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The poetics of place: Architecture, nature, and memory in the works of Liu Jiakun

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Abstract: This paper explores the architecture of Liu Jiakun through the lens of phenomenology and the poetic experience of space. Grounded in embodied perception and multisensory engagement, Liu's work responds to the environmental and cultural challenges of contemporary China. Rather than imposing form, his projects establish relationships between architecture, landscape, and urban life, inviting users to engage with material, light, time, and memory.

This research addresses a knowledge gap: while phenomenological approaches to architecture have been extensively studied in Western contexts, little has been written about their resonance within Chinese conditions. Liu's projects demonstrate how phenomenology can be reinterpreted through the lens of rapid urbanisation, cultural memory, and the search for liveability and habitability in Chinese cities.

Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Pallasmaa, and Zumthor, the study highlights the role of thresholds, sequences, and atmospheres in shaping spatial experience. Four case studies — Shuijingfang Museum, West Village, Luyeyuan Stone Sculpture Art Museum, and the Museum of Clocks — are analysed through direct fieldwork in Chengdu and its surroundings.

The paper proposes a transcultural reading of phenomenology that connects Western theory with Chinese practice. It shows how Liu Jiakun's work at multiple scales generates new forms of liveable and habitable environments, affirming architecture as a poetic and ethical act at the urban and environmental scale.

Keywords: Phenomenology of architecture; poetic space; urban-landscape continuity; embodied experience.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, architectural theory has shifted toward the experiential and sensorial dimensions of space, challenging the limitations of formalism and functionalism (Pallasmaa, 2005). Among those advancing this approach, Liu Jiakun distinguishes himself by rooting architecture in poetic and embodied experience. His works are not objects for contemplation but spatial narratives to be lived, perceived, and remembered, where architecture becomes a form of storytelling grounded in material, temporality, and emotional resonance.

While phenomenological approaches have been widely developed in Europe and North America, little attention has been given to how these frameworks operate in the context of Chinese urbanisation and cultural transformation (Rowe & Kuan, 2002; Zheng, Zhao, & Tong, 2017). This paper addresses this gap, proposing a transcultural reading that connects Western theories of phenomenology with the socio-cultural conditions of contemporary China. In particular, it highlights how Liu's work responds to questions of liveability and habitability, constructing multi-scalar environments that link the intimate with the collective, and architecture with landscape (Zhu & Huang, 2021)

This study draws especially on Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodied experience, where the body is the primary site of perception and space is interpreted through movement and sensory engagement (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Pérez-Gómez, 2008; Holl, 2006). Based in Chengdu, Liu designs at the threshold between city and nature, embracing irregularity, porosity, and incompleteness (Shen, 2018; Zhu, 2019). His projects employ raw

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and recycled materials, respond to topography and vegetation, and create spatial sequences that resonate rather than dominate (Pallasmaa, 2005; Angelillo, 1997).

Adopting the journey as both conceptual and methodological framework, this paper examines how Liu Jiakun's architecture generates poetic meaning through embodied experience. Four case studies were selected to represent diverse scales and contexts of his practice: the Shuijingfang Museum in a historic urban setting; the West Village, a contemporary superblock; the Luyeyuan Stone Sculpture Art Museum, embedded in a natural landscape; and the Museum of Clocks, an introverted architectural interior. Together, these examples provide a comprehensive picture of how Liu's work negotiates the relationship between architecture, environment, and the lived experience of place.

Ultimately, the paper reflects on Liu Jiakun's contribution to contemporary architecture in a time marked by environmental crises and cultural disconnection. His work offers a model grounded in slowness, continuity, and belonging—a poetic and ethical alternative to spectacle.

2. Theoretical framework: phenomenology and poetic experience of space

Phenomenology provides a crucial framework for rethinking architecture as an experience rooted in the body and inseparable from place and landscape (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Pallasmaa, 2005). Space is not an abstract geometry but a multisensory and relational field, where architecture orchestrates perceptual conditions that activate memory, orientation, and emotion (Holl, Pallasmaa, & Pérez-Gómez, 2008).

For Merleau-Ponty, the body is not simply located in space but actively shapes its perception. Movement and interaction establish continuity between inside and outside, time and matter, self and landscape (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Architectural experience therefore unfolds through duration, sequence, and the balance between disorientation and recognition. Authors such as Pallasmaa and Holl have further developed this perspective, emphasising atmosphere, tactility, light, and sound as essential dimensions of architecture (Pallasmaa, 2005; Holl et al., 2006).

Within this framework, poetic space becomes central: not a decorative notion but a condition that transforms lived experience. Poetry emerges through materials, proportions, thresholds, and the play of light and shadow (Zumthor, 2006; Dal Co & Mazzariol, 1984).

However, most of this discourse has been elaborated in European and North American contexts, rarely addressing how phenomenology may be reinterpreted within Chinese urbanisation, cultural memory, and ecological fragility (Zhu, 2019; Zheng et al., 2017). This constitutes the knowledge gap that this paper addresses.

Liu Jiakun's work embodies this sensibility. His projects use thresholds as generative zones where memory and identity converge (Pallasmaa, 2005; Angelillo, 1997). At the same time, they resonate with practices of contemporary Chinese architects such as Wang Shu, Amateur Architecture Studio (Wang, 2012; Rowe & Kuan, 2002), who have explored material reuse, craft, and cultural continuity. These parallels show how phenomenology, when transposed into China, can engage with liveability and habitability in ways distinct from the Western canon (Zhu & Huang, 2021).

In this context of rapid urbanisation, Liu's architecture engages stone, bamboo, concrete, vegetation, water, and wind as active presences, restoring continuity and belonging (Holl et al., 2006). His projects unfold slowly, incorporating silence and weather as part of spatial grammar. Details that resist immediate interpretation—textures, thresholds, transitions—become vessels of memory and imagination.

The Museum of Clocks illustrates this approach: like Carlo Scarpa, Liu designs through layering and allusion, constructing paths that teach us how to see and feel, where material becomes language and time a spatial composition (Dal Co & Mazzariol, 1984; Pallasmaa, 2005).

In this way, Liu Jiakun's architecture offers a transcultural contribution: it shows how phenomenology can be critically reinterpreted beyond Euro-American origins, enriching global debates on environmental architecture, liveability, and the poetics of place.

3. Methodology

The methodological approach is grounded in direct site experience and sensitive interaction with the selected architectures, recognising that architecture—especially at the urban and landscape scale—cannot be fully grasped through abstract representations (Pallasmaa, 2005; Holl, 2006). The investigation takes shape as an embodied and situated journey, where observation intertwines with memory, movement, and multisensory perception, and where the body itself becomes a tool of knowledge (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Landscape, whether

urban or natural, is not a neutral backdrop but an active and transformative condition of experience (Zumthor, 2006). Fieldwork was structured as a journey, with visits to sites around Chengdu where Liu Jiakun's architecture engages with transitions between city and territory, urban density and landscape openness (Shen, 2018)

Four projects were selected to represent different conditions of his practice: the Shuijingfang Museum in a dense historical fabric, the West Village as a porous urban superblock, the Luyeyuan Stone Sculpture Art Museum embedded in a rural setting, and the Museum of Clocks as an introverted architectural interior. Together, these cases provide a multi-scalar framework linking architecture with issues of liveability and habitability (Zhu & Huang, 2021). The criteria for selection were: (1) representation of different scales; (2) diversity of contexts; (3) ability to reveal Liu's design ethos in relation to environment, memory, and everyday life.

Projects were investigated for their capacity to generate meaningful relationships with environment, local materials, and everyday practices (Crawford & Cenzatti, 2017; Zheng et al., 2017). The aim was not a documentary survey but an immersive dialogue in which details could reveal deeper design intentions (Pérez-Gómez, 2008). During the visits, analytical sketches, field notes, photographs, and diary writing were produced. These media were employed not as illustration but as analytical tools: sketching slowed perception and revealed hidden geometries; photography captured atmospheres, textures, and light conditions; writing translated impressions into narrative sequences (Holl, 2006; Pallasmaa, 2011).

Complementing the fieldwork, the method also draws on cultural comparison, situating Liu Jiakun's work in dialogue with Western architects such as Zumthor, Holl, Siza, and Souto de Moura, as well as Pallasmaa's critique of visual dominance (Pallasmaa, 2005, 2011). These references highlight transcultural affinities based on embodied perception, atmosphere, and material rootedness, allowing Liu's architecture to emerge as an original contribution to a global culture of experience.

Finally, the method is also narrative. Writing is conceived as a subjective cartography, interweaving description, reflection, and resonance, in the belief that only a text that inhabits space can convey its complexity (Pallasmaa, 2011; Pérez-Gómez, 2008). Liu's personal trajectory—marked by early interests in literature and poetry—helps explain the evocative depth of his work and its ability to bridge architecture, landscape, and the human condition.

4. Case studies

The projects selected for this research are located in the urban and peri-urban area of Chengdu, in contexts that vary greatly in scale, function, and relationship to the landscape. Despite their heterogeneity, they all share a common quality: the ability to articulate the relationship between architecture, environment, and the moving body, generating spatial experiences that go beyond function and form (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Pallasmaa, 2005; Zumthor, 2006).

Each project is approached as a sensitive device capable of creating thresholds and activating relationships between public and private spaces, city and nature, memory and contemporaneity. Analytical sketches, photographs, and field notes were instrumental in unveiling hidden compositional logics, sequences of movement, and atmospheric conditions. The figures included in this section therefore function as evidence of the method, showing how embodied observation revealed specific spatial qualities.

Some operate at the urban scale, such as the West Village, where infrastructure becomes a place to inhabit—an inhabited street or a social spine—resonating with concepts of "architecture as a framework for everyday life" (Holl, 2006; Gehl, 2010; Lefebvre, 1991). Others, like the Luyeyuan Stone Sculpture Art Museum, engage with the natural landscape through gestures of immersion and counterpoint, constructing a dialogical relationship between geometry and wilderness (Zumthor, 2006; Pérez-Gómez, 2008). Others still, such as the Museum of Clocks, develop an interior landscape composed of light, rhythm, and memory, generating a spatial dramaturgy of time that aligns with architectural phenomenology (Pallasmaa, 2011; Böhme, 2016).

The aim is not to offer an exhaustive description of each project, but to highlight—through direct experience—those elements that define the environmental and poetic quality of space: materiality, light, transitions, time, and atmosphere. In each case, Liu Jiakun's architecture acts as a connective tool—not only between places, but also between scales, languages, cultures, and emotions. It operates as a situated intervention that encourages the user to engage both bodily and emotionally with space (Zumthor, 2006; Pérez-Gómez, 2008).

4.1. Shuijingfang Museum

Among the projects visited, the Shuijingfang Museum stands out for the immediate formal and material clarity with which it presents itself within the urban context. A dominant material—fired brick, darkened to a deep tone—is alternated with exposed concrete and wooden inserts, defining an expressive grammar that recalls the industrial memory of the site while reinterpreting it in a contemporary key (Pallasmaa, 2005).

The strength of the intervention lies in its ability to dialogue with the city through the entrance courtyard (Figure 1). The sketch highlights the large horizontal concrete slab as both structural and symbolic: a perceptual and climatic filter that produces shade, regulates the microclimate, and slows the visitor's pace. In doing so, it transforms a functional access into an urban threshold—a space of interchange between public and private, everyday life and cultural experience.

Defined by its precise horizontality, the slab generates a perceptual pause, a moment of deceleration that prepares the visitor for the museum's interior. The architectural gesture evokes the constructive tension of Miesian architecture, but without monumentality; instead, it creates a sense of suspension, a habitable anticipation (Frampton, 1995). A few carefully selected trees complete the composition, introducing a discreet natural presence and creating a poetic dialogue with the geometry of the project (Zumthor, 2006).

The museum does not isolate itself from its context (Figure 2) but interprets it, generating spatial and relational continuities. The porous edge allows visual and experiential connections with the surrounding city, a condition made more evident through on-site observation and recording.

In an era of urban fragmentation and typological hyper-specialisation, the Shuijingfang Museum shows that it is still possible to build intermediate places (Rowe & Kuan, 2002) capable of holding together urban and architectural scale, function and perception, collective and individual experience. The threshold becomes architecture: a space that does not divide but connects, that does not display but accompanies (Holl, 2006; Pérez-Gómez, 2008).

In this perspective, Liu Jiakun's intervention reveals an architectural conception that is both civic and environmental, in which the project constructs relationships—with the city, with the body, with time. A valuable lesson for rethinking the meaning of urban scale today.

Figure 1, 1a: Entrance shelter. Figure 2: Urban relationship. (source: Rolla, S., 2025)

4.2. West Village

In Chengdu's West Village, the theme of the street is not merely present—it is the very core of the project. Not a street as a functional artery, but as a livable urban space, an infrastructure that becomes place: a site for encounters, crossings, and shared life. My experience walking through this large urban complex was one of continuity between the public fabric of the city and the internal life of the project, where distinctions between access, passage, and pause dissolve into a fluid, porous, and layered system.

Here, the street does not divide—it connects. As in the great traditions of urbanism where buildings lean on and draw from public infrastructure—from the arcades of Bologna to Mediterranean city streets and the spontaneous occupation of rooftops—here, too, inhabited space is structured around, above, and below the path. But with one difference: in the West Village, the infrastructure is intentional, designed, and integrated. A long ramp cuts through the site, gently rising and opening into terraces, staircases, views, courtyards, and communal areas. It is not only a link, but a generator of urban relationships (Gehl, 2010; Lefebvre, 1991).

The strength of the project lies in its urban character. The architect is not simply working on a building, but on a genuine portion of the city, a superblock that becomes both scale and morphology. The layout recalls, in some ways, the grid of the Cerdà Plan, particularly in the chamfered corners, where edges become small architectural episodes serving urban life (Sennett, 2018; Shen, 2018). But what is most striking is the ability to

activate multiple levels of urbanity, integrating landscape, construction, and everyday activity: from the inhabited rooftops, forming a kind of suspended village, to the ground level, where greenery, ramps, and artisanal and sports facilities create a densely populated landscape (Crawford & Cenzatti, 2017; Zheng et al., 2017).

Walking along the ramp means experiencing an alternation of full and empty spaces, of openings onto the city and more intimate moments (Figure 3). The photographic sequence captured during fieldwork shows the gradual unfolding of spaces: wide terraces, shaded passages, and vegetation emerging from perforated concrete blocks. These images clarify how the design operates through porosity and adaptation over time.

I was particularly struck by the clever and unexpected use of small perforated concrete blocks on some roofs. In these interstices, nature re-emerges spontaneously: moss, climbing plants, wind-blown seeds. Whether intentional or accidental, the outcome is poetic: vegetation brings life back to what infrastructure may have initially claimed. It is an architecture that resonates in tune with time and the elements (Zumthor, 2006).

The ramp transforms into a portico, a terrace, a passageway, and a lookout. Interior spaces—offices, shops, residences—are articulated without rigid hierarchies, ensuring privacy while remaining open and visually connected to external life. Shared spaces—steps, pergolas, benches, play areas—are integral components of the project, sustaining a vibrant intergenerational life, unspectacular yet full of community (Holl, 2006).

In an era when urban planning tends to separate, organise, and discipline, this project instead operates by juxtaposition, adaptation, and inclusion of diverse forms. The final impression is that of a possible city, where infrastructure accompanies rather than imposes, where architecture serves rather than represents, and where nature is not decoration but an active organism (Corner, 1999; Pallasmaa, 2005; Zhu, 2019).

In short, West Village speaks of urban freedom: the freedom to live in space in non-codified ways, to build relationships, to invent new uses (Figure 4). And in this freedom lies its deepest poetic dimension.

Figure 3, 3a: The urban relationship and the porosity of the roof. Figure 4: Public space as a domestic place. (source: Rolla, S., 2025)

4.3. Luyeyuan Stone Sculpture Art Museum

Some projects, more than others, convey the profound sense that architecture can engage with nature not subordinately, but in dynamic balance. The Luyeyuan Stone Sculpture Art Museum is one of them. Nowhere else during my journey did I so clearly perceive how architectural design can enter into nature while also marking its own distance—not as separation, but as constructive counterpoint. A precise geometric sign confronts, without mimicry, the immeasurable organicity of the subtropical forest (Corner, 1999; Leatherbarrow & Mostafavi, 2005).

Here, the dominant theme is the path through the landscape (Figure 5): not as mere circulation, but as a complex, sensorial, almost initiatory experience. Architecture does not impose a single point of view, but constructs many—sequential, oriented, surprising. One begins by walking among bamboo and the sound of flowing water, still invisible. Rough walls of local or recycled materials and horizontal planes appear to emerge from the vegetation. Each threshold is a transition; each passage is architecture in itself (Holl, 2006; Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Perhaps the most powerful gesture is the long ramp that, after a stretch immersed in greenery, pierces the museum's volume. The sketch of this suspended walkway (Figure 5) revealed the tension between the raw concrete line and the organic fluidity of the forest. Photographs (Figure 6) captured the atmospheric

dimension—humidity, moss, and filtered light—demonstrating how time and weather inhabit the structure. Advancing along this fragile, moss-covered walkway, one does not feel a sharp moment of entering, but a gradual, respectful passage inward. The building recedes, opens a gap, and allows itself to be crossed: a gesture of welcome, but also of geometric precision and formal control (Zumthor, 2006).

The reference to Carlo Scarpa becomes evident (Figure 6). As in his works, the project does not mimic its context but operates through stratification and interference. Levels touch and slide past one another; vertical cuts frame views while concealing others. One is guided, never forced. Protected, never separated. This is a project that generates experience without predetermining it: it offers trajectories rather than solutions (Albertini & Bagnoli, 1988; Pallasmaa, 2005).

Inside, the exhibition follows the same logic. Quick sketches confirmed how movement is not predetermined but punctuated by pauses and framings, echoing Scarpa's layered approach. Sculptures, placed with surgical precision, appear, disappear, and re-emerge unexpectedly. Some seem to follow you with their gaze. The space never feels static: the building is inhabited not only by artworks, but by the perceptual possibilities they activate. Two materials—concrete and white plaster—define everything, yet nothing is missing.

Even marginal elements—a flush wall fountain where water slides along the concrete and nourishes a strip of greenery—contribute to the sense of unity. Nature is not decoration but an active presence, a co-author of the project. Interior and exterior dissolve into one another: space expands, contracts, and resonates with sound and reflection. The body adjusts, orients, loses and finds itself again (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Pallasmaa, 2011).

This project maintains a constant tension between control and surrender, between form and life. Geometry marks and carves, but time and weather are allowed to act. There is no pursuit of technical perfection, but a conscious economy of means, recalling the designer's philosophy of essential living. Architecture here is not self-referential but open: it lives through landscape, weather, and those who traverse it.

Few places invite you simply to stop and watch the wind. This one does: the swaying bamboo, the silent dialogue between materials and light, the possibility of registering the passage of time even without clocks. In this museum, architecture does not narrate—it is itself the story, made of space, time, and relationship.

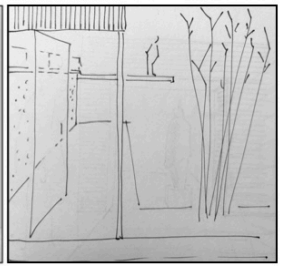

Figure 5, 5a: The path in the forest. Figure 6: Architecture and landscape dialogue. (source: Rolla, S., 2025)

4.4. Museum of Clocks

Unlike other projects in which the dialogue with the natural or urban landscape is foundational, the Museum of Clocks instead constructs an introverted architectural landscape—dense, stratified, entirely shaped by internal geometries, by material and light, by gestures that do not seek the context but withhold and evoke it. Set within a themed park populated by other pavilions, this building deliberately withdraws from its surroundings. It isolates itself, retreats, as if to declare that the true landscape lies in the mind, in memory, in time (Pérez-Gómez, 2008; Pallasmaa, 2011).

The theme is explicitly that of both domestic and collective time: table clocks, propaganda pins, official seals, and material and political memories that mark the public and private life of an entire people (Zhu, 2019). What is most striking is how architecture welcomes and translates all of this—through a dense sequence of delays, shifts, and sudden surprises, in which space becomes narration and emotional device (Zumthor, 2006).

Entry occurs through a tall portico—solemn yet light—leading to an elevated level via a staircase. The image of this entrance sequence (Figure 7) reveals how compressed passages suddenly open onto courtyards where bamboo and light enter the building. Sketches clarified the role of thresholds in shaping temporal perception, while photographs documented the auditory dimension of rustling leaves and ticking clocks.

Here, the poetic character of the building reveals itself immediately: a cut in the roof houses tall bamboo stalks whose sound is carried inward by the wind—an auditory reminder of the natural world that remains outside yet is subtly evoked (Figure 7). It is a simple yet meaningful gesture: nature enters not to be seen, but to be heard (Holl, 2006; Pallasmaa, 2005).

The exhibition unfolds in layered, never-banal sequences. Occasionally, precise openings reveal unexpected views: one, in particular, frames a statue of Mao placed on a cantilevered slab, recalling—with surprising affinity—the equestrian statue of Cangrande I della Scala in Carlo Scarpa's restoration of Castelvecchio. As in Verona, the statue here is suspended between civic solemnity and spatial dramaturgy (Albertini & Bagnoli, 1988; Rowe & Kuan, 2002). Every point along the path seems conceived as a choreography of time, in which even visual orientation carries narrative meaning (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Descending to the lower floor, the atmosphere becomes more intimate, almost meditative. Figure 8 shows how verticality and shadow amplify the ticking sounds of domestic clocks, turning time into an atmospheric substance, a corporeal presence. It is a profoundly physical experience: the verticality of the space contrasts with the modest scale of the objects, generating a perceptual tension that heightens emotional impact (Pallasmaa, 2011; Zumthor, 2006).

A small side door leads to a circular courtyard, crowned by projecting elements that frame a fragment of sky. The bamboo reappears here, closing the narrative circle. This space is a pause, a suspension—a threshold between darkness and light. The route continues into a second chamber, a twin of the first, where the ticking resumes with subtle variations. At the end, a red banner reminds us that the past is present, but it is toward the future we must look.

The exit is carefully orchestrated: one passes through two right-angle turns, the path narrows, and the visitor separates from the group they entered with. One exits alone. It is a subtle yet symbolic gesture that translates into architecture a reflection on collective destiny and the individual. As if to say that time is lived together, but understood alone (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Holl, 2006).

In this museum, Liu Jiakun also tackles a delicate theme: the compromise between commercial function and disciplinary integrity. He does so without sacrificing architectural quality. The abundance of displayed objects, which could threaten spatial coherence, is instead absorbed and rendered effective through precise use of light, rhythm, and material. Architecture contains, organises, and orients—without losing strength or autonomy (Zumthor, 2006; Pallasmaa, 2005).

The Museum of Clocks is, in its own way, an architectural meditation on memory and the interior landscape. A building that, more than showing, teaches how to feel. One that speaks of contemporary China and its identity tensions—but also of architecture as a device that mediates between collective density and individual introspection. A space in which every transition—between light and shadow, sound and silence, group and individual—becomes a threshold, a story, a landscape of the soul.

Figure 7, 7a: Entrance and exit porch and the nature inside the building. Figure 8: Dramatic verticality. (source: Rolla, S., 2025)

5. Discussion

The analysis of the projects visited reveals a set of design constants in Liu Jiakun's work, which outline an original position within the contemporary architectural landscape. His architecture is distinguished above all by its ability to activate resonances between the urban scale, the landscape dimension, and sensory experience, composing spatial narratives that unfold through time (Zumthor, 2006; Holl, 2006; Pallasmaa, 2005).

One of the most evident traits is the centrality of the threshold as an active space, never reduced to a purely distributive function. Across the different projects, the threshold becomes a place of perceptual intensification, of slowing down, of attentiveness. The clearest example is the entrance courtyard of the Shuijingfang Museum, where a large horizontal reinforced concrete slab not only guides the entrance but also creates a space of interchange between the city and the museum, between the collective and the intimate. Similarly, in the Museum of Clocks, the threshold between public and private is mediated through compressed and expanded passages, vertical openings, and small internal courtyards that transform spatial orientation into a narrative gesture (Holl, 2006).

Alongside the theme of the threshold, a distinct attention to the structure of the path emerges. In all the case studies, the project is not immediately legible but reveals itself through a constructed sequence, designed to be experienced bodily. The architecture is discovered by walking, by slowing down, by following deviations. The Luyeyuan Museum is emblematic in this regard, where the long ramp suspended in the forest becomes a poetic device that builds tension between nature and geometry (Albertini & Bagnoli, 1988). This design mode recalls the work of Peter Zumthor, in its capacity to combine mass, light, and material in sensitive paths (Zumthor, 2006), or of Steven Holl, in his use of light for orientation and spatial sequences for storytelling (Holl, 2006).

A third recurring element is the relationship between architecture and landscape. In Liu Jiakun's work, nature is never a mere backdrop but a co-author of space. In urban projects such as the West Village, greenery permeates the built surfaces, climbs over rooftops, and inhabits infrastructural voids. In rural contexts like the Luyeyuan Museum, spontaneous vegetation and the sound of running water become compositional elements—alongside shadow, wind, and weather. The project thus becomes an experiential landscape, where perception is oriented but never forced (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Here, the reference to Carlo Scarpa becomes particularly evident: in the layered composition, in the use of vertical cuts as tools of vision, in the artisanal care for materials, in the tension between geometric gesture and organic context (Albertini & Bagnoli, 1988).

Finally, Liu's architecture exhibits a temporally dense quality. Spaces are not merely paths, but rhythms. The Museum of Clocks fully embodies this logic: time is not only the subject of the exhibition but the spatial structure itself. Light, sound, volumetric compression, and sequences of thresholds build an environment where the visitor is invited to reflect on their own temporal experience. In this sense, architecture does not represent time — it activates it (Pallasmaa, 2011; Zumthor, 2006).

What emerges from this discussion is not only an architectural poetics but also a contribution to the broader debates on liveability and habitability. Liu Jiakun's projects show how thresholds, paths, and atmospheres can be translated into design strategies that foster inclusive urbanity, ecological awareness, and a renewed sense of belonging (Zhu & Huang, 2021; Shen, 2018). They demonstrate how phenomenological approaches, often developed in Western discourse, can be reinterpreted in the context of Chinese urbanisation to generate multi-scalar environments (Zheng et al., 2017; Crawford & Cenzatti, 2017) where the everyday and the extraordinary coexist. In this sense, Liu's architecture expands the field of phenomenology by situating it within the environmental and cultural conditions of contemporary China, addressing the knowledge gap identified at the outset of this paper.

This ability to translate complex themes into architectural form also stems from a cultural background that extends beyond the discipline. Liu Jiakun's education included narrative and poetry before he founded his studio. This sensibility is clearly present in his work: each building is a silent narrative, composed of sequences, pauses, and perceptual tensions. As with certain Western authors — Álvaro Siza, Eduardo Souto de Moura, Juhani Pallasmaa — the project becomes a device of experience: not only for those who inhabit it, but also for those who design it as an act of listening and restitution (Pallasmaa, 2005; Holl, 2006).

In conclusion, Liu Jiakun's architecture does not offer formal models to replicate, but design attitudes rooted in attentiveness to place, to atmosphere, and to the complexity of relationships. His work demonstrates that it is still possible — even in the context of global urbanisation — to build spaces that do not simplify experience but intensify it, restoring dignity to time, to the body, and to memory (Pérez-Gómez, 2008).

6. Conclusion

The journey through the work of Liu Jiakun has shown that architecture can still, today, be a form of poetic resistance. In a context dominated by speed, efficiency, and standardisation, his projects build spaces of slowness, attentiveness, and depth—places where the experience of the body, light, time, and material become central. This is not about aestheticizing experience, but about cultivating an ethics of space grounded in the care

for detail, the measure of proportions, and responsibility toward the environmental, social, and cultural context (Pallasmaa, 2005; Holl, 2006).

Each of the case studies analysed offers a different interpretation of this poetics: the threshold as a place of encounter between city and memory; the street as social and spatial infrastructure; the path as immersive narrative; the museum as a time-machine and atmospheric device (Zumthor, 2006; Pérez-Gómez, 2008). In all these examples, architecture does not aim to represent, but to connect — bodies, natural elements, memories, practices, and silences.

From this perspective, the relevance of Liu's work to the conference theme of Urban Scale, Environmental and Landscape Architecture becomes evident. His projects operate across multiple scales — from the fragment to the city, from landscape to infrastructure — generating liveable and habitable environments that respond to the challenges of rapid urbanisation and ecological fragility (Shen, 2018; Zheng et al., 2017). They also show how phenomenology, when critically adapted to the Chinese context, can enrich global architectural discourse with new insights into the relationship between place, memory, and community (Rowe & Kuan, 2002; Zhu & Huang, 2021).

This ability to construct intermediate spaces — between inside and outside, material and immaterial, visible and invisible — is what links Liu Jiakun's work to some of the most intense experiences in contemporary architecture. It is also what renders his work irreducible to any stylistic language or school. His architecture is not merely a tool, but a gesture: a tool that listens, a gesture that respects. And, above all, a gesture rooted in a deep attentiveness to the landscape and to the urban or natural context that hosts it (Pallasmaa, 2011).

Viewed in light of his biographical and intellectual background, it becomes clear that this sensitivity is nurtured by a deeper source: writing, poetry, and narrative. Liu Jiakun does not design buildings — he designs experiences. And he does so with the delicacy and precision of someone who understands the weight of words, the rhythm of a sentence, the evocative power of silence. It is this attention to sequence, to structure, to anticipation and revelation that transforms built space into a space to be inhabited not only with the body, but with the mind and with memory (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Bachelard, 1994).

Ultimately, Liu Jiakun's architecture can be read as both a local and a global lesson: rooted in the specific cultural and environmental conditions of Chengdu, yet able to dialogue with international discourses on phenomenology, liveability, and habitability. It reminds us that architecture, when attentive to thresholds, atmospheres, and memory, retains its power to construct meaningful places in an increasingly fragmented world.

This paper has sought to convey — through direct experience and a phenomenological reading — the depth of an architectural practice that does not renounce beauty, but searches for it where it is often no longer sought: in thresholds, in details, in shadows, in sounds, in minimal gestures. In a time when architecture risks losing its critical and poetic function, Liu Jiakun reminds us that it is still possible to build spaces that help us feel part of a world that is complex, fragile, but full of meaning — and to do so at every scale, from the landscape to the urban fragment, from infrastructure to contemplative emptiness.

7. References

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