



The Factory

Tucked inside a gargantuan Bauhaus building, Beijing's newest gallery is anchored by French architect Jean-Michel Wilmotte's smart renovation

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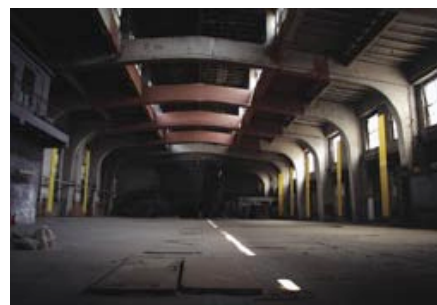
The doorway is unextraordinary. Large, heavy, industrial, it could be the entrance to any of the 798 Factory Art District's post-industrial spaces. But just behind the heavy door to the new Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA), an automatic glass door silently moves aside. As it slides shut, the airy entryway, where smooth white lines have replaced factory walls, cements the feeling of transition. In the midst of the chaos of Dashanzi, this mode of access evokes the feeling of entering a secret headquarters, like the kind Maxwell Smart or the Men In Black would have, but for art lovers instead.

At its opening in November, some of UCCA's surprise was ruined by the ubiquitous signs, the

red carpet, and the pack of foreign journalists flown in for the occasion. But little would prepare 798 regulars for what French architect Jean-Michel Wilmotte and his collaborator, Shanghai-based Ma Qingyun, have done to this concrete behemoth.

Fourteen months before, the two massive rooms, each 70 by 24 meters with 12-meter ceilings, were empty. The original structure of the East German-designed munitions factory (built in 1950) stood intact. Despite the debris of four decades of manufacture, followed by 15 years of disuse, the space was a massive blank slate.

To make a good fit, Wilmotte began to examine the 798 environment. "All the buildings around are in concrete with a concrete floor and everything is



Wilmotte's design preserves elements of the original 1950 Bauhaus factory, such as the towering smokestack and vaulted ceiling, but adds a sleek white wash with black accents, a hi-tech lighting system and mezzanines. The museum features a theater, offices, cafes and a library

the same, so I decided to have something smooth," he said. "And for the paintings it's much better, because [elsewhere] sometimes paintings are in competition with the walls."

Indeed, the iconic tsunami-like roofs, and the still-exposed Mao-era slogans of the adjacent 798 Space are probably as well known as any of 798's galleries. The result of Wilmotte's choice is an absence of visible concrete, though the structure remains. Instead, there is white, white, and more white – broken up with black accents in the soaring catwalks, shop, and mezzanine. The white serves another purpose: to reflect the natural light that enters through the computer-controlled motorized shades. "We don't need any spot lighting on the paintings," Wilmotte says proudly in the main exhibition hall, which has been left open to be reimagined for each exhibition. The building's precise light management means that the transition from daylight to unnatural light is smooth; when dark is called for in daytime, the shades can quickly seal the high windows.

The update of the space was thorough, but Wilmotte, a veteran of several adaptations of spaces at the Louvre who is presently refitting three

old buildings as museums in Kiev, was careful not to let the building's history slip away completely. A 50-meter smokestack that towers above 798's low buildings occupies a corner of one of UCCA's two large chambers. The brick cylinder plummets through the roof and into the floor, which has been elevated slightly throughout to hide utilities and the climate-control system. In this half of the building, a mirror image of the main hall, Wilmotte added a mezzanine level to make space for the institution's library and offices, and a small black box theater, where the chimney cuts slightly into the seating area.

Wilmotte, 60, has had a diverse career in architecture and urban design. He is most at home in the luxury world, having designed new concepts for Cartier, Chaumet, and Montblanc boutiques, as well as the interior of LVMH's new Paris headquarters. In 1994, he designed starkly contemporary new benches, street lamps, and traffic signals for the Champs-Élysées – quite a statement in a city where subway entrances stand as shrines to Art Nouveau. He also has no shortage of experience with large institutions outside of France. In Asia, he is responsible for a stack of projects in Japan »



UCCA photos © Pascal Tournaire / Wilmotte & Associés SA; Jean-Michel Wilmotte portrait © Daimara



Wilmotte chose a design that would slip into 798's industrial texture but give preference to the art. Elsewhere, "paintings are in competition with the walls"

“At the beginning they thought they were renting out this space for seven or nine years, [after which] they wanted to destroy it and build new buildings. Now they are a little bit surprised and don’t know what to do, because they think maybe it would be interesting to keep it”

and South Korea, including the interior of Seoul’s airport terminal. He has also completed many projects in Russia, including the master plan for 4km of waterfront in Volgograd.

But even a veteran designer can be as helpless as a writer on a movie set when construction is mostly complete. On a tour of UCCA before opening day, Wilmotte appeared nervous about the inevitable finishing touches. Some lampshades had broken during construction. A trip to IKEA had been necessary to procure bookshelves for the library until the custom ones were ready. Mostly, he seemed eager to see how regular visitors – not invited media and guests – would interact with the space. There had already been some encouraging reactions.

“I know the local people from the government visited yesterday, and they were completely astonished,” he says. “At the beginning they thought they were renting out this space for seven or nine years, [after which] they wanted to destroy it and build new buildings. Now they are a little bit surprised and don’t know what to do, because they think maybe it would be interesting to keep it.”

The UCCA building has something of a split personality. The design is marked by both subtlety and grandiosity, modesty and luxury. The clean interior seeks to distance the space from the rough edges outside, but it is also designed to be simple, unornamented, and to let the art speak for itself. However, the organization itself is perhaps less modest than the home Wilmotte built for it. At

the opening, for instance, more subtle organizers might have left the red carpet at home, and printed fewer signposts in favor of simple directions: Go toward the big chimney.

It’s obvious that Guy and Miriam Ullens, UCCA’s founders, have high hopes for their project. The Belgian art collectors sold a cache of Turner watercolors last summer to bankroll the museum, which they hope will be a pioneering institution in the development of the Chinese contemporary art community. They have assembled an international team to manage and expand their private collection in conjunction with the center, and seek to provide what they envision as a first-of-its-kind library of Chinese contemporary artwork, combined with a venue for visitors to access foreign art materials not often available in China. They’re even envisioning a curatorial training program designed to help develop the world of art institutions in China.

As for Wilmotte, his next major project to open is his firm’s collaboration with I.M. Pei on the National Islamic Art Museum in Doha, Qatar. When it opens in March, it will be the largest Islamic art museum in the world.

The pace of construction at UCCA, where construction work ran round-the-clock in three eight-hour shifts and workers lived in a dormitory nearby, greatly impressed Wilmotte. But will he be doing more work in China? Uncertain, he says. “It’s simple, it’s easy. But sometimes, it’s more difficult to do simpler things.” **11**