






HIS MINIMAL SIDE

From the Bird's Nest to Houston: China-confined Ai Weiwei gets his work shown off at Architecture Center

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04.19.12 | 05:03 pm

Ai Weiwei is an artist known for working in an impressive range of mediums, including installations, photography and curatorial efforts. Yet, while one of his most successful works — the *Bird's Nest stadium*, centerpiece of the 2008 Beijing Olympics — has become an icon of 21st-century architecture, Ai's building designs have remained relatively unexplored by galleries, museums and scholars.

AIA Houston hopes to fill the gap with *Ai Weiwei: Five Houses*, a series of architectural models and renderings that form basis of a larger collaborative project that views residential design as a total work of art, a notion known in German as *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Working with Swiss architectural firm HFF, Ai created *five designs* for the exhibit (which opens Thursday night) that serve as the conceptual beginnings of a home crafted in conjunction with specialists in fields ranging from architecture and art to furniture and textile design. Fully realized under Ai's guidance, the project fuses the artist's work in conceptual art and building design on an unprecedented scale.

For now, however, the vision exists primarily in a collection of small wooden blocks.

"Most of us are used to seeing Ai Weiwei's more exuberant and stylized works like the Bird's Nest," AIA Houston executive director Rusty Bienvenue told CultureMap. "The pieces in this exhibit, though, are very pared down and minimal."

"The project is reminiscent of Ai's collaboration with HFF for 2009's *Artfarm project* in upstate New York. It's a beautiful contrast to a lot of his bolder art."

When AW Asia — the organization behind Ai's *Zodiac Heads* installation currently on view in Hermann Park — reached out to AIA Houston about the possibility of displaying the artist's building designs, the organization jumped at the opportunity to show a lesser-known side of an international art icon and respected human rights activist who remains *blocked* from leaving his native China due to his fierce disputes with the oppressive government regime.

"Considering his role as a political activist," Bienvenue said, "this exhibition of architectural designs has an even more interesting and important layer for us."

Rudick, Tyler. "From the Bird's Nest to Houston..." Culture Map Houston, April 19, 2012.

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