

POLITECNICO DI TORINO
FIRST SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE
Master of Science in Architecture Construction City
Honors theses

THE MINIMUM PALACE

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Double-degree thesis developed on-site in collaboration between Tsinghua University, Beijing and Politecnico di Torino.

The objective of this work is to design a Collective Housing residence for Visiting professors in the Campus of Tsinghua University by applying the Minimum Palace approach. The Minimum Palace approach is a design approach that unifies some theories of Critical Regionalism together with a new attitude towards design inspired by the contrast between the concept of Palace and the Minimum Dwelling and applies them to the contemporary context where working in foreign countries has become the norm.

The Minimum Palace is a research and design work on the subject of private housing whose purpose is to study the architectural typology of the Palace in China and in the West, identify and extract its characteristics and explain how, through the combination with the idea of Minimum, it can represent a viable alternative to current design approaches. The method adopted include historical research, surveys and design experimentation.

An analysis of the idea of Critical Regionalism based on the works of Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre, but also Kenneth Frampton and Wendell Berry, gives us an idea of how this issue has been faced in the past and how it can be revised today. I picked the oxymoron "Minimum Palace" to describe this new approach because I think that it gives a good idea of the contradictions of contemporary society, where we have less and less resources but we pretend to increase our standards of living indefinitely. In this picture Minimum Palace stands to represent an idea of design through which we can get more by minimizing our impact through careful and local-conscious design.

The word Minimum has a long history: Karel Teige's initially introduced this concept in the first half of the twentieth century during Europe's boom of urbanization between the two wars, where it stood as a paradigm to achieve the democratization of housing.

The idea of Palace was also born in a period of great urbanization, during the Renaissance in Florence. At that time the private residences of a great number of families shaped the future of Florentine architecture, thanks to the stylistic development and the characteristics of these buildings. It gave particular attention to the client's needs, using construction techniques deeply rooted in the local tradition. Architects of the time they were also able to innovate. The way that they reshaped and influenced the surrounding communities is still significant today.

The characteristics of this approach are that every building, no matter its function, has to be respectful of the place where it is built-in, unique, functional and fit to the client's and community's needs. Efficient by minimizing its use of land, energy, materials; it has also to be simple, in terms of the idea that it wants to communicate and durable, in relationship with its prospected life-span.



The Visiting Professors Residence, concept

During the design application of this approach, I have first analyzed China's trends in terms of urban development and energy resources, then, zooming-in to Beijing and the University Campus, I have outlined the general structure of the Campus and analyzed the existing visiting Professor residences. I have also interviewed local visiting Professors to understand their needs and inputs regarding the project of the new Residence.

The site analysis really determined the final design concept of reinterpreting what is already on the site because it led me to fully understand the potential of the building and the area, ultimately leading me to design a project that could represent a possible inspiration of guidelines for the south-west area of the Campus' future master plan.

These inputs led me to design a Residence that is intended to serve as an attraction for Visiting Professors, providing them with all the necessary services, including shared lounges and private offices. The project symbolizes this by introducing great interaction between the public, private and semi-private dimensions.

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