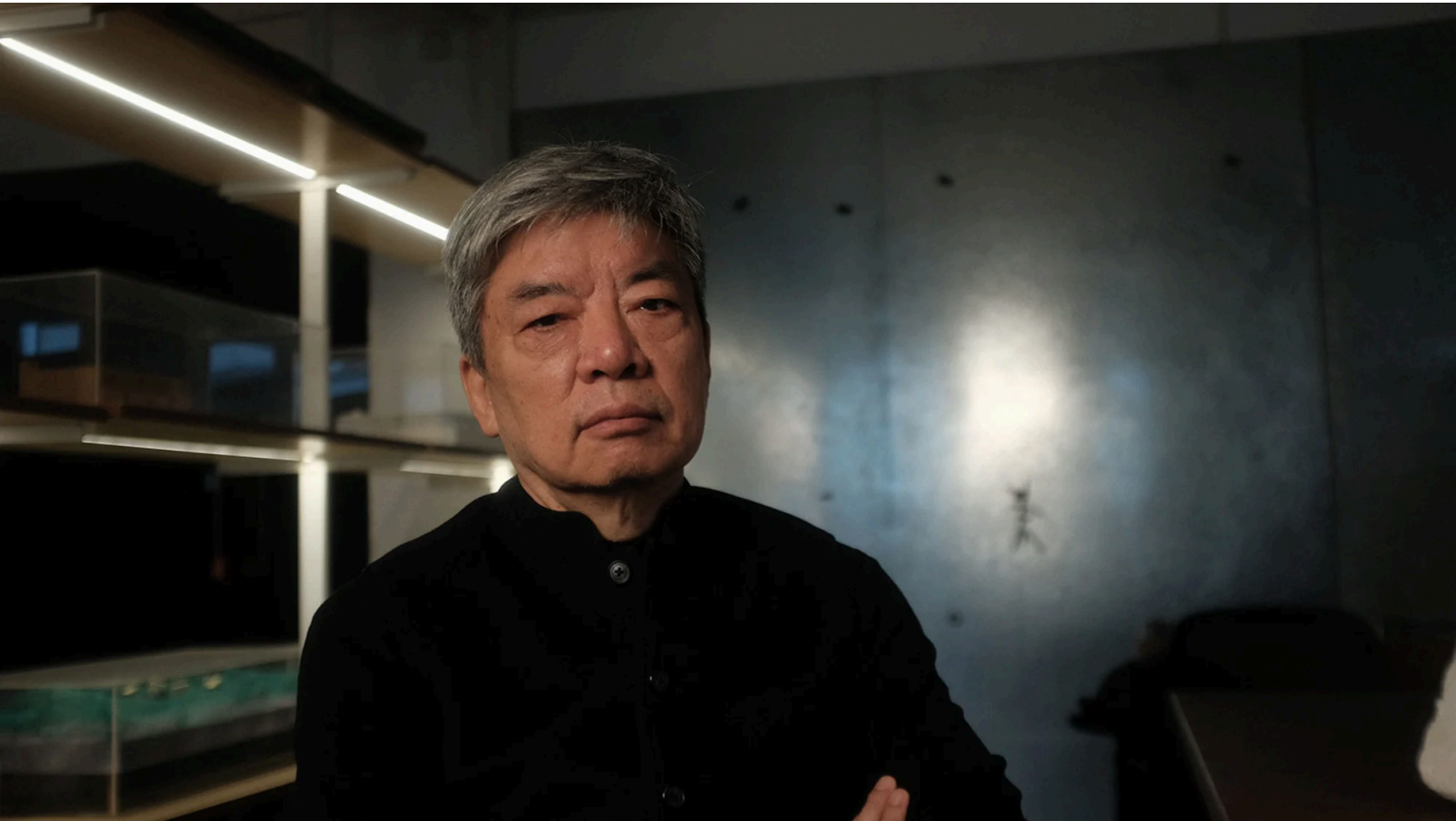


Pritzker Prize 2025: China’s Liu Jiakun awarded ‘Nobel of architecture’

By [Oscar Holland](#), CNN

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Chinese architect Liu Jaikun, winner of the 2025 Pritzker Prize. Tom Welsh for The Hyatt Foundation/The Pritzker Architecture Prize

(CNN) — Throughout its 46-year history, architecture’s most prestigious prize has often been won by icon-builders: the apparent lone geniuses who imprint their visions, signature-like, on the world. It is emblematic of the industry’s shifting priorities that this year’s Pritzker Prize, often dubbed the “Nobel of architecture,” has gone to a man who actively *avoids* having a recognizable style.

Liu Jiakun, unveiled as 2025’s laureate on Tuesday, has spent much of his four-decade career designing understated academic buildings, museums and public spaces in his home city of Chengdu (and nearby Chongqing), in China’s southwest. His hyper-local and self-admittedly “low-tech” techniques have come at the expense of a distinctive aesthetic.

In China’s era of architectural excess, Liu has instead quietly thrived by letting each site — and the history, nature and craft traditions surrounding it — shape his designs, not vice versa. Whether repurposing earthquake debris or creating voids in which native wild flora can flourish, methodology matters more than form. In its citation, the Pritzker Prize jury praised Liu for precisely that: having “a strategy instead of a style.”





≡ CNN style



Nature and architecture coalesce at Chengdu's Luyeyuan Stone Sculpture Art Museum, one of the first projects completed by Liu's firm, Jiakun Architects. Bi Kejian/The Pritzker Architecture Prize

Explaining his approach to CNN ahead of the announcement, the 68-year-old architect (who admitted to being “a little surprised” by the accolade) said he tried to act “like water.”

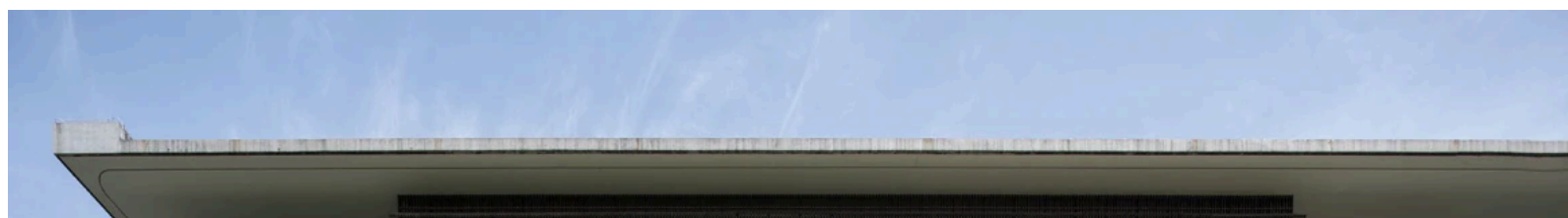
“I try my best to penetrate and understand the place ... then, when the time is right, it will solidify, and the idea of the building will appear,” he said on a video call from Chengdu, adding: “A fixed style is a double-edged sword. It can make others remember you quickly, but it also binds you and makes you lose a certain freedom.”

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Liu's firm, Jiakun Architects, has completed over 30 projects — all in China — in almost as many years. The architect has often turned to his country's history for inspiration. Traditional pavilions informed the flat rooftop eaves of his Museum of Imperial Kiln Brick in Suzhou; the wraparound balconies of the Shanghai campus he designed for Swiss pharmaceutical firm Novartis evoke a tiered pagoda. But these nods to the past are never for history's sake alone, Liu said.

“I focus on the themes that tradition focuses on, rather than the forms that tradition presents,” he explained.





The eaves and cantilevered verandas of Liu's Novartis Shanghai Campus building put a contemporary spin on traditional Chinese architecture. Arch-Exist/The Pritzker Architecture Prize

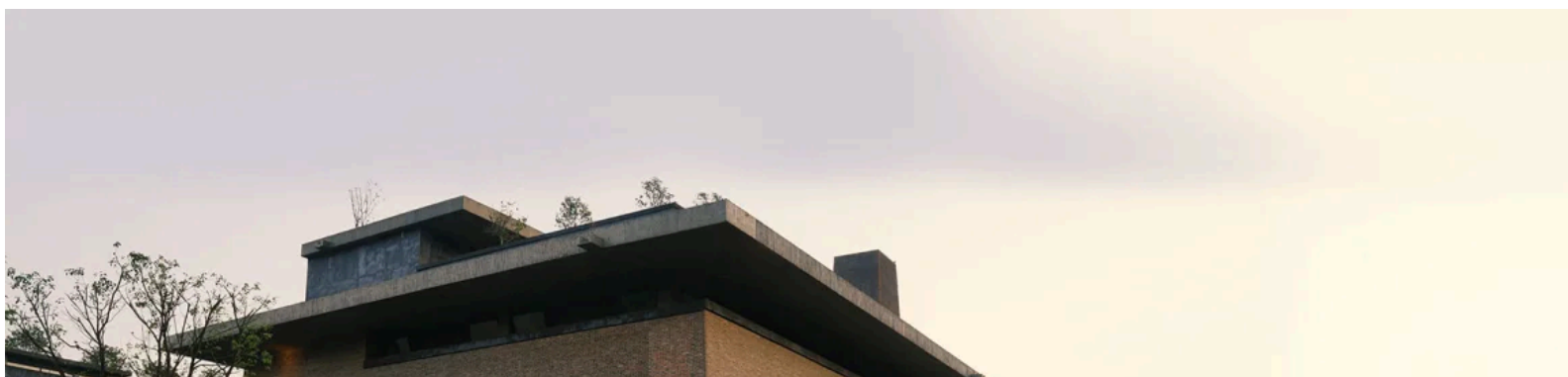
In other words, elements of traditional architecture must be reinterpreted for functional, modern use, not used as tributes to a bygone time. Indeed, China's cities are inundated with examples of the opposite, whereby curved roofs are added to otherwise characterless structures in the pursuit of an ill-defined "Chinese-ness."

"Traditional forms ... are the results of the culture, technology and people's philosophy of survival at that time," Liu explained. "If we focus on the superficial results, we will stop at that time. But if we focus on the themes that tradition has always focused on, but use current technology and methods, then there's a continuation of tradition."

China's new dawn

Born in 1956, three years before China's (and arguably the world's) most devastating famine, Liu's childhood revolved around the Chengdu hospital where his mother worked. He demonstrated an early aptitude for art and literature, though, like many of his generation, his teenage years were interrupted by the Cultural Revolution when he was sent to the countryside as part of Mao Zedong's "educated youth" program.

Liu's career has, however, neatly coincided with the *post*-Mao period — one that has seen architecture freed from state control and socialist ideals. He accepted a place at Chongqing's Institute of Architecture and Engineering in 1978, two years after the former Chinese Communist Party leader's death, and graduated amid the reform-era policies that opened China's centrally planned economy to free-market forces.





Liu's museum architecture, including the Suzhou Museum of Imperial Kiln Brick, was praised by the jury for being "at once a historical record, a piece of infrastructure, a landscape, and a remarkable public space." Liu Jian/The Pritzker Architecture Prize

This period heralded huge changes for architecture. Key foreign texts and journals from the field entered the country and became more widely available to students and academics. Government-controlled design institutes, like the one Liu worked at in his early career, were finally permitted to charge fees, having previously only served the state. Yet, in the fast-moving atmosphere of 1980s China, Liu still felt architecture “lagged behind.”

“When I graduated, it seemed that architects had nothing to do,” he said. “The economy had not developed, and ideas had not become active.”

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By the early 1990s, Liu — who was, at the time, also pursuing writing — considered quitting the profession altogether. He changed his mind after seeing an exhibition by a former classmate, the architect Tang Hua, that he says inspired him to escape the shadow cast by their sector’s state-controlled past. He established [Jiakun Architects](#), one of the country’s very first private practices, in 1999.

The firm’s early projects laid a blueprint for understanding Liu’s ethos. His Luyeyuan Stone Sculpture Art Museum, which opened in Chengdu in 2002, sits serenely in a bamboo forest, its rough concrete and gray shale existing in harmony with the stone artifacts housed within. The recesses and overhangs of his rust-colored Department of Sculpture building, completed for the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in Chongqing two years later, are themselves acts of sculpture. At the Museum of Clocks, also in Chengdu, textural red brickwork alludes more to the area’s humble past than a gleaming future.





The protruding upper levels of Sichuan Fine Arts Institute's Department of Sculpture allowed Liu to artfully maximize the narrow site's floor space. Arch-Exist/The Pritzker Architecture Prize



At the Museum of Clocks in Chengdu, sunlight passes through a circular ceiling void and slowly travels across the brick-walled courtyard like a sundial. Bi Kejian/The Pritzker Architecture Prize

As architecture in China became increasingly bold and bombastic in the 2010s (a trend that eventually led the country's cabinet, the State Council, to call for the end of "oversized, xenocentric, weird" buildings), Liu's output remained quiet and unpretentious — even when the scale of his commissions grew. By Liu's own admission, his firm was always too small to tackle the skyscrapers or mixed-use mega-projects that redrew China's skylines. But as his oeuvre came to encompass corporate real estate and urban regeneration, his motivations still lav

elsewhere.

“I am not very interested in the tendency of making taller and bigger buildings,” he said. “I am not necessarily consciously resisting it. I am just not very interested.”

Everyday architecture

Instead, Liu seeks to redress some of the ills generated by his country's rampant urbanization.

“China's cities are developing very fast, so they face two major challenges,” he explained. “One is the relationship with public space, and the other is the relationship with nature. I think my works focus on these two aspects.”



Pedestrians and cyclists pictured on the sloped pathways of West Village, which transformed an entire Chengdu block and remains Liu's largest work to date. Arch-Exist/The Pritzker Architecture Prize

Symbiosis between nature and architecture plays out at Liu's ambitious West Village, an inner-city Chengdu block transformed into a courtyard but at a neighborhood scale. Sloping pathways transport cyclists and pedestrians around a five-story structure that encircles soccer pitches and lush greenery, a park reimagined vertically.

This huge public gesture is accompanied by many tiny ones. For paving, Liu used bricks perforated with holes and filled with soil, allowing grass to sprout through the middle.

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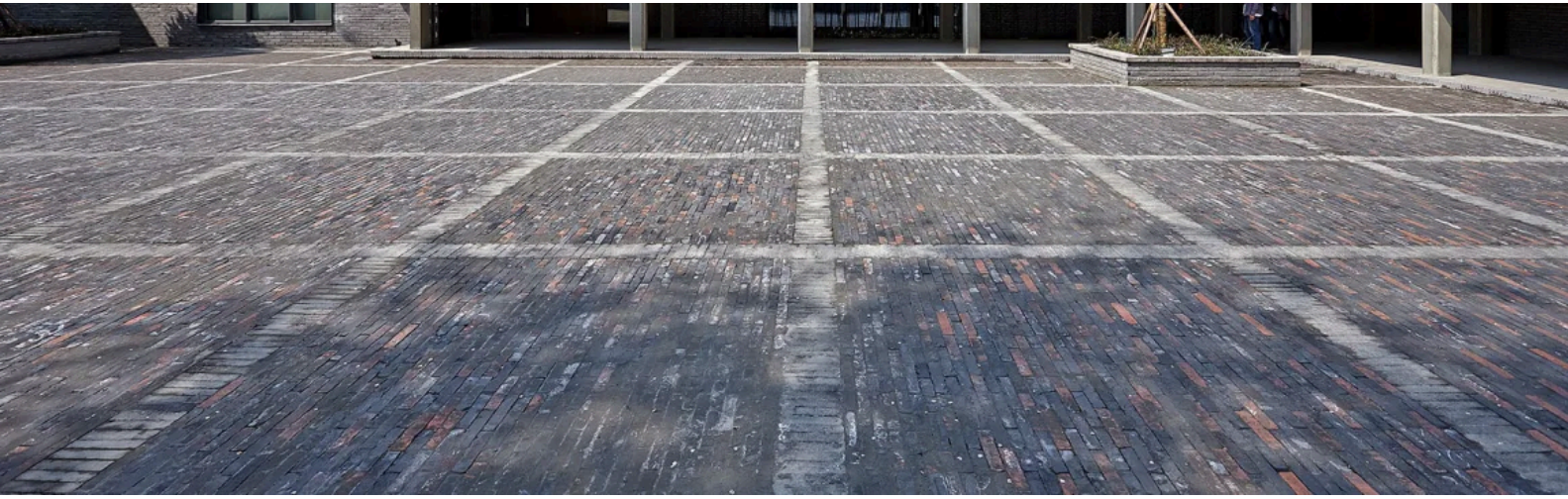
The scenic garden that became China's secretive seat of power

A few miles away, the Shuijingfang Museum has been constructed using similarly thoughtful building blocks: "Rebirth Bricks." Created by Liu's firm using rubble from the Wenchuan earthquake, which devastated the Sichuan region in 2008, the reconstructed bricks (made by mixing the rubble with wheat stalks and cement) have been employed in several of his projects. It's an innovation that typifies why Liu is celebrated for practicing a kind of everyday architecture in which local context reigns large.



Liu's "Rebirth Bricks," made using rubble from the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, are pictured in use at the Shuijingfang Museum in Chengdu. DAI Chun/The Pritzker Architecture Prize





At the Shuijingfang Museum, Liu sensitively surrounded the site's preexisting wood-framed buildings with new concrete structures. Arch-Exist/The Pritzker Architecture Prize

But does this mean the architect's vision will always be restricted to China, the country he most intimately understands?

Despite designing the first overseas pavilion for London's Serpentine Gallery in Beijing in 2018 and lecturing at institutions including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and London's Royal Academy of Arts, Liu has never completed a project abroad. Asked whether he would relish the prospect of a prestigious international commission, an opportunity winning the Pritzker Prize will surely present, Liu said his approach could indeed be adapted to foreign contexts with sufficient research and preparation.

"From the perspective of method and methodology, there is actually no problem in doing it abroad," he said, adding: "As long as I am fully familiar with the place, I think (my) set of methods is completely applicable."

CNN's Hassan Tayir contributed to this story.