

## The Architecture of Density

Words: Rebecca Walker  
Images: [www.photomichaelwolf.com](http://www.photomichaelwolf.com)

**German-born photographer Michael Wolf has been described by some as 'humanly alert'. KEE talks to him about the urban dynamics of a complex culture.**

Michael Wolf views ordinary things in extraordinary ways. Culturally astute, Wolf's artistic inspiration comes from the local culture in which he immerses himself. Wolf has been fascinated by China's complex urban dynamics since moving to Asia as a contract photographer 10 years ago and his photography focuses on the idiosyncrasies of the Asian way of life. Insightful and absorbing, his latest book "Hong Kong, The Front Door/The Back Door" deals with the SAR's cultural identity through depictions of the city's architecture.

Wolf was born in Munich and grew up in the USA. He began a career in photography after graduating from the University of Essen in Germany, freelancing for various international publications including Time, Spiegel and Stern. In the early 1990s Wolf had an epiphany. "I was sitting in my room in Amsterdam and suddenly knew I needed to make a big change in my life. I had a picture of the globe in my head and when I came to Asia I knew that was where I needed to go."

His decision was a good one and it was in China that he found his ultimate inspiration. "I love the visual chaos of China. It is a photographers dream," says the photographer. Wolf's poignant portrayals of the lives and living conditions of his cultural environment are subjective and personal and have earned him international acclaim. As described by Art Critic Kenneth Baker, "By their formal intelligence and acuity of observation, Wolf's Hong Kong pictures easily earn the status of art works."

Wolf's first book, "China in Transition" (2001) documents the disappearing grandeur of the Middle Kingdom in China. It is a compelling portrait of old culture embarking into modernity and casts a moving gaze at China and its people on the threshold of the third millennium. His second book, "Sitting in China" (2002) depicts a multifaceted China, from its chairs to the mindset of its people. Through a diverse assortment of compelling images, Wolf documents the beauty of the ugly, the stretching of time, the art of improvisation, and the nature of the stool as a portrait of its user. He often depicts discarded objects of the man-made world in his photographs and is interested in the "beauty inherent in used objects." He explains, "My parents are both artists and from an early age my mother took me to flea markets to rummage through a myriad of used knick-knacks. I love pattern and character, and the feeling that something has a history."

Wolf's third book, "Chinese Propaganda Posters" (2003) showcases his vast personal collection of colourful propagandist artworks and cultural artifacts produced between the birth of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and the early 1980s. "Chinese Propaganda Posters" is whimsically structured to correspond with the chapters of Mao's Red Book and gives a sense of how the illiterate masses used images to define themselves in Communist China. "The posters give a sense of how the Chinese viewed their future at that time. The discrepancy between fantasy and reality really fascinates me and the posters are also very stylistically beautiful."

In his latest release, "Hong Kong: Front Door/Back Door" (2005), Wolf continues to explore the theme of the organic metropolis. Hong Kong is one of the most densely populated metropolitan areas in the world and Wolf's photographs seek out the human spirit in the urban jungle. The images in the book depict the high-rises that shape the spatial experience of Hong Kong's citizens. Since Wolf himself is one of those citizens (he has been a Hong Kong resident since 1994), his photographs have a distinctively personal essence. "To me the concept of the 'back-door' is far more interesting than the front. The back alleys contain a tremendous visual wealth. When you enter through the front door of someone's house you see what they want you to see: the best version. The back door on the other hand tells a culture's true story."

A close look at one of Wolf's architectural images uncovers irregularities such as plants, laundry and scaffolding that interrupt the orderly design of monolithic apartment buildings. The monotonous regularity of each façade is given a distinct personality through human details. "When people don't have enough space, they improvise and adapt. There are many symbols of Chinese thriftiness in the book that are very telling of the Eastern mindset. In the West we throw things away when they break. In the East people take the time to fix things, it doesn't matter what things look like, as long as they work."

Thought-provoking texts by art critic Kenneth Baker and designer Douglas Young are included in "Front Door/Back Door". The two pay a humanistic tribute to the ingenuity of city-dwellers and their content examines peoples' lifestyle choices and explores the concepts of form, function, identity, and design. As stated by Baker in the book's introduction: "The new Hong Kong residential architecture has turned the lives of the Hong Kong people inside-out." This assertion is supported by Young who says, "Buildings that begin as monoliths are slowly humanised by their inhabitants; architecture becomes a framework upon which people can hang their personal personalities."

Young describes Hong Kong as a "city of contrasts" and says, "Architects (in Hong Kong) have ingeniously stretched the tolerance of strict building codes by squeezing as many households as possible into a given site." Wolf chose to collaborate with Young and Baker on this project because he was drawn to their

cultural knowledge and artistic sensibility. “Douglas Young has a very interesting local vision of Hong Kong whereas Kenneth Baker puts the photographs into context artistically on an international level.”

Wolf's interest in the people and societal changes taking place in China earned his images first prize in the 'Contemporary Issues' section of the 2005 World Press Photo Awards. Held annually, the awards have come to be regarded as the most prestigious for photojournalism in the world. Says Wolf, “I have been a photojournalist for over 30 years, so it's great to be rewarded for all my hard work.”

Wolf is interested in exploring a wide range of multi-faceted artistic pursuits and says he has an ever-increasing urge to work on his own projects. His installation art piece, “The Real Toy Story”, is one such example. In 2004 he spent four weeks collecting over 20,000 toys from various charity shops and flea-markets, all with 'Made in China' stamps. He then visited five toy factories in China where he photographed the workers producing the toys and the resulting artwork was an elaborate installation that incorporated 16,000 toys and embedded photographs. The installation was extremely well received by art critics worldwide and will be exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago in 2006.

With the next 12 months booked in advance, Wolf shows no sign of slowing down. He stands by his motto: “If you are a vision and real conviction, you will find success.” And that he has.