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FIELDS OF IMAGINATION. THE ARCHITECTURE OF WUTOPIA LAB

POLA WYOBRAŹNI. ARCHITEKTURA WUTOPIA LAB

Abstract

Architecture in its definition is a discipline that organises and shapes space in real forms necessary to satisfy material and spiritual human needs. Once closely related to sculpture and art, today it is prone to economic factors. What is the role of architecture today? Is it supposed to serve only material human needs, or can it be more than that? The Chinese studio Wutopia Lab proves that architecture, without giving up its pragmatic aspect, can still be a space for creativity and experience for the recipient. Buildings suspended between the real and dreamlike worlds affect emotions, develop imagination, and also become a voice in the discourse about truth and lie in architecture.

Keywords: Chinese architecture, Modernism, Postmodernism, magical realism

Streszczenie

Architektura określana jest jako dyscyplina organizująca i kształtująca przestrzeń w realnych formach niezbędnych do zaspokojenia materialnych i duchowych potrzeb człowieka. Kiedyś ściśle związana z rzeźbą i malarstwem, dziś podatna na czynniki ekonomiczne. Jaka jest rola architektury dzisiaj? Czy ma służyć jedynie materialnym potrzebom człowieka, czy posiadać głębszy przekaz? Chińska pracownia Wutopia Lab udowadnia, że architektura, nie pomijając swojego pragmatycznego aspektu, potrafi być wciąż przestrzenią kreatywności i doświadczeniem dla odbiorcy. Zawieszone pomiędzy światami rzeczywistym i onirycznym budynki oddziałują na emocje, rozwijają wyobraźnię, a także wpisują się w dyskurs o prawdzie i kłamstwie w architekturze.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura chińska, modernizm, postmodernizm, realizm magiczny

*Architecture strengthens existential experiences,
the individual sense of being in the world,
it is a significantly enhanced experience of subjectivity¹*

Juhani Pallasmaa

1. PARADIGM OF COMPLEXITY

Wutopia Lab was founded by architects Yu Ting and Min Erni in Shanghai in 2013. Its founders describe it as an architectural firm whose actions go beyond the classically understood definition of architecture, creating its own paradigm. In their work, they blur the boundary

¹ J. Pallasmaa, *Oczy skóry*, Instytut Architektury, Kraków 2012. p. 51

between the designs of the building, its interior and an artistic installation, treating the culture and lifestyle of modern society as a starting point.

When looking at the work of Wutopia Lab, it is easy to note how fluidly the designers use previous architectural styles. Their projects feature both echoes of Modernism and Postmodernism that appear to conflict with one another when we note that Postmodernism was created in opposition to the pragmatic ideology of the Modernists. However, Yu Ting believes that the contemporary world, including architecture, is complex first and foremost and is subjected to different processes that often run counter to one another. Therefore, we cannot categorically say that function, form or the structure of a building are more important, or clearly state that *the ornament is a crime*.²

Spatial harmony based on mathematical proportions and compositions adopted on simple geometric masses dates back to antiquity, when human creativity was strongly linked with the course of nature, interpreted as the order of the universe. Attachment to the proportions of the module was present in many architectural styles, from Vitruvius, to Le Corbusier and contemporary architects.

The author of *De architectura libri decem* stated that order gives due measure to the members of a work considered separately, and symmetrical agreement to the proportions of the whole. It is an adjustment according to quantity (in Greek ποσότης). By this I mean the selection of modules from the members of the work itself and, starting from these individual parts of members, constructing the whole work to correspond.³

The foundation of Postmodernism was the rejection of the rank of functionality and detaching it from its previously strong link with the form. Postmodernism allowed one to strive for giving architecture a greater narrative meaning. Robert Venturi, whose *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* is one of the key publications for the discipline, believed it is proper to introduce humour or irony into architecture. This allowed the broad use of the style, producing both historicising, detail-rich buildings and simple, well-defined forms. The discourse between styles also included slogans, which have become a part of culture. For instance, Louis Sullivan's 'form follows function' and Bernard Tschumi's 'form follows fiction'.⁴ Mies van der Rohe's 'less is more' and Robert Venturi's 'less is a bore'.⁵ Despite the postmodern style no longer being popular since the 1990s and architecture displaying a greater overall plurality, it can be noted that many contemporary architectural firms reinterpret old slogans, continuing to transform them, and create their own manifestos. To Yu Ting, the idea of *antithesis* is such a manifesto.

Yu Ting, apart from being a designer, also writes articles on culture and cuisine, and is the editor of *Time + Architecture* magazine, engaging with the broadly understood issue of activating small social spaces in Shanghai. It is his home city that is his greatest field for experimentation and his inspiration. The wealth of Shanghai's culture is visible not only in

² Popularized statement from the lecture by modernist architect Adolf Loos, that criticizes ornament in useful objects.

³ M. Vitruvius Pollio, *O architekturze ksiąg dziesięć*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1956.

⁴ D. Douglass-Jaimes, *Form Follows Fiction: Ole Scheeren's TED Talk on Why Architecture Should Tell a Story* [in:] ArchDaily, 2016 <https://www.archdaily.com/780997/form-follows-fiction-ole-scheeren-ted-talk-on-why-architecture-should-tell-a-story> (access: 3.8.2020).

⁵ P. Keskeys, "*Less Is More*" vs. "*Less Is a Bore*": *Whose Camp Are You In?*, <https://architizer.com/blog/practice/details/less-is-more-vs-less-is-a-bore/> (access: 3.8.2020).

the contrast between old and new development, but also the diversity of ingredients found in local foods. The city's culture and lifestyle are a motor for everything. He sees this changing and teeming city as a system of complex processes that are often contradictory. Thus, in contemporary architecture, he sets simplicity against complexity and sees design as the combination of different ideas, often forming poetic pairings he calls *antitheses*.⁶

Yu Ting also highlights that it is the community for which the building is designed that is at the centre of creation, and it is between the building and man that architecture creates its relationship. This principle is visible in many of the firm's projects, which initially appear to be minimalist and simple forms, but in direct contact they reveal their complexity, for instance through the layers of their facades, the mixing of various types of materials or their varied translucency. Form, colour and materiality aid in conferring relationships between all of the building's elements and to create relationships between people.

To Ting, experiencing the building is significant at the level of our senses, of vision and hearing, but also appreciating the sense of touch, which was marginalised in the past. The significance of the sense of touch was observed by Juhani Pallasmaa, who devoted his book *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* to this issue and noted that we discover the world via the sense of touch, which he expanded to include the dimension of architecture's carnality, but also formulated an argument that the designer works with their entire body and sense of subjectivity. Technology merely frees human fantasy and makes working easier, but this work must still take place within the artist. In a different passage, he observed that architecture cannot become a tool of pure functionality, bodily comfort and sensual pleasure, devoid of a mediating, existential task. The architects work should not be transparent in its utilitarian and rational motives; it must feature an impenetrable mystery to be able to free our imagination and emotions.⁷ This definition appears to reflect the working spirit of Wutopia Lab.\

2. IN A LABORATORY OF UTOPIA

When we take a look at the firm's name, we can also see that it is also complex. The character *wu* refers to its location, the Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces, while the Chinese character is also linked with *yo* – a Greek suffix,⁸ and its name features a combination of the words *utopia* and *laboratory*.

Just as a *laboratory* is a place that is associated with conducting research and medical analyses by definition, Wutopia Lab is a field for experimentation, research and experience in the field of architecture, urban planning and broadly understood culture and art. The work of the laboratory innovatively combines the past with the future, making use of both Chinese and European aesthetic legacies, creatively transforming them into its own unique language. In contrast to current trends, proposing an architecture full of a wealth of colour, light and space, that escapes easy categorisations.

⁶ A.C. Pearson, *Design Vanguard 2018: Wutopia Lab*, 2018, <https://www.architecturalrecord.com/articles/13444-design-vanguard-2018-wutopia-lab> (access: 3.8.2020).

⁷ J. Pallasmaa, *op. cit.*

⁸ Sufiks – “a group of letters that you add to the end of a word to make another word”, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english-polish/suffix> (access: 3.8.2020).

Utopia, a term from Latin, taken directly from Thomas More's work that denotes a 'good place', but also 'a place that does not exist',⁹ which has become a permanent fixture in culture and the arts, as well as political and philosophical treatises. It is therefore the pursuit of a perfect place or an ideal form of society that, often through its illusory character, refers to some unspecified future. The utopia is thus always a vision and not something real, it is unachievable or idealised. This is also how we can look at the work of this studio – as striving for a world that does not exist.

When we enter the firm's website, we are greeted by a blue background and a shining cut in the shape of a triangle. A moment later we can see its name and sliding illustrations of the company's designs which are closer to science-fiction aesthetics than to the real world. At the bottom, we can find a request to move the illustrations. When we do so, the creed of the firm appears, which is an extension of the previously mentioned antithesis philosophy:

Through magical realism, Wutopia Lab located in Shanghai, as a cutting edge architecture studio, is aiming to create miracles in daily life based on GLOCALIZATION.¹⁰

Glocalization is a concept in which a product or service has a better chance of success on the global market when it is adapted to the location and culture to which it is offered. It is a factor that moderates the conditions on the local market that faces the pressure of the global business environment. That which takes place locally can impact the product and make it more attractive than the one marketed for the global economy.¹¹ In an architectural perspective, Wutopia Lab sees potential not only in the promotion of local materials and supporting regional economies, but also approaches the matter philosophically, believing that when one designs, one should understand the consumer, know the person to whom one's service is offered, how to adapt the function or aesthetic, or how to architecturally create an atmosphere in order to ultimately satisfy the needs and desires of local users.

2.1 GEOMETRY AND COLOUR

Instant Red was created in 2015 for a sales office of a Chinese real estate company and was designed as a small temporary structure with a floor area of around 100 m². It was to operate up to the sale of a villa close to which it was built, which happened already a month after its construction and this event led to its name. Temporary buildings, due to their short operation times, allow design firms to present projects that are an expression of their creative pursuits and often are formal experiments.

The developer cared not only about aesthetics and attracting the gaze of the viewer, but, most importantly, about quick and easy construction, hence the decision to use steel frame structures with sandwich panels and light polycarbonate panels as a finish. It is a material that is often used by the studio.

However, it is not the form that attracts the greatest amount of attention, as at first it appears simple and minimal, but the uniform red colour that covers all of the building's elements. Thanks to its expressive colour, the pavilion became an orientation point that made it easier to reach the villa, while the uniform coating produced a coherent effect that hid any

⁹ *Utopia* [in:] *Encyklopedia PWN*, <https://encyklopedia.pwn.pl/haslo/utopia;3991950.html> (access: 3.8.2020).

¹⁰ Wutopia Lab website, <http://www.wutopialab.com/index.aspx> (access: 3.8.2020).

¹¹ B. Racoma, *What is Globalization and How Does it Work?* [in:] Day Translations, 2018, <https://www.daytranslations.com/blog/what-is-glocalization/> (access: 3.8.2020).

technical defects that might have arisen from its short construction time. Had a less expressive colour been chosen, the observer could have focused on the detail, while here it is the red that attracts their entire attention. On the other hand, due to the organisation of the floor plan and the nearby courtyard, the design does not have a facade that is perceived as flat, as it changes during the day due to the play of light and shadow.



Ill. 1. *Instant Red*, source: <http://www.wutopialab.com/worksinfo.aspx?id=36>

The design interestingly approaches the matter of complexity in architecture. Although the pavilion appears to be something completely separate from the landscape in which it was built, it remains indirectly in a state of continuity with its surroundings. Its location near the Yangcheng Lake peninsula in Suzhou was an inspiration for the creative interpretation of Chinese transient gardens that the city is famous for. This is also the reason behind the irregular courtyard visible in the plan. The courtyard was not cut out in a random manner, as it appears from overhead. We can find simple geometric shapes of the rectangle, circle and triangle inscribed into the entire layout, bringing to mind an abstract composition by Suprematists. Here, functionality becomes secondary.¹²

2.2 ARTIFICIAL WORLDS

The impact of Postmodernism can be seen in many projects by Wutopia Lab, but it is particularly evident in the design of the children's restaurant in Aranya Park. Just as in the case of *Instant Red*, here the expectations of the developer, who wanted to adapt a part of their service building into a restaurant for children during its renovation, were the starting point. This exceptional function was an opportunity for the studio to engage in even greater

¹² Wutopia Lab in Architizer, <https://architizer.com/projects/instant-red/> (access: 3.8.2020).

creativity and to adopt the idea for the space to be engaging for children and that it should develop their imagination. And so, in 2018, *Polycarbonate Neverland* was built, which owes its name to the fictitious world from the Peter Pan children's story combined with that of a popular plastic material – polycarbonate.

Polycarbonate often returns in the firm's projects due to its technical specificity, durability, resistance to cracking, design flexibility, lightness and the effect that it enables – of variable transparency. Facades made from this material change during the day – when backlit in the evening, they become radiant while not allowing anyone to peer inside the interior while still intriguing observers with the play of light and shadow. So the material becomes very plastic in creating mystery and magic.

We hope that the architectural practice of Wutopia Lab can use a rich imagination and exaggerated artistic techniques to perform “special performances” on daily life, turning everyday life into a “magic reality” and creating a daily miracle that can reveal the truth of real life. We hope that design can turn reality into an illusion without losing its truth. The Anaya Kid's Restaurant is the best example of this design philosophy.¹³

This is how Wutopia Lab describes the project in its accompanying text.

In this short summary about the meaning of the project to its authors, there appears the essential term: *magical realism*,¹⁴ which is predominantly associated with arts and literature, and less with architecture. Magical realism is creating a space that is completely different within existing reality, a space that distorts its rational perception. Wutopia Lab explores the potential for architecture in this field.



III. 2. *Polycarbonate Neverland* – midnight aerial view, source: <http://www.wutopialab.com/worksinfo.aspx?id=6>

¹³ Wutopia Lab in new.rushi.net, <http://new.rushi.net/Home/Works/detail/id/218323.html> (access: 3.8.2020).

¹⁴ *Realizm magiczny w literaturze iberoamerykańskiej* [in:] *Oblicza kultury*, <http://obliczakultury.pl/2015/04/realizm-magiczny-w-literaturze-iberoamerykanskiej/> (access: 3.8.2020).

In its approach to magical realism as referred to architecture, there is a similar effect as in the case with abstract art, as the observer gains a connection with something unreal, illusory and extraordinary through a building. Here, the senses take priority over functionality, as they gain a greater significance in the process of perceiving and understanding reality. The assumption of surprise and astonishment is visible already in the approach to the building, which is set apart through its uniform and glimmering facade surface. At the point of contact with existing buildings, in which we can easily identify familiar elements of houses with doors, windows and a roof, in this remodelling project, due to the forms and materials applied, the perception is completely different, alien and mysterious.

The polycarbonate cladding envelops the existing, historicising massing of the villa. The space between its two facades features greenery and hidden stairwells. Combined with light, this measure produced an appearance of the blurring of the facade's texture, making it something intriguing. This magic is continued inside.

The Postmodern narrative mentioned in the introduction is visible in the manner of entering the building, which was not dictated by the safe idea of a clear door opening, but was its opposite. The assumption was that effort should be required to get inside, as if the building was a fortress. The building has two storeys with two hidden entrances.



III. 3. *Polycarbonate Neverland* – interior of the ground floor, source: <http://www.wutopialab.com/worksinfo.aspx?id=6>

On the ground floor is a play area – a large, dark space filled with bubbles made from translucent polymers. Smaller plastic balls cover the floor. On the one hand, this is a reference to childhood and soap bubbles that children love to make, while on the other, the interior resembles a stage design of the moon's surface. The dream-like atmosphere is highlighted by the black, sky-like ceiling with small light fixtures that resemble stars. The walls are made from an undulating mirror-like polycarbonate texture and magnify the interior, blurring its boundaries.

The entrance to the main dining section leads through an external stairwell marked in yellow paint, which guides the user through the opening in the first facade into the area between the envelopes and then onto the first floor. The largest dining room is located centrally and has the form of a circle. Its interior is bathed in white and has a distinct ceiling with characteristic lamps that resemble floating balloons. Due to this measure, we do not register the interior as having an actual ceiling barrier. The openwork walls of the dining room are similarly confusing and blur their textuality. The circular interior does not direct the users, allowing them to leave in any place and to explore other areas of the building – smaller halls and rooms.

Wutopia Lab wanted the rooms to remain hidden / await to be discovered by young users. Both the main and ancillary spaces like bathrooms, relaxation rooms or the library were designed as a continuation of the effect of illusion and introduce varied textures, mirrors and colours. They feature slides, trampolines and sound games. One of the rooms is a courtyard, where we can find a continuation of the yellow stairs that this time lead the user even higher.

At the top of the roof of the building there is a small pavilion, special space enclosed with a red pointy roof. Both the stairwell and this expressive red colour tower over the surroundings while also allowing those inside to see the landscape as if from a lighthouse. The tree house, lighthouse, a hidden compartment where no one can find us, are also symbols of childhood that were referenced by the architects who used contemporary aesthetic means.¹⁵

2.3 SOMEWHERE UNDER THE RAINBOW

In 2017, Wutopia Lab designed a bookstore in Zhongshu. Assuming that contemporary bookstores and libraries are open spaces, the designers typically focus on attractively presenting their collections and on relaxation spaces.



Ill. 4. Zhongshu bookstore – *Cave of Fireflies*, source: <http://www.wutopialab.com/worksinfo.aspx?id=9>

¹⁵ Wutopia Lab in new.rushi.net, <http://new.rushi.net/Home/Works/detail/id/218323.html> (access: 3.8.2020).

The space to be adapted by Wutopia Lab was located on the first floor of a modern service building that was also classical in form and was thus neutral in its aesthetic expression. The architects wanted to feature an element of surprise in their design, striving to create a new, colourful world. This new world is visible from outside, as it is the only colourful accent within the building's volume.

The arrangement was based on four functionally and aesthetically separate parts through which the reader is guided. First interior is named *The Sanctuary of Crystal* and it is a space with a minimalist expression, whose main theme is the presentation of books. All the shelves and the surrounding furniture and walls were built from materials with varying transparency. The books appear to levitate in this surreal, white chamber that resembles the interior of a palace made of ice.

The sanctuary is contrasted with a space called *Cave of Fireflies*, which resembles a dark tunnel. The user's path is outlined by shimmering blue optical fibre lights. They also feature furniture with books between them. This room is a passage to another space that has become the hallmark of the bookstore.



Ill. 5. Zhongshu bookstore – *Xanadu of Rainbows*, source: <http://www.wutopialab.com/worksinfo.aspx?id=9>

The Xanadu of Rainbows is the largest space, open and naturally lit and filled with bookstands of all sizes, as well as places for rest. Due to the introduction of different levels, the architects created a dynamic and abstract landscape, which is comprised of wooden mountains, islands and oases filled with books. However, it is the ceiling that attracts the most attention, as it resembles a colourful artistic installation. Thin, perforated aluminium panels in running, soft lines are intended to resemble a rainbow. The space gains an original, magical atmosphere because of this.

At the end of the space, where the rainbow loses its colour, the ceiling turns from red to pink and then white, there is an entrance to a separate space, a room intended for children,

named *The Castle of Innocence*. The white space was divided by an arched wall along which there are elevations, shelves and imitations of houses with doors and windows. The application of materials with a different form of translucency made the walls appear open. At the centre of the space, on the ceiling, there is an elliptical opening through which we can see a black-painted ceiling with bright light points that resemble a starlit sky.¹⁶

2.4 PAIN AND A SMILE

In 2019, the studio designed the renovation of the facade of the Fenglin Road Street Community Cultural Activity Center in the Xuhui District in Shanghai. The remodelling was necessary not only because of aesthetic reasons, but technical ones as well as there had been problems with water drainage. The Center was surrounded by industrial, infrastructural and residential buildings, while the street had not significantly changed since the 1970s and it appeared as if time stopped there. The architects saw this emotion as an impulse for not as much creating a modern facade that was to present the new centre, but also to inject new energy into the life of the local community – *Infinite Transparent Smile*.

Facing the street, there are continuous walls and gables of residential buildings, occasionally there are also shops. The spatial scale is pleasant and the trees grow well. When you are walking down this road, it's like travelling back in time, as if back to the early days of reform and opening up.¹⁷



Ill. 6. *Infinite Transparent Smile* – evening view of the facade, source: <http://www.wutopialab.com/worksinfo.aspx?id=67>

¹⁶ *Wutopia Lab Zhongshu Bookstore* [in:] *Divisare*, <https://divisare.com/projects/364871-wutopia-lab-zhongshu-bookstore> (access: 3.8.2020).

¹⁷ *The façade renovation of Fenglin Road Street Community Cultural Activity Center, Shanghai, China by Wutopia Lab* [in:] *gooood*, <https://www.gooood.cn/facade-renovation-fenglin-road-street-community-cultural-activity-center-wutopia-lab.htm> (access: 3.8.2020).

To the firm's founder, the design became personal, as he had visited the area due to the illness of a relative and shopped at the nearby pharmacy. He remembered this place through the lens of hospitals and a medical school. He also had a memory of the arcade he had passed through to buy drugs gave him a moment of peace from the pain he had felt. When renovating the facade, he decided to create a contemporary arcade and add to it an element that was to make the area more lively and be a sign of comfort that he had lacked for a long time. He also noted that the lack of variance of the streets over the years made the residents feel tired and their joy of life was muffled. The arcade was to recreate memories, but also to induce the same emotions he had felt in its users.

At first glance, the very simple, grey space hides in it more than meets the eye, which can be observed when touching the facade and its coarse stone structure. It was made using a traditional method by cutting the stone with an axe. It is slow and demanding work. A single craftsman was able to make only 1 square metre of this facade in a day. The architect compared work on this facade to the process of medical treatment, which also requires patience and perseverance.

The internal arches of the arcade are to resemble a smile and were painted orange from the inside, which was to reflect the new energy of the place. The colour selection was dictated by the colour of autumn maple leaves. A maple tree stood directly in front of the building. Leaves are also visible in a different way, as metal casts immersed in the floor and facade. The metal panels are not directly visible by day, but as light changes, they can glimmer in the sun, producing an impression of actual leaves falling from trees. This was also a commemoration of a period of autumn known as maple season, which coincided with the ill family member's return to health. It was therefore an expression of hope to the designer.



III. 7. *Infinite Transparent Smile* – close view of the facade detail, source: <http://www.wutopialab.com/worksinfo.aspx?id=67>

The design is thus something more than just a building and the facade is not an accentuation of an entrance without any greater meaning, but it is a voice in the discussion about architecture becoming a part of our emotions as a building's users and viewers. It can even convey the emotions of the designer. It can then be said to be genuine and true.¹⁸

2.5 BLUE AND PINK

In 2017, at the Shenzhen Biennale, Wutopia Lab was invited to renovate two buildings in the Dameisha urban village, which is a part of Shenzhen. The district in which the houses were located resembled a contemporary slum and the designers wanted to introduce a social space between them. The renovation of two buildings turned into a general reflection on the role of gender in home life, which once again focused on abstract symbolism. Hence, two buildings and two names: *His House* and *Her House*, which are defined by two determining colours: blue and pink, and the approach to their detail.

His House is blue, a colour that the architects thought to be symbol of survival and competition, qualities which describe masculine nature. The colour of the interior is supplemented by green and one room is white – dedicated to salt mining, which is associated with local craftsmanship, primarily engaged in by men. This room also has a skylight, which adds to the illumination. In a different space, one of the walls is filled with green beer bottles, while in another one there are pieces of bacon hanged to dry from the ceiling. Masculine symbols can also be found in the detail – in the use of the triangle to make doorknobs.



III. 8. *His house, Her house* – evening view of the buildings, source: <http://www.wutopialab.com/worksinfo.aspx?id=11>

¹⁸ *The façade renovation of Fenglin Road Street...*, op. cit.

Her House is pink, both inside and outside, which signifies female sensitivity and delicateness. While *His House* has a single level and is minimalist, *Her House* has two storeys and features more detail and ornamentation. The ground floor is used as a multi-room social space with a place for baking, drinking tea, etc. A small patio was also fenced off and has floor made of white aggregate, as a sign of the female need for intimacy. We can reach the upper storey via sculpturally formed stairs. Here, the space as are, analogously to those on the ground floor, open and connected with arched openings into an enfilade, enabling the hosting of workshops. One of the facades features a gallery, which can be hidden behind a curtain, as if it were a veil. In places where *His House* is topped by a solid railing, in *Her House* it is a delicate, openwork balustrade. In the case of *Her House*'s doors, the door handles are different, delicately bent to form the shape of the letter C. Both houses use window openings in a different way, allowing us to peer inside but also enable people who are inside to see each other.¹⁹

The design is an abstract display of the differences between genders, assuming a certain simplification of this thinking, but primarily inspires interest and encourages interaction. The architects did not as much want to attract attention to the differences between genders, but to display the symbiosis of two human natures living side by side, expecting this intervention to stimulate the cultural life of the community.

3. IN PRAISE OF THE IMAGINATION

When we look at the work of Wutopia Lab, we can conclude that the building can be not only functional, aesthetically beautiful, or regulate spatial order in a certain way, but it can also be a part of its designer's personality. The guidelines of legal documents and regulations, the functional programme or the expectations of the client are always processed by the sensitivity of the designer, their expectations and motivation. The exceptionality and originality of designs lies in the approach of a firm to its work and to unrestrained imagination, which drives their actions. The designer, as if a guide, wants us to enter their world and architecture becomes a part of this game.

Wutopia Lab's projects go beyond classically understood architecture. In most cases, it is the building, its so-called skin, that attracts the greatest attention of the viewer, while in this firm's work that which is outside is often unremarkable, and that which is worth discovering can be found inside. In contrast to often repetitive, trend-following or even soulless designs, those by the Shanghai firm offer a space that evokes emotion, and sometimes even participates in the discourse on the problems of contemporaneity.

Wutopia Lab turns architectural designs into stories. They allow children to become lost in the space of the *Polycarbonate Neverland*, to lose oneself in a book underneath the cloud of the *Metal Rainbow*, or in *His House* and *Her House*, to discuss the perception of masculinity and femininity in China in a dream-like manner. They do so in each of their designs, by focusing on creating a space for play, spending time, reflection and, most importantly, relations. By mixing styles, conventions and blurring the line between truth and lie.

¹⁹ *Urban village renovation by Wutopia Lab* [in:] goood, <https://www.goood.cn/urban-village-renovation-by-wutopia-lab.htm> (access: 3.8.2020).

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