

METROPOLIS

ARCHITECTURE AND
DESIGN AT ALL SCALES
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FUTURE

100

NO NATION EMBASSY
Danny Ortega,
Penn Weitzman School
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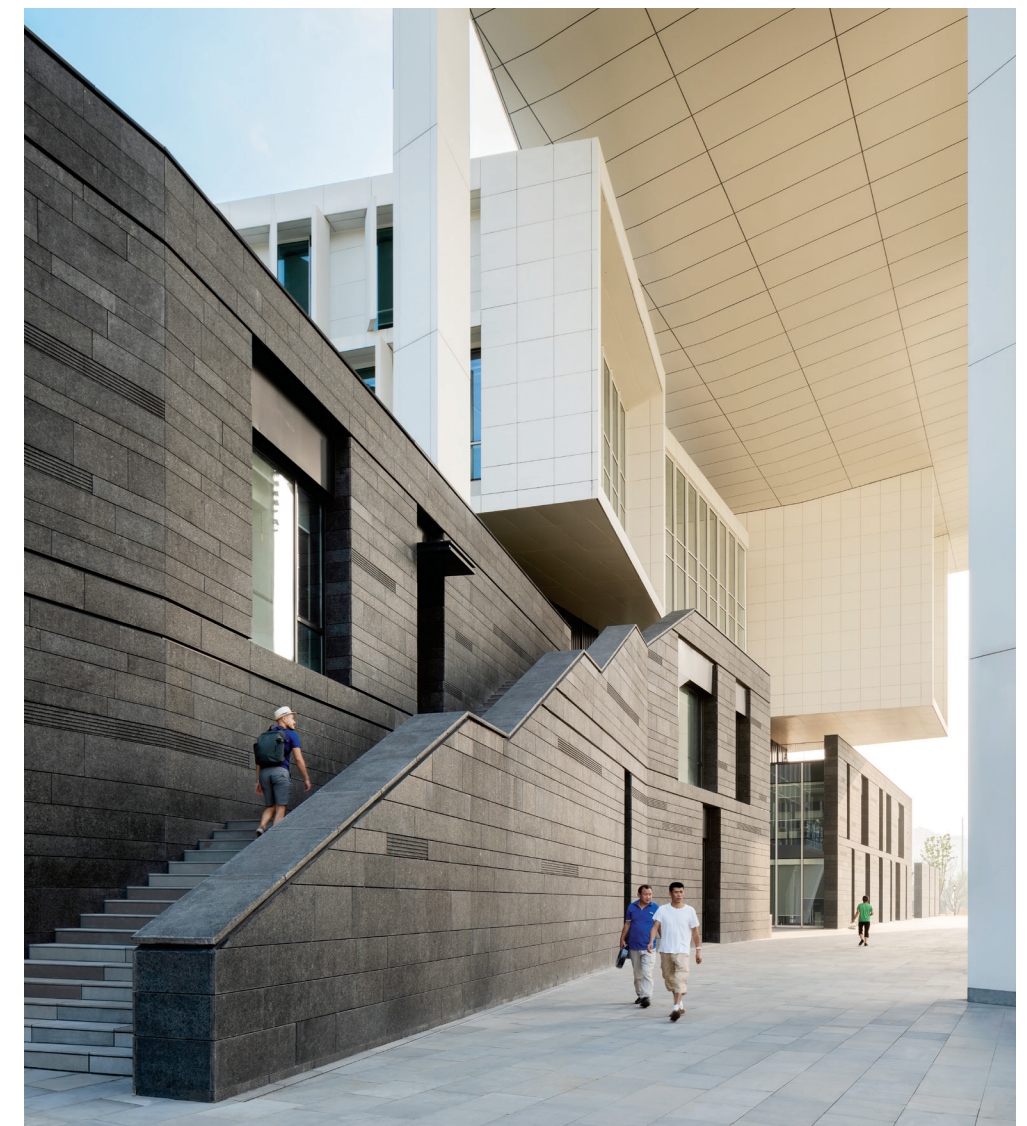
The Top A&D Students of 2022



LET'S GET TOGETHER

Ge Hekai Hall at Wenzhou-Kean University unites students and disciplines.

By Jennifer Krichels



With its central location on campus, Ge Hekai opens to a 3.5-acre quadrangle (opposite), whose pathways are both diagonal and ellipse-shaped. Students can access rooftop gardens via stairs (right) that ascend from ground level.

COURTESY SETH POWERS

It is no mistake that a dance troupe has taken over a balcony space inside Ge Hekai Hall, on the Wenzhou-Kean University campus in Wenzhou, China. The building, which houses the university's architecture, design, and computer science programs, is made to be occupied by students from around campus.

Designed by Moore Ruble Yudell (MRY), Ge Hekai is anchored by an 800-seat central forum, which is "a kind of interior Piazza di Spagna" for the university, says John Ruble, design principal for the project and cofounder of MRY. The space features three stories of tiered seating overlooked by open balconies and an overhead bridge connecting the hall's east and west wings. Within this community hub students can just as easily stage an impromptu dance rehearsal or shoot a video as they can take in a lecture by a world-famous economist.

The very history of the campus lends itself to understanding the power of cross-pollination among academic disciplines and cultures. The only public college in the United States to collaborate on a campus in China, New Jersey-based Kean University launched its Wenzhou location in 2011 in partnership with Wenzhou University, a public nonprofit Chinese institution. Two hallmarks of the agreement were that all students would have unfettered access to the internet, just as they do in the United States, and that graduates would receive dual degrees from Wenzhou and Kean.

The Wenzhou-Kean campus, a 175-acre site surrounded by mountains about an hour south of Shanghai, was created through a master plan by Michael Graves's office that placed the university's architecture and design schools (both named for Graves himself) at its center. To its north, the hall dialogues with Perkins and Will's Student Learning Center, a hybrid library and activity center slated for completion next year. To its south, Ge Hekai extends to an expansive 3.5-acre quadrangle, whose perimeter pathway forms a tilted ellipse crossed by intersecting diagonal paths leading to the hall's east and west gardens.

The civic-scaled design earns its focal position on campus with several gestures meant to express China's history, its forward-thinking goals, and the concept of international collaboration. While the

The forum's tiered seating is designed to be both flexible and approachable. The space's height and drama help make it a central meeting place on campus.



COURTESY SETH POWERS



“BY THE TIME YOU PUT ALL THOSE THINGS TOGETHER, YOU’RE TALKING ABOUT THE FUTURE FABRIC OF SOCIETY.” — JOHN RUBLE



hall presents a modern, formal portico as a grand gateway at its southern facade, it also uses the concept of a Chinese urban district to incorporate a series of alleyways, lofts, and bridges that become a sort of “three-dimensional mini campus” accessible to all students, says Ruble.

Eight oblong “bar” buildings, clad in Angola black granite, form the structure’s three-floor base, hosting community spaces and classrooms, flexible exhibition areas, a makerspace, a digital-media auditorium, and a lakeside café. Punched windows and deep inset ledges emphasize the three-foot thickness of the walls while also providing interior shading and hiding mechanicals and ductwork. The bars are connected by a network of exterior bridges that circumnavigate the building and act as structural braces, reducing steel in each of the wings by resisting torsional movement. Each bar has a landscaped rooftop that students can use around the clock, while the surrounding landscape extends the rooftop gardens to the ground, stitching the building into its context with 16-foot-high freestanding stone walls that form a series of outdoor rooms.

The bars are capped by two striking, daylight studio loft buildings, which form the fourth and fifth floors and offer more traditional architectural design studio spaces. These are fronted with ultra-high-performance concrete (UHPC) sunshades. (The use of UHPC throughout the project allowed for a 12 percent reduction in overall steel structure.) Shading was also important for the hall’s central forum, whose atrium features a hexagonal skylight, and where the architects introduced a concept they call bo lang, meaning “wave.” White ceiling slats meander in angular directions, creating a play of light and texture above the grand space. Custom terrazzo flooring in parallelogram shapes throughout the hall also expresses these angles.

As the hall welcomes students from near and far, and (pandemic permitting) from different disciplines across campus, it is on its way to achieving its potential as a campus gathering place and an incubator for the future. “This is a place for architecture, urban and industrial design, and computer science; by the time you put all those things together, you’re talking about the future fabric of society,” says Ruble. ■

A large portico (opposite, top) serves as the building’s grand entry. Black, bar-shaped buildings (opposite, bottom) form the hall’s base and host classrooms, community spaces, and more; two white studio loft buildings flank the forum. Angled slats and ceiling forms throughout create a play of light and texture.



COURTESY SETH POWERS