

Beautified China

The architectural revolution

Photography by Kris Provoost

Foreword

by Nikolaus Goetze

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When I first visited China 20 years ago, it was the largest developing country in the world, characterized by heterogeneous grey urban landscapes against which magnificent buildings in the style of Soviet Classicism (Shanghai Exhibition Centre) stood out, with postmodern skyscrapers shooting up out of the ground like mushrooms. The architectonic quality of these new buildings consisted chiefly in differentiating themselves from their neighbours through extravagant roofing reminiscent of motifs such as lotus, pineapple, or artichoke.

The ambitious goal of becoming one of the world's leading economies within the shortest possible time led to the decision to upgrade large cities through mega-events that boost urban development. Thus, the 2008 Olympic Games reshaped formerly grubby Beijing into the proud capital of an emerging global power. Projects such as the renovated and expanded National Museum (gmp), the Olympic stadium (Herzog & de Meuron), affectionately dubbed the 'bird's nest' by the public, and the provocative new building for the CCTV station (OMA) signalled China's new architectural ambition.

Expo 2010, with its 'Better City, Better Life' slogan, transformed Shanghai, which was then already on its way to becoming the financial centre of Asia, into one of the world's most modern cities. Both mega-events not only changed the urban image of Beijing and Shanghai in record time, but also radiated beyond the city limits into surrounding areas. Cities like Hangzhou, Nanjing, Ningbo, and Suzhou profited from Shanghai's lustre and have become modern, high-tech cities that have shaped the Yangtze River delta into China's richest region.

The southern Chinese city of Shenzhen, meanwhile, underwent a transformation on a scale never before seen in new urban development, turning within a single decade from a small fishing village into a metropolis of millions that, today, is even challenging Hong Kong for economic status. Shenzhen, together with Guangzhou, Macao, and Zhuhai, in the Pearl River delta, form one of the world's largest high-density urban areas, with over 100 million residents.

In order to reinforce the status of Chinese cities, architecture is consciously deployed with a political purpose as an instrument of enhancement. To prevent the erosion of their populations through outmigration to the prospering megacities on China's east coast, for instance, cities in western China such as Chongqing, Wuhan, or Chengdu acquired outstanding architectural projects of their own within a short time. The general tempo of urban development in China is greatly accelerated by the fact that Chinese cities find themselves in constant competition for prestige. No sooner does one city complete the highest skyscraper in China than ground is broken on the construction of another, even higher building elsewhere. The same goes for opera houses, athletic complexes, and museums.

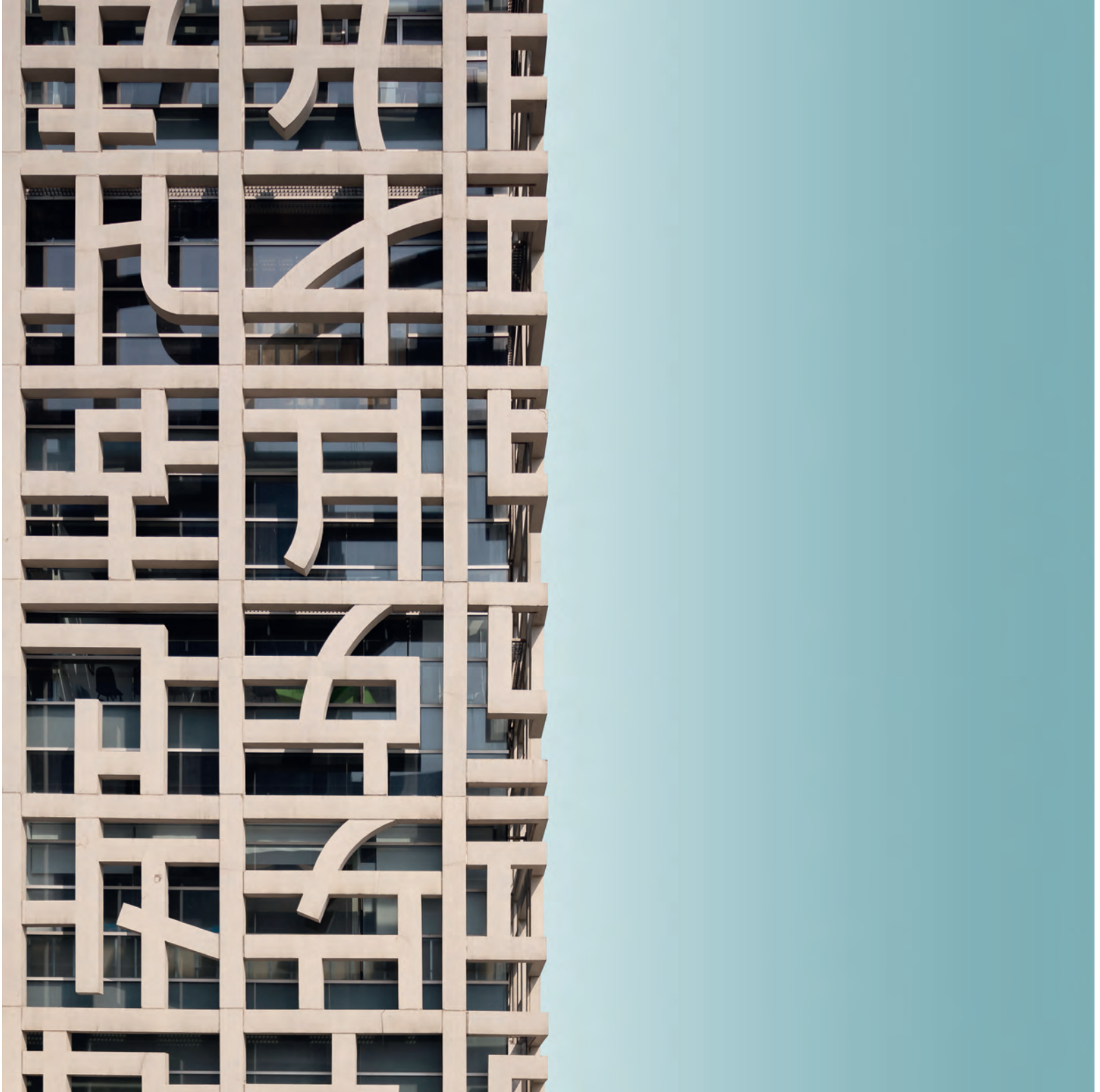
In this way, China has managed not just to join the ranks of the Western economic powers with its ever bolder visions in highly developed cities, but it has even begun to overtake the West, especially given that the pressure of population growth in the ever more attractive megacities will soon lead to the emergence of more satellite cities with populations running into the millions (Lingang New Area, Shanghai – gmp).

But such rapid progress has also left its mark. Environmental pollution and its attendant health problems, traffic congestion, and the gradual ageing of the Chinese population are now leading to a radical rethinking of urban planning. The trend leads away from providing the world's largest source of manufacturing toward becoming a service- and technology-oriented society. New parameters arising out of modern developments, such as the Smart City, artificial intelligence, demands for sustainability, a healthy work-life balance, and the great longing for more green space, will soon decidedly change the image of the Chinese city. And once again, one of the largest countries on the planet is poised on the brink of an urban and architectural revolution as the entire world looks on with anticipation. •









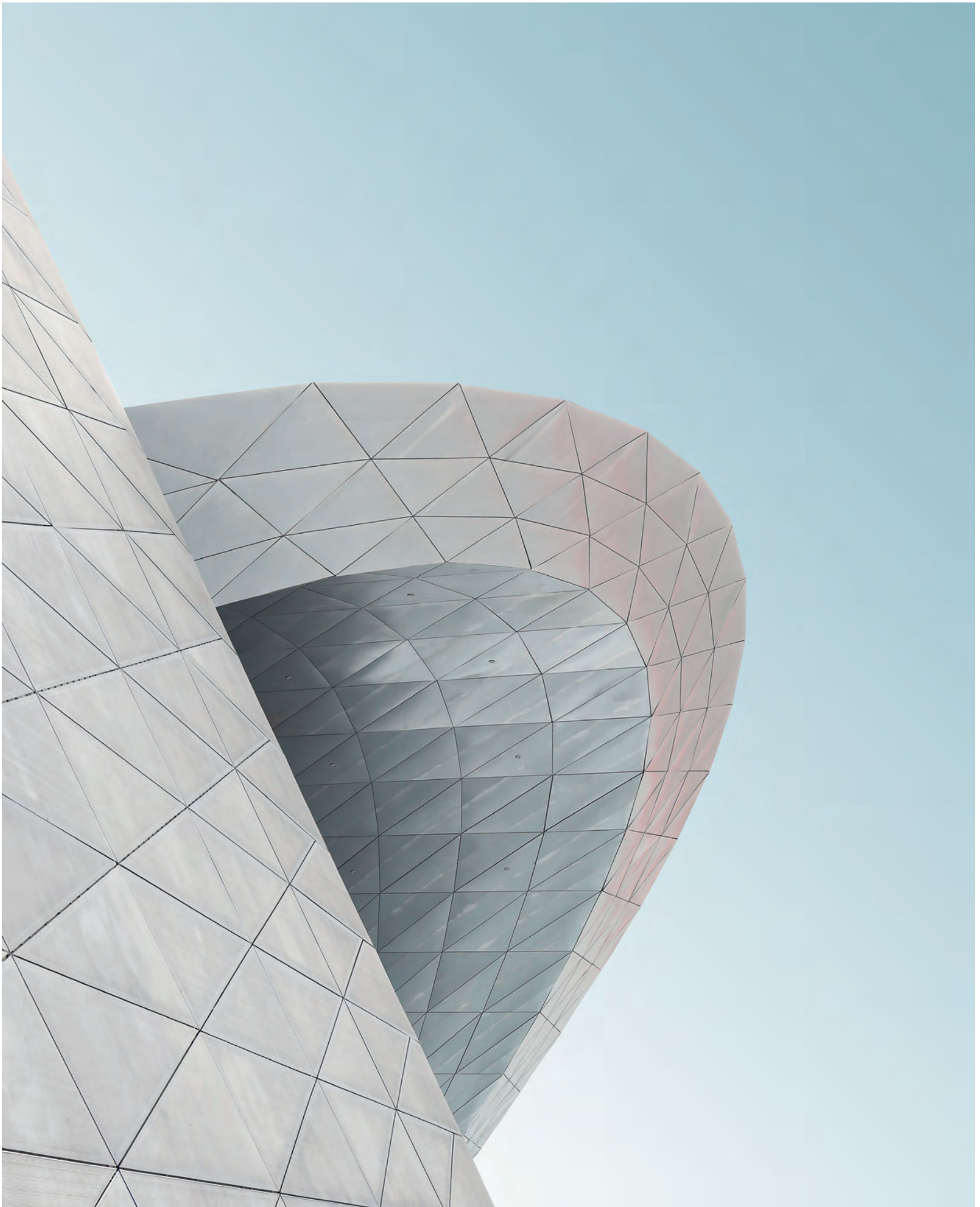
Beijing

Shanghai

Pearl River Delta

Yangtze River Delta

Other cities







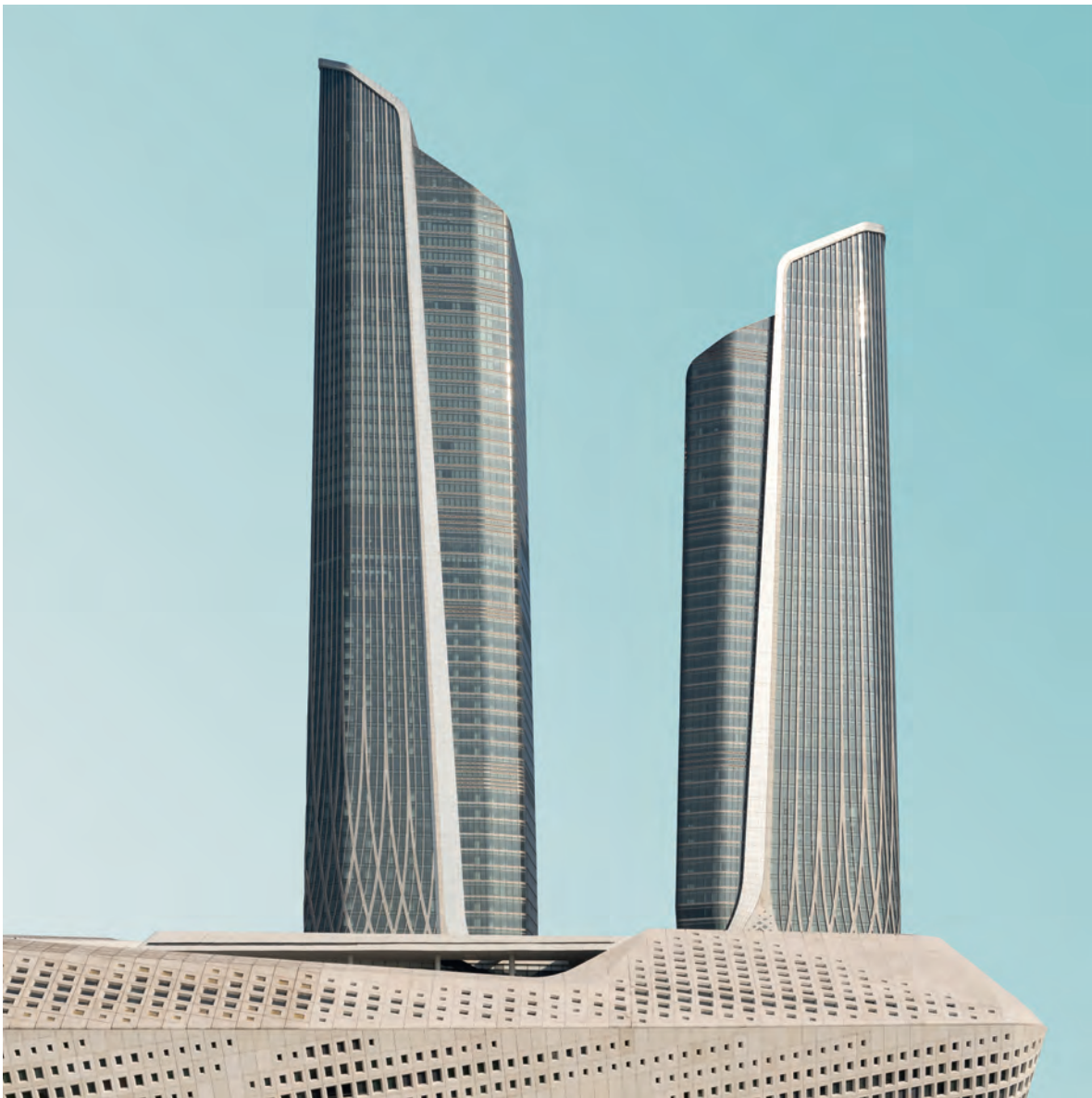
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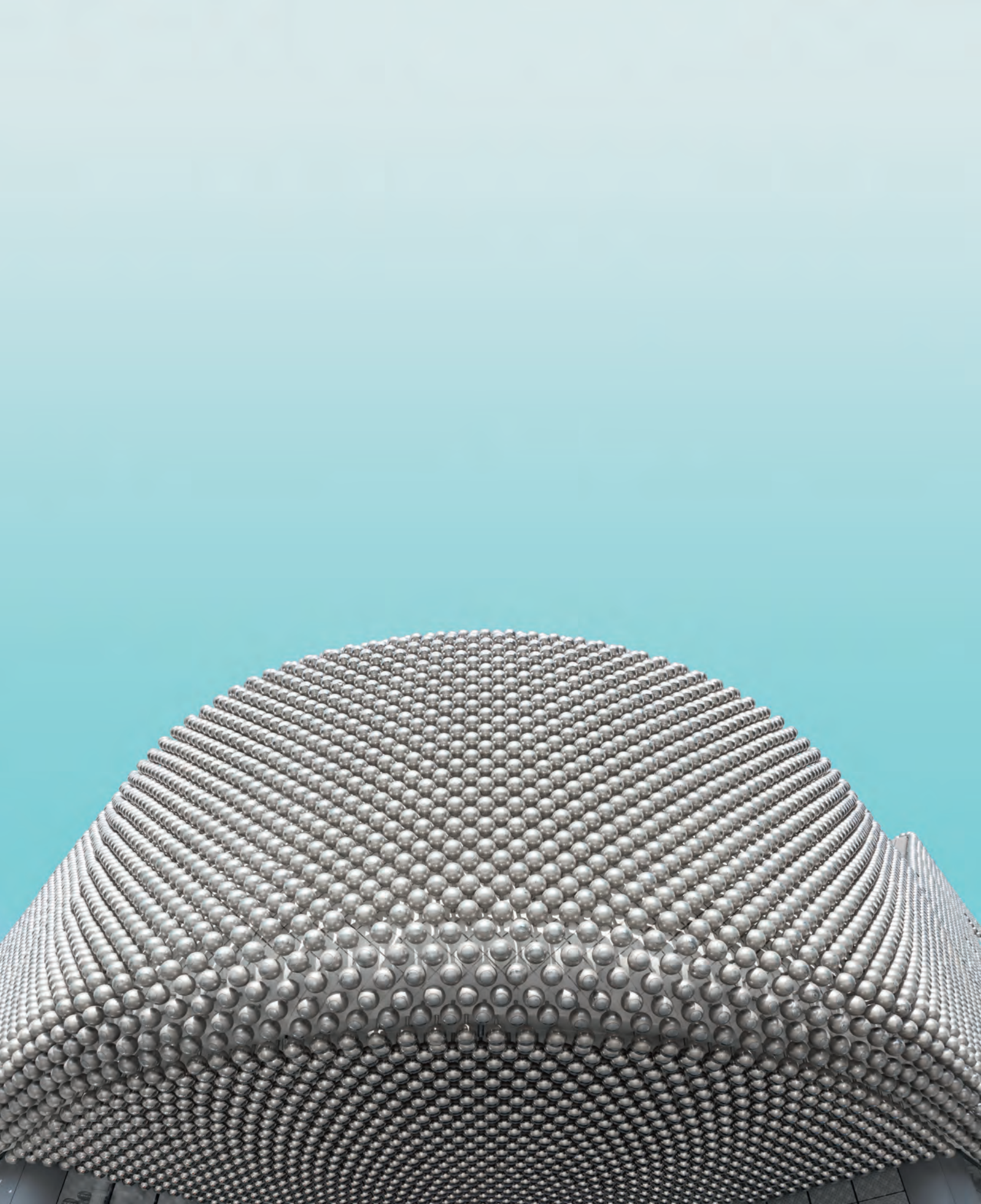
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Hong Kong, Lippo Center designed by Paul Rudolph





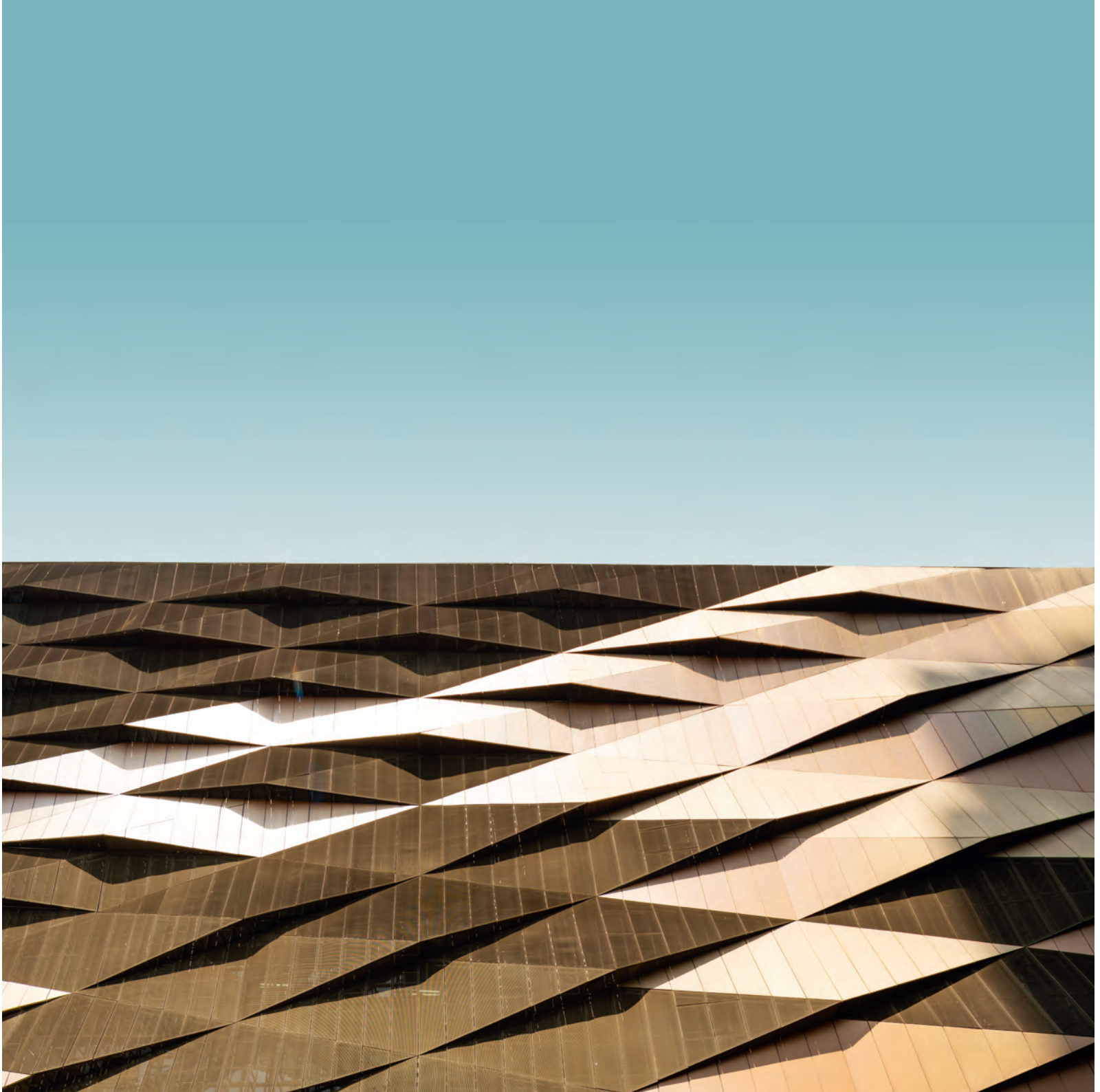




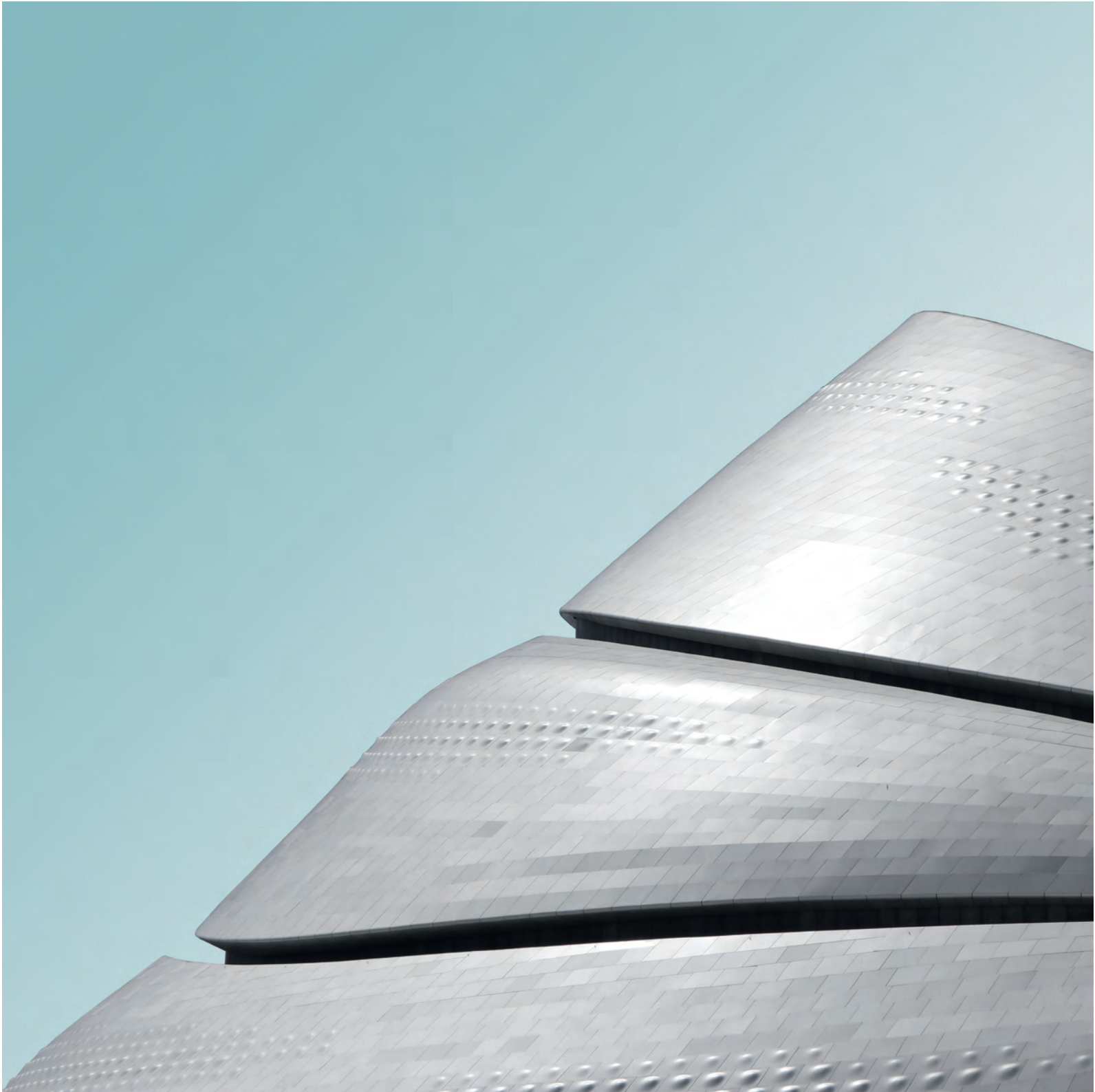


Changsha, Meixi Urban Helix designed by KSP Jürgen Engel Architekten









An Anatomy of Excess

by Li Shiqiao

Li Shiqiao is Weedon Professor in Asian Architecture, University of Virginia, School of Architecture. He studied architecture at Tsinghua University in Beijing and obtained his PhD from AA School of Architecture and Birkbeck College, University of London. Li practiced architecture in London and Hong Kong. His recent publications include *Understanding the Chinese City and Architecture and Modernization*.

Residing deep inside Kris Provoost's striking photographic images are two pictorial traditions—Chinese and European—that are best captured by the works of two quintessential pioneering individuals: Wen Zhengming (1470–1559) and Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778). It is for good reason that these two individuals have been iconic cultural figures for centuries: they set profound methods for the visualisation of buildings long before photography was invented. In some ways, photography inherited the pictorial traditions of depicting buildings: early photographers such as Henry Fox Talbot, at the very moment of invention of an enormously attractive method of making images, immediately pointed their camera lenses at buildings. Like buildings and paintings/engravings, buildings and photography have fulfilled each other in many ways in the past one hundred and fifty years. Digital photography only amplified this mutual fulfilment with bewildering speed and quantity.

Wen Zhengming loved the idea of serial architectural images in square format; his most enduring image series is the *Thirty-One Views of the Humble Administrator's Garden* (1533), a set of diptych square compositions of poems/calligraphy on one side and images of the garden on the other. These were not meant to be a singular piece of work to be comprehended at a singular moment; rather, they form narratives to be unfolded in time through both images and poetic compositions. In this sense, Wen's combined textual and square pictorial representations of buildings/landscape were grounded in how the Chinese writing system functions; instead of seeking their own graphic formal character, Wen's pictorial representations trace the logic of the square words. The logic of the square words is not about syntactical rules; rather, it is about the laying out of curated figures with implicit associations of meanings, made apparent through the written words. The influence of Wen's *Thirty-One Views* is enormous; Qianglong, one of the most accomplished emperors in Chinese history, closely followed Wen's example in the eighteenth century as he depicted his beloved Summer Palace in Beijing. Through this imperial endorsement, Wen's method gained iconic status.

Piranesi's pictorial representations of buildings are entirely different. Among numerous depictions of Greco-Roman architecture, he brought the idea of the ruin to the centre of his pictorial art, a sublimity that was perfectly captured by a deliberate blending of temporal frames. Behind the apparent purpose of documenting a classical architectural past, Piranesi created a sense of melancholy with his images of buildings both as examples of architectural perfection and as unattainable ideals forever lost. The seeds of Romanticism were sown here. Joseph Michael Gandy's pictorial representations of John Soane's buildings as future ruins captured the same melancholy behind the seeming felicity of Soane's architectural composition in classicism. Nothing is in square format here—but again, Instagram had not been invented yet. John Soane lived at a time when the reconstitution of Greco-Roman architecture was not only unquestioned but also developed into complicated systems. It is in the excessive amplification in the reconstitution of Greco-Roman architecture that Soane harboured a melancholic hesitation: impending decline and ruin already foreshadowed by the excessive flourishing of classical architecture.

In the age of printed and electronic media, taking pictures of buildings is usually perfunctory: post-factual reconstruction to recreate idealized and abstracted 'projects' that existed throughout the design process in the minds of the architects. But photography has an entirely different take on architecture. Xing Danwen's *Urban Fictions* is an extraordinary example of how the idealized and abstracted 'project' is turned on its head: the architectural model made for the real-estate sales office becomes a stage for delicious urban tales of illicit love and violent murder. In the hands and eyes of Zhang Dali and Rong Rong, buildings and their urban contexts become indistinguishable through demolition; theirs is a ruin born not of excess, but of obsolescence. There has been a steady rise of architectural photography that focuses on the prosaic and the