

HUNAN- CENTRED DESIGN



CHANGSHA

In a city better known for antiquities than modern innovation, a bravura display of creative tech is bringing the focus firmly back to the present. **Jonathan Evans** meets the audio-visual kingpins responsible for Changsha's ambitious new theatres



PHOTOGRAPHY KRAFTWERK LIVING TECHNOLOGIES

Not so long ago, the name Changsha in southern China's Hunan province was one rarely heard of by foreign ears. Next to illustrious neighbours such as Guangzhou and Shenzhen, it was a city dwarfed in size and significance, but undeservedly so – Changsha has more than 3,000 years' worth of cultural heritage, a museum renowned as one of the best in the country, and plenty of fame within China for its spicy gastronomy. It holds ancient tombs from the Han dynasty, a strong connection with former resident Mao Zedong, and a rich tradition of crafts such as pottery, lacquerware, and silk.

Luckily, times are changing in Changsha. In 2017, it was nominated as a Culture City of East Asia, along with Kyoto in Japan and Daegu in South Korea. That same year, it was named one of UNESCO's Creative Cities for its media and arts industries.

The city's recent emergence as a manufacturing centre, prominent port, and mecca for foreign businesses – along with a sizeable overseas population – has brought rapid modernisation, and with it a boom in tourists seeking out the secrets of one of China's up-and-coming conurbations.

It's against this backdrop that a major new attraction aims to shed light on Changsha's history and culture using ultra-cutting-edge techniques. The vast Tongguan Kiln International Cultural and Tourism Center already holds eight museums and three luxury hotels, making it a heavyweight destination in the city's emerging tourist industry.

Among its 18 "cultural attractions", as they are known, are two recently opened theatres that showcase the technical brilliance of audio-visual supremos Kraftwerk Living Technologies, an Austrian-based group which has produced several entertainment attractions using large-scale multimedia technology." (*Kraftwerk* means "powerhouse" in German).



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WIDESCREEN AMBITION

The ambitious nature of these Changsha projects – one a remarkable “flying theatre” known as *Beautiful Hunan* which screens immersive footage of the same name, the other a multi-dimensional, 800-seat main cinema showing a 15-minute film called *Magic Glaze* – meant that the venue required experienced specialists to carry out their construction.

Kraftwerk Living Technologies’ recent track record – which includes a virtual underwater experience in New York’s Times Square, a James Bond-themed cinematic installation high among the Austrian Alps, and the world’s largest 5-D theatre at Chimelong Ocean Kingdom in Zhuhai, near Macau – made them natural frontrunners for an undertaking of this scale and sophistication, which evolved into the largest project to date in the company’s 26-year history.

“It was back in 2016 when we negotiated the contracts for this project in Changsha,” says Jennifer Zika of the company’s corporate communications arm. “China has been one of our key markets for a while with several projects in the entertainment and cultural sector, from Expo 2010 Shanghai to a unique dome installation

LEFT:

The animated 15-minute film *Magic Glaze* shows on a giant screen at a dedicated theatre.

BELOW:

The high-tech auditorium for the *Magic Glaze* movie was built in a circular shape to re-create a giant kiln.

in Macau. We were informed about a potential lead by a partner of ours, and soon afterwards we entered into the concept stage for the two attractions.”

The Tongguan theatres each focus on a particular aspect of life in this corner of China. While *Beautiful Hunan*, which opened last October, offers visitors a 72-seat, high-tech ride over the spectacular highlights of Hunan’s landscape, the main theatre which screens *Magic Glaze* resembles a pot or kiln, with a circular shape incorporating 360-degree projection and mapping surfaces so that guests so guests will feel like they are entering the interior of a burning oven.

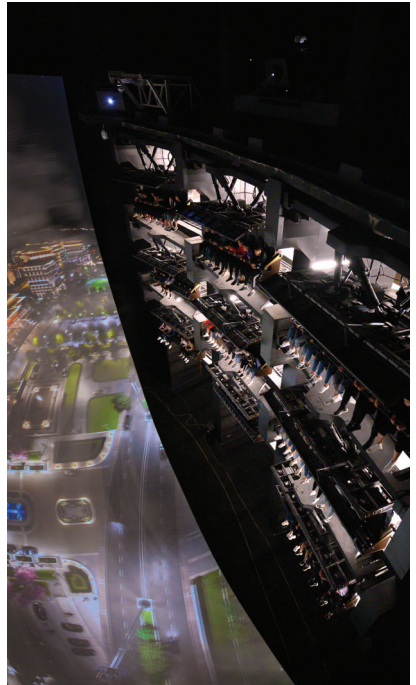
Magic Glaze zones in on Changsha’s tradition of porcelain manufacturing in a fashion that is as ingenious as it is, literally, immersive. The effects-laden show – which was produced by Los Angeles-based animation specialists Prana Studios, and soft-opened in March – tells the story of two characters, Xiaoxiao and Tongtong, who chase after the eponymous glaze. It is this elusive substance that will allow them to break the evil spell which looms over Tongguan, a subdistrict of Changsha celebrated for its centuries-old tradition of ceramics.

“It was important that porcelain craftsmanship was the main theme,” says Zika. “We were responsible for the technical design, planning, supply, integration, programming, and commissioning of the theatre – including all technical components such as the 3-D screen, projection, audio system, and special effects.”





LEFT, BELOW:
In the interactive
“flying theatre” of *Beautiful
Hunan*, thrill-seekers are
taken on a simulated ride
over both rural and urban
scenes from the province.



Apart from the action on the screen, the realism of the experience is enhanced for the audience with the use of integrated effects ranging from wind, water, and smoke to vibrations and “poke” effects. Running at three 15-minute shows per hour, the attraction has a daily capacity of more than 20,000 people.

FLYING COLOURS

For *Beautiful Hunan*, Canadian company CAVU Designwerks built the theatre, while Kraftwerk Living Technologies provided the screen and audio-visual system.

In an outstanding attraction that seems destined to do wonders for the local tourist economy, guests can enjoy a realistic feeling of flight as they soar across the most beautiful locations in Hunan province during a six-minute visual journey.

Covering an area of more than one million square metres, Tongguan Kiln International Cultural and Tourism Center – named after a pottery-producing site in Changsha that dates back more than a thousand years – is designed to appeal to all kinds of visitors, particularly those with an interest in the heritage of the area.

Grave expectations

Visit the tombs of **Mawangdui**, where in 1968, the immaculately preserved body of Han dynasty socialite Lady Dai was found inside a lavish coffin.
📍 89 Guhan Rd

Time immemorial

Dig deep into the past at the 68-year-old **Hunan Museum**, with its vast cache of artefacts from as far back as the Shang dynasty.
📍 50 Dongfeng Rd

Little wonders

Stop by **Changsha Window of the World** where replicas of iconic buildings like Angkor Wat, Shwedagon Pagoda, and the Sydney Opera House are showcased.
📍 485 Sanyi Ave



CHANGSHA'S THE STAR

What to see and do in the southern city.

SCOTCH THE RUMOURS



The world's biggest distillers return on 21-22 September for **Whisky Live**, now in its fourth year. The event at Niccolo Hotel also showcases vodkas, gins, rums, and cognacs; satellite events include a rare-whisky auction and bartender competition. "Locals are passionate about it, because Changsha is the only city apart from Shanghai that can hold such a large-scale whisky exhibition," says the organiser. "Brands can expand to central, western, and southern China through Whisky Live, and lots of people from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau [attend] our festival."

But the new theatre experiences – combined with children's amusement parks that also form part of the complex – ensure that young people are well catered for, too. Though Changsha attracts a large number of foreigners, it seems that locals and Mainlanders will be best provided for, since all content is provided in the Mandarin language only.

In this fertile urban environment which has staged many large-scale artistic, musical, and sporting events in the last few years, the centre aims to attract more than five million visitors annually.


Instilling contemporary pizzazz into the history, geography, and culture of Hunan using high-tech techniques, the new attractions introduced by Kraftwerk Living Technologies fit squarely into Tongguan Kiln International Cultural and Tourism Center's overall mission to inform, as well as entertain.

The centre aims to celebrate the region's heritage and craftsmanship, and bring them closer to the people,"

ABOVE:

Tongguan Kiln International Cultural and Tourism Center is a major destination in Changsha containing eight museums, three luxury hotels, and 18 cultural attractions.

says Zika. "*Magic Glaze* and *Beautiful Hunan* both entertain, but also seamlessly integrate the main theme into the story and experience, thus immersing the guests into art and culture.

"Flying" over the Hunan region as well as [participating in] an action-filled 3-D adventure are great additions to the more classical cultural offerings." 



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