby. It grounds us by removing all the weight we carry in our lives and reconnects us with the primary elements; those pure substances of life which cannot be broken down, reminding us of who we are and what we are made of.

When I saw Wuxi for the first time, with its sleek, white columns set in a gentle landscape of trees, fog and water, I felt for a minute that I was back there. Wuxi has a transcendental quality about it that works perfectly for a theater. When we go out for a meal, to socialize with friends, and to experience the best of what life has to offer, we bring our whole subconscious self with us – the good and the bad. Wuxi breaks that all down and sets the stage for the performances ahead by bringing us back to nature and giving us a sense of the wonder to come.

Wuxi Taihu Show Theater is the first 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.

It's been written that the concept for Wuxi inspired by the Sea of Bamboo Park in Yixing, the largest bamboo forest in China. What was it about that forest or bamboo that drew you to using it as a metaphor for the building?

Wuxi is a notably lush and green city quite unlike those I was familiar with in China such as Beijing and to a lesser extent Wuhan. The manner in which nature had been integrated into the urban landscape and the abundance of parks, particularly around Lake Taihu, left a deep impression on me and was the catalyst for looking to the natural environment for inspiration.

We soon learnt that Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* had used the Sea of Bamboo as the location for the famous fight scene between the Li Mu Bai and Jen Yu. Their balletic performance in the canopy of the forest always resonated with my sensibility as an architect preoccupied with performance architecture. The manner in which they push against and harness the material properties of the bamboo, to reinforce their movements and the interplay of their bodies under the changing quality of light and shadow, is a masterful example of how the environment can be used to simultaneously inform the narrative and heighten the dynamism of the performance. Our research also led us to an appreciation of the importance the forest held to the community as a place they would have visited as children on outings, somewhere they may have taken a lover or family, to give them space to reconnect and wander under its peaceful, majestic and elegant canopy. Architecturally speaking, a bamboo forest is an immensely appealing and inspirational setting due to the material's slenderness and vertical dynamism, and the contrasting quality of the leafy canopy that appears to hover like an everchanging, filigree tapestry of light and shade.

The theatre, which holds 2,000 people, has been designed to house a permanent water show by the Belgian theatre director Franco Dragone who is broadly known for his work with the Cirque du Soleil and Celine Dion. Can you share what that show will be like and how the building celebrates or enhances its production?

The show is called *SPLENDOR* and is a modern reinterpretation of the ancient Chinese legend of Xi Shi. Xi Shi was one of the legendary beauties who 500 BC is said to have helped overthrow a kingdom. Unlike previous Dragone shows, *Splendor* is more story driven and stylistically more of a musical. It also weaves a comedic quality into the narrative and is designed to appeal to more contemporary sensibilities through the use of modern technology such as the 360-degree LED screen that surrounds the stage, and places the audience into the foreground of the back drop.

Early on in the conception of the building it was decided that it was important to bring the audience from the street and into the auditorium as effortlessly as possible, and that the best way to achieve this goal was to sink the seating bowl and remove the need for stairs and an upper lobby. We sought to harness the potential of this move by conceiving the outer edges of the building as a bamboo forest through which the audience would pass and quickly arrive within the inner sanctum of the auditorium. Part of the purpose of the exterior design is to heighten the audience's sense of anticipation and to help them transition into a receptive and heightened state where they are prepared to open up and experience the magic and wonder of the show. The simple narrative of walking through a forest into a clearing lends itself to making this transition in a manner that is relatable, practicable and [we hope] enjoyable.

The building's organic structure allows for much of the columns and roof to be exposed. I'm particularly drawn in by the elaborate, triangular lattice that hovers over the perimeter of the building like a tree canopy. Does the canopy structure serve any functional or sustainable purpose to the building's design?

The climate in Wuxi is very hot in the summer and due to its location, the sun is particularly high in the sky during these months. The main practical purpose of the canopy is to provide shade over the front curtain wall and to a lesser extent, the windows serving back of house facilities during these peak months. Beyond supporting the shading elements, the primary structure of the canopy also supports the top of the steel tubes that form the 'bamboo forest' around the perimeter of the building. These columns help to block direct sunlight when the sun is less vertical in the sky, and combined with canopy, are effective at lowering the HVAC load on the building.

Some of the most beautiful images of the building are at night when the building's exterior is illuminated from below. How were elements of light, shadow, and colour used to enhance the theatre's design?

Early on the conception of the lighting scheme we wanted the structure to have an iridescent, lantern like quality where the building appeared to glow from within. We achieved this effect by placing spot lights at ground level behind the columns and up lighting them. At canopy level, LED fixtures are positioned to discreetly illuminate the louvres and structural elements again from behind. These are capable of providing the full RGB spectrum of colours and are programmed to gently transition from one to the other to alter the character of the building for any given moment.

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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Wuxi TAIHU Show Theatre by SCA | Steven Chilton Architects

Located close to Lake Taihu in Wuxi, Jiangsu Province, China, the Wuxi Taihu Show Theatre concept was inspired by the Sea of Bamboo Park in Yixing, the largest bamboo forest in China. The 2000 seat theatre has been designed to house a permanent water show by Franco Dragone and it is due to open on 22nd December 2019.

Credits:

Architect: SCA | Steven Chilton Architects

Client: Sunac Group

Architecture and Design Management: Sunac Group

Concept Engineer: Buro Happold Engineering

Theatre Consultant: Auerbach Pollock Friedlander

Show Design: Dragone

LDI: Tongji Architectural Design

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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