



## Wen Lee: Two Projects

Wen Lee

### 1. Communism as a Fetish or The Aesthetic of Asceticism

Truth is the significance of fact. It is hence reasonable to assume that the truth of even the most objectivist of works may be contaminated by subjectivity and romanticism. One may even think that the very motor behind objectivistic modern movements such as the *Neue Sachlichkeit* or communism is a romantic and fetishistic obsession for the "idea" of objectivity.

In September 1995, Mr. C. Y. Chang, general manager of the Chia Tai Group International's plant in Lianyungang, invited me over to spend some time in China and to plan a housing project. He had made available a fund to build subsidized housing for workers. When we first talked about the idea few months earlier, I was still in Paris, and obviously, I mentioned François Mitterrand, who really seemed to have turned him on. He is a generous philanthropist and a great fan of André Gide. At the very moment of the collapse of communism in China, this romantic capitalist from Taiwan sports the virtue of generosity and fetishizes the idea of communism. He is also an amateur of modern art. When he was still a university student, he had a summer job in my father's design studio translating Mies Van der Rohe into Chinese.



Lianyungang is an important industrial harbour in northern China. It is a linear city of a soviet clarity. The city is defined by a railway and a harbour. The railway goes all the way to Munich, Germany. The arrival to the city is absolutely spectacular. I was haunted by the phantasmagoric images of the brutally modern utilitarian buildings along the railway. These Neue Sachlichkeit buildings were summarily built and are now in various states of decay. Set against the rising sun, this extreme repetition of concrete, steel, and glass poisoned my imagination. I was intoxicated by their terrifying beauty. Suddenly, communism became the object of my fetish.

The basic housing type there is that of a linear building. Because the city is situated in a severe earthquake zone, the length of building is limited to 60 meters. These linear buildings are all oriented towards the south in response to the northern climate. This project is no exception. It is a six storey 55 meter linear point-bloc oriented towards the south. The planning is reminiscent of the Mies Van der Rohe housing in Weissenhof Siedlung. It is a recurring motif in modern housing. Each staircase services 2 units per floor. And there are 48 units in total. 42 units have 2 bedrooms and 6 units have 3 bedrooms. Each unit has a standard pin-wheel modern plan, but some concessions had to be made to respond to the structural requirements of the severe earthquake condition: *la vie a toujours raison*. The south side of the building is filled with a wall of winter gardens in direct response to the northern climate. Quartz sand is an industrial waste in that region, so we mixed concrete with quartz sand to give a naturally white surface. The finishes are minimal and all the pipes are exposed in the kitchen and WC.

The entire design was completed in a trance of religious fervour of rationalization, optimization and standardization. Objectivity was the cult, and asceticism was the aesthetic. To complete the experience, I donated all my commission to a local charity fund as a totally selfish act. It was better than sex.





Client: *Karl Michael Winter*  
*Georg Holba*



The façade is composed of a series of squares that relates to the neoclassical architecture of the building, a series of standard A1 plotter outputs on mylar, and an exploded monitor. The electric wire that was supposed to be connected to a neon sign is simply left exposed, dangling, *branché*.

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