

A Land-Art Theater, Built for Birds and Human

/ by GOA (Group of Architects)

"The Earth Valley Theater is an adventure of humans, nature, and the mind. Space is no longer a shelter, but a question: how far are we from nature, and how close are we to ourselves?"

—XU Qi

Lead Architect of the Earth Valley Theater

! 00 ! The theater embraced by the valleys © CHEN Xi Studio

Urbanization has gone with a gradual estrangement between humans and non-human species. Since the advent of the modern zoo, birds have typically been displayed in sealed aviaries, confined to prevent them from flying away. Even as these environments evolve to imitate natural habitats, the roof continues to limit avian movement and reinforces a one-sided way for humans to view birds as the other.

Reflecting on anthropocentrism, the architects sought an alternative to traditional aviaries: a space that accommodates birds' autonomous flight and allows interspecies cohabitation. Taking the Sino-French art project *Dancing with the Birds* as a starting point, GOA used the Earth Valley Theater in Yixing, Jiangsu, China as a test ground to reconstruct an open system in which birds can fly, perch, and roost according to their own logic.

! 01 ! 02 ! 03 ! Birds and humans as co-participants in an open system © CHEN Xi Studio

The architecture, interior, and landscape of the Earth Valley Theater were completed by GOA through an integrated design process. Building on collaboration between disciplines, the team was able to explore an idea resonant with Richard Wagner's notion of the Gesamtkunstwerk, or total work of art. Together with director Fan Yue and his team, GOA conceived the theater as a single artistic work: from the outset, artists and animal experts worked alongside designers and engineers, integrating avian behavior, topography, sound, light, performance, design and construction into one coherent system.

! 04 ! *Rendez-vous of the Birds* staged in the theater © CHEN Xi Studio

01 Architecture as Land Art

Design for the Earth Valley Theater began in 2021. After completing a series of design projects in Yixing, GOA received a new commission from a

longtime client, Yaohu Town: to design an open-air theater for an “ecological narrative show” by director Fan Yue. The site lies at the undeveloped end of a valley on the town’s southern edge, a gentle landform that opens out in several directions. Rather than placing significant volumes above ground, the architects sought to sink the theater into the valley, allowing it to read as part of the land art.

! 05 ! ! 06 ! Construction minimized intervention in the original landform © GOA, CHEN Xi Studio

Creating a theater for a specific show is different from designing a “generic” venue based on established typologies. Here, the logic of space had to be tailored in advance to the logic of the performance. The fact that birds, rather than humans, are the protagonists amplified this challenge.

In response, the architects approached the theater from both “human” and “avian” points of view, planning its spatial structure in two directions at once. For visitors, the Earth Valley Theater is conceived as a retreat from urban anxiety; for birds, it must function as a habitat shielded from external disturbance.

! 07 ! The theater “inlaid” into the valleys following the terrain © GOA

The site’s two ends are organized into distinct zones: a stepped plinth containing the public functions such as entrance and ticketing, and an aviary zone for bird habitation. In between lies the auditorium. The plinth, set close to the road, is composed of rectangular volumes that screen the theater from the outside world; the two realms are almost invisible to each other. Passing through one of the three entrance halls into the auditorium, visitors leave daily life behind and cross a threshold between reality and a dreamscape to be created the birds.

The 2,000-seat auditorium sits behind the plinth. The design maximizes the use of level ground, letting the building’s edges trace the topography. The valley serves as a container that defines the form, which remains fluid until it reaches a desirable geometric state. The building sinks into the encircling hills, which are both part of the birds’ lived environment and, once the performance begins, a natural backdrop.

A second valley intersects the main one and extends toward bamboo grove. The aviaries line this quieter valley, gently separated from the human world. The varied terrain extends the stage: flocks of white storks emerge from the narrow valley corridor, accompanied by sound and light effects that mark the dramatic climax.

02 Bird-Oriented Design

In a performance built around the idea of “coexistence in nature,” birds fly freely through the open theater, weaving, circling, and eventually returning to their roosts. In this context, architects faced a set of questions: What kind of take-off paths do birds need? From where do they derive their field of vision and sense of safety? How do different species live, and what kinds of habitats do they each require? Which materials attract them, and which sounds, lights, or wind conditions do they avoid? Finally, can the theater itself become a landscape from a bird’s point of view?

| 11 || 12 | The architecture appears different to birds and humans © CHEN Xi Studio

Avian consultants accompanied the design. The Earth Valley Theater adopts a ring-like configuration: birds travel from the aviaries to bird boxes at the top of the auditorium, then launch into flight across the site. This required the architects to choreograph the flight paths with great care and to calibrate the seating slope relative to the vertical difference. Raptors sweep just over the visitors’ heads, creating an intense sense of immersion while maintaining a safe distance between humans and birds.

| 13 || 14 || 15 || 16 | Birds in a theater made for them © GOA, CHEN Xi Studio

To achieve a bird-oriented design, the team implemented a series of detailed measures. Dot stickers are applied to glass to prevent collisions. The interior surfaces of the aviaries are clad in thermally treated timber, improving durability while avoiding the toxicity of paint. For each species, the grain size of ground gravel, the mesh size of the aviary window, and the partitioning of space are all adjusted to match its body and behavior.

| 17 | Topography and level changes subtly separate aviaries from human © CHEN Xi Studio

03 Variations on Local Materials

Material, here, is intended as a carrier of architectural emotion rather than a thin, decorative surface. Yixing has long history of local pottery production, while Yaohu Town is backed by forest of bamboo. The material strategy therefore privileges locality: “clay” and “bamboo” become two core motifs. After numerous tests, the team translated their symbolic textures into more weather-resistant materials that could withstand the

conditions of an outdoor theater.

| 18 | Multiple manifestations of “clay” and “bamboo” © GOA

As a cultural symbol, “clay” appears in several guises: raw earth, malleable clay, and shaped terracotta. In construction, the structural ribs of the carved concrete were CNC-shaped to control the form, then hand-sculpted on site by craftsmen. The resulting volumes are enlarged in scale yet retain the tactile qualities of pottery ware.

| 19 || 20 || 21 | Carved concrete shaped to evoke clay in its different states © GOA, CHEN Xi Studio

“Bamboo” forms the stage installation and the envelope of the aviaries. For durability and maintenance, the team chose high-density polyethylene (HDPE) to simulate the texture of woven bamboo fiber. Components in three different tones are randomly combined to create a dappled facade.

| 22 || 23 || 24 | Humans and birds inhabiting a world of “clay” and “bamboo” © CHEN Xi Studio

04 When Designers Become Builders

Within the integrated design system, GOA’s multidisciplinary team undertook the architecture, interior, and landscape design, and also took part in construction management, dissolving the traditional boundary between concept design and construction drawing. As professional divisions blurred, coordination became more fluid—and designers were compelled to move beyond the confines of own specialties to become builders collectively.

The gentle topography of the performance area conceals a network of drainage inlets: rainwater is guided into integrally cast gutters, which then tie into the valley’s existing flood channels and landscape water system. The “clay” landforms also house concealed cavities that contain acoustic equipment, enabling the multimedia effects devised by the director’s team for *Dancing with the Birds*.

| 25 || 26 | Existing streams form the backbone of the landscape water system, integrated with site drainage © CHEN Xi Studio

| 27 || 28 | “Invisible” technical equipment is crucial to the performance © GOA, CHEN Xi Studio

To ensure efficiency and precision, the aviaries employ prefabricated

components in a light steel system. Three standard types of wall panels are combined to complete both the external cladding and the internal insulation.

129 130 Erecting the steel frame and constructing the aviaries © GOA

Rather than participating only indirectly through models and drawings, the design team became deeply involved in materials, details, equipment, and construction processes, guiding the Earth Valley Theater from concept into inhabitable form. More importantly, the design and construction of the building and the staging of the performance were conceived as one continuous whole. Architecture is no longer standardized “stage,” and the performance is no longer a one-off event merely occurring in space. Through this process, the Earth Valley Theater ultimately emerges as a “total work of art.”

131 The final presentation of *Dancing with the Birds* © CHEN Xi Studio

Drawings

132 Site plan © GOA

133 First Floor plan © GOA

134 Second Floor plan © GOA

135 A-A Section © GOA

136 West Elevation © GOA

Project Info

Project Name: The Earth Valley Theater in Yaohu Village

Location: Wuxi, Jiangsu Province, China

Design/Completion: 2021 / 2025

Floor Area: 9,200 m²

Client: Jiangsu Mingling Yaohu Town Tourism Co., Ltd.

Integrated Design (Architecture, Interior, Landscape): GOA

Design Management: GOA

Director: Yueshang Studio

Acoustic Consultant : EZPro

Environmental Visual Consultant: ToThree

Aviary Management: Puy du Fou

Photographer: CHEN Xi Studio