

ONE HOUSE, TWO SYSTEMS

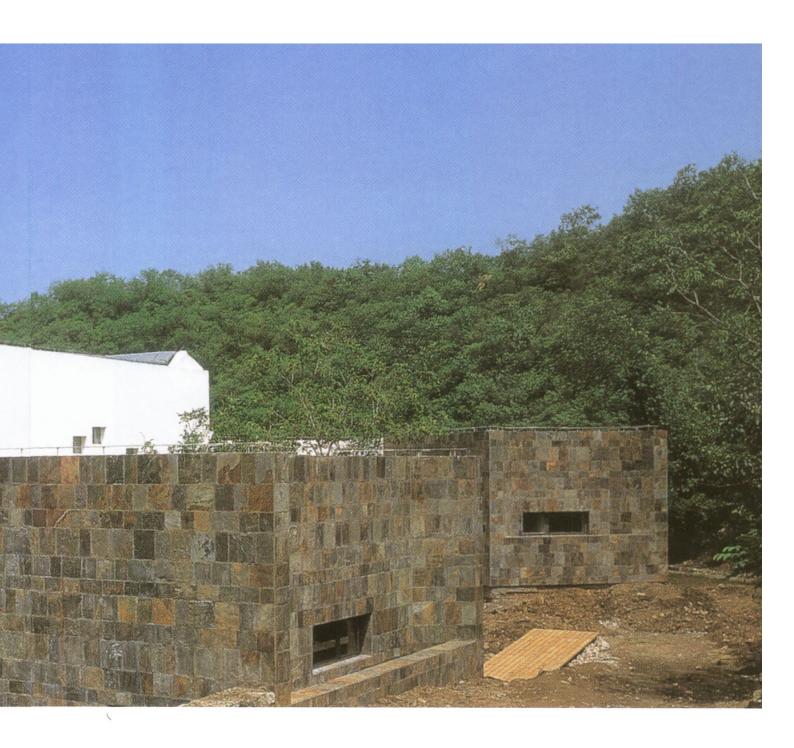
Text Jason Hahn Photography Satoshi Asakawa

Side and rear elevation of main building with metallic roof extended down to enable the cleaning of snow.

COMMISSIONED TO DESIGN A PROTOTYPE VILLA NEAR THE GREAT WALL, KNTA ARCHITECTS DISCOVERS THAT WORKING IN CHINA IS BOTH EXHILARATING AND FRUSTRATING AT THE SAME TIME.

It almost seems like a severe case of hubris to contemplate building any-thing in the shadow of China's Great Wall, let alone a complex of 11 prototype luxury villas. Yet that was exactly what two property developers from Beijing, Zhang Xin and her husband, Pan Shi Yi, have done.

Cleverly tapping into a nascent and very much unexplored market for lush, country-side homes, especially at a time of burgeoning economic wealth and a developing taste for the good life among the Chinese baby-boomers, the intrepid duo (fronted by Redstone, their property company) purchased an $8~{\rm km^2}$ plot



of land in the Shuiguan Valley, a stone's throw from the Great Wall and an hour's drive from Beijing. The wealthy in China are increasing in their numbers, they reasoned. And what better way to show off that wealth than with a second home in the country? This, at a time when most Chinese are only just beginning to comprehend the concept of home ownership. The chutzpah is enervating.

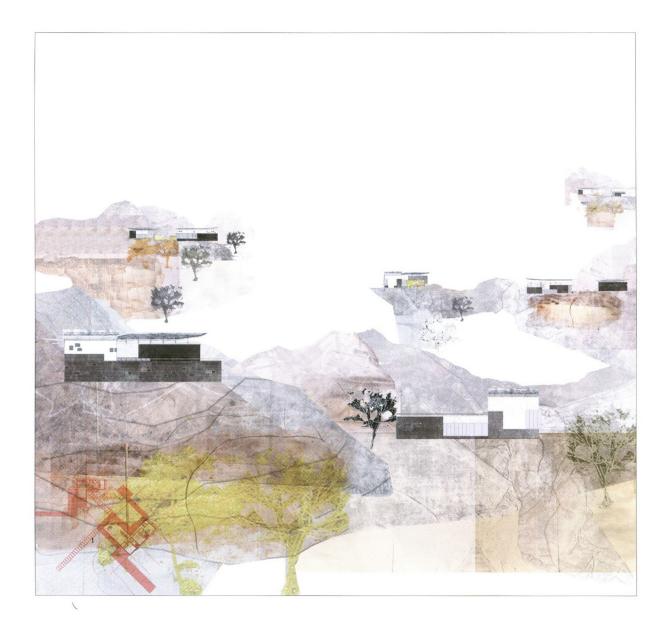
And so the dream to build a community of luxury homes first came into being. From the somewhat barren valley – the principle vegetation here being walnut trees, crab-apple trees and rocks – Zhang and Pan sent out a clarion call for eleven of the region's brightest architects to come and build their version of Utopia on Earth. The US\$24m project would be a chance to show China that when it came to architecture for the home, the possibilities were limited only by the imagination; that there were other types of housing that didn't involve cramped spaces and dowdy, unimaginative façades.

The plan was to reproduce the first phase of eleven prototypes

into a further 40 with the end result a high-end boutique hotel resort. The entire masterplan would be named, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, The Commune by the Great Wall.

The inherent irony of the contrast between the communist idealism of a commune (one for all) and the objective of the project (all for one) was not lost on anyone, least of all Kay Ngee Tan, the lead architectural designer for the KNTA Architects team from Singapore. (The other empanelled architects included Hong Kong's Gary Chang, Japan's Shigeru Ban and Thailand's Kanika R'Kul.)

For the KNTA team, this was an opportunity to test the market in China for innovative designs and to see at first hand, the close symbiotic relationship between architecture and patronage. Unsurprisingly, everyone from Redstone downwards was a bit vague as to how the various planning approvals for the complex were obtained, never mind the speed with which they were obtained, nor how much those approvals cost.



Despite the inherent logistic and technical difficulties (the project overshot completion targets by a year, in large part due to the fact that water and electricity infrastructures had to be piped in from scratch), KNTA lauds Redstone for their pioneering focus on the local Chinese construction and architectural scene and for promoting architecture as an art form, a collectible art form at that. There was, Tan recalls, a very real sense that the project was a breath of fresh air, even among the overseas architects.

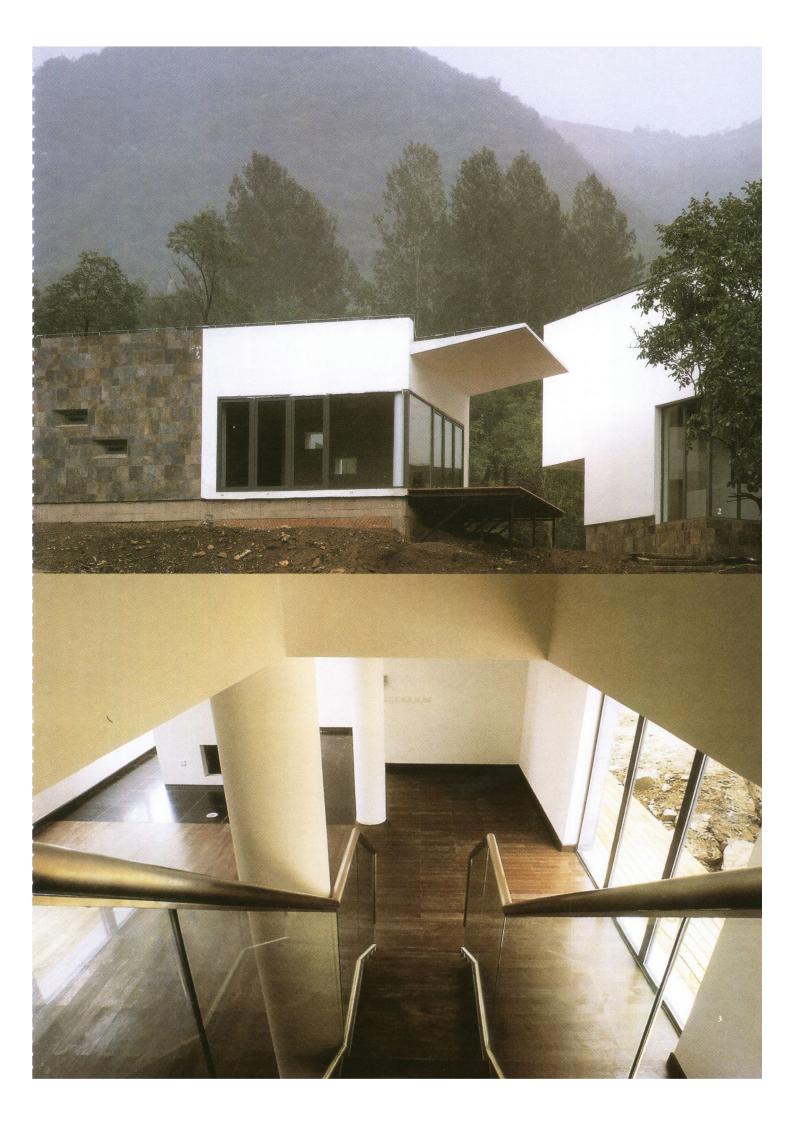
KNTA's design for the project, "House #9', is elegantly simple, a duo of L-shaped buildings loosely locked into the shape of an off-centre parallelogram. Taking their cue from the traditional courtyard home found in Beijing, KNTA broke apart the tight enclosure of that design to open the living areas into two annexes (Tan wryly refers to this as One House, Two Systems) into the surrounding nature, allowing spaces to flow in and out and between the buildings. The smaller annex housing the kitchen, servants' quarters and dining room is wedged against a steep cliff to the valley's north.

The larger annex – angled at 45° from its smaller twin – holds the bedrooms and living areas.

The overwhelming impression generated by the house is one of space, seemingly unending in the way the vitrine windows open into a vista of wooded forests and in the way the double-volume living room seemingly resonates with the view of the Great Wall snaking away in the distance. Certainly, it's far removed from the kind of cramped traditional residential architecture the majority of Chinese are familiar with.

"It was very exciting to work in China," Tan says. "The architectural scene there is full of the sort of enthusiasm and energy you used to find in Singapore in the 1980's. There are lots of inspira-

 A stylised rendition gives a hint of the scale and breadth of the project.
The buildings are planned so one enters through a narrow opening between them. 3. Stairs lead up to the master bedroom and library.



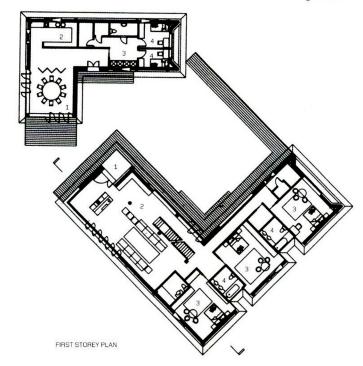


- 1 DINING
- KITCHEN
- 3 UTILITY
- 4 MAID/DRIVER QUARTERS

ENTRANCE LIVING ROOM

BEDROOM BATH

VOID OVER LIVING ROOM



MASTER BEDROOM WITH ENSUITE BATH TERRACE

SECOND STOREY PLAN

tional avenues. People there just want the best and the newest. But the experience was also frustrating because the Chinese developers and builders do not have the same level of sophistication that we are used to."

The saying goes that God is in the details and in China, God appears to be having an extended siesta. Tan has said in previous interviews that the Chinese his team met seemed to have the openmindedness of the West, but they reserved the right to exercise circumspection when dealing with delicate issues. "In that sense, they can be very sophisticated, but harder to fully comprehend."

This circumspection came into play as "House # 9" was being built. The original plans called for local stones from around the Great Wall and excavated sites within the valley itself to be used for the majority of the facades. The reason for this was to give the impression that the lower portion of the house was part of the landscape, a natural growth of the landscape – the ground, the mountains and hills – as it were, giving an extra organic dimension

to the language of the design. However, unbeknown to KNTA, the local project managers felt that the process would be too laborious and difficult and quietly switched the façade materials to thin (and common) slate tiles. For their part, KNTA is commendably circumspect as to whether words were exchanged with their Chinese counterparts.

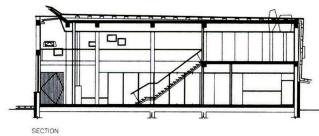
And it certainly didn't help that there was no site representative on the ground to keep an eye on the progress and that many decisions were made by remote (in other words, phone, fax, email). This despite the generation of over 73 A1 sized drawings for the house.

Still, the house got built. For the KNTA team, the entire experience brought home the fact that the Chinese diaspora has spread far with their respective influences bearing significantly

Opposite page: Natural lighting is introduced into the entrance area through skylights, balancing the quality of light.







1. Dining room in the 'L' shaped building with central pivot doors and floors with local timber panels. 2. Seclusion in the master bedroom is suggested by the smaller windows. 3. The existing crab apple trees are retained to become part of the future landscaping of the house.

on the way individual architects think and process information. "The chosen architects from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore had relatively similar attitudes to life and work [as compared to the architects from the other countries]." It would seem that a Chinese lineage is an advantage when working in China.

For the record, when the Commune by the Great Wall project showed at last year's Venice's eighth International Architecture Exhibition, Redstone walked away with the Silver Lion. For the eleven architects, maybe God is still in the details after all.

Architect KNTA Architects

Tan Kay Ngee, Tan Teck Kiam, Ian Aw, Jax Yeo, and Sven Schichor Design Team

Structural Consultants Battle McCarthy Engineers, UK

Battle McCarthy, Chris McCarthy, Martin Fenn, Structural Team

and Pilar Chapero