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These days, the word "indie" can signify everything and it can signify nothing—the only universally held truth about it is that nobody agrees on what it means anymore. One of our most important artistic movements—not just in music, but American culture in general—is in crisis. And so we ask (and answer) this question.

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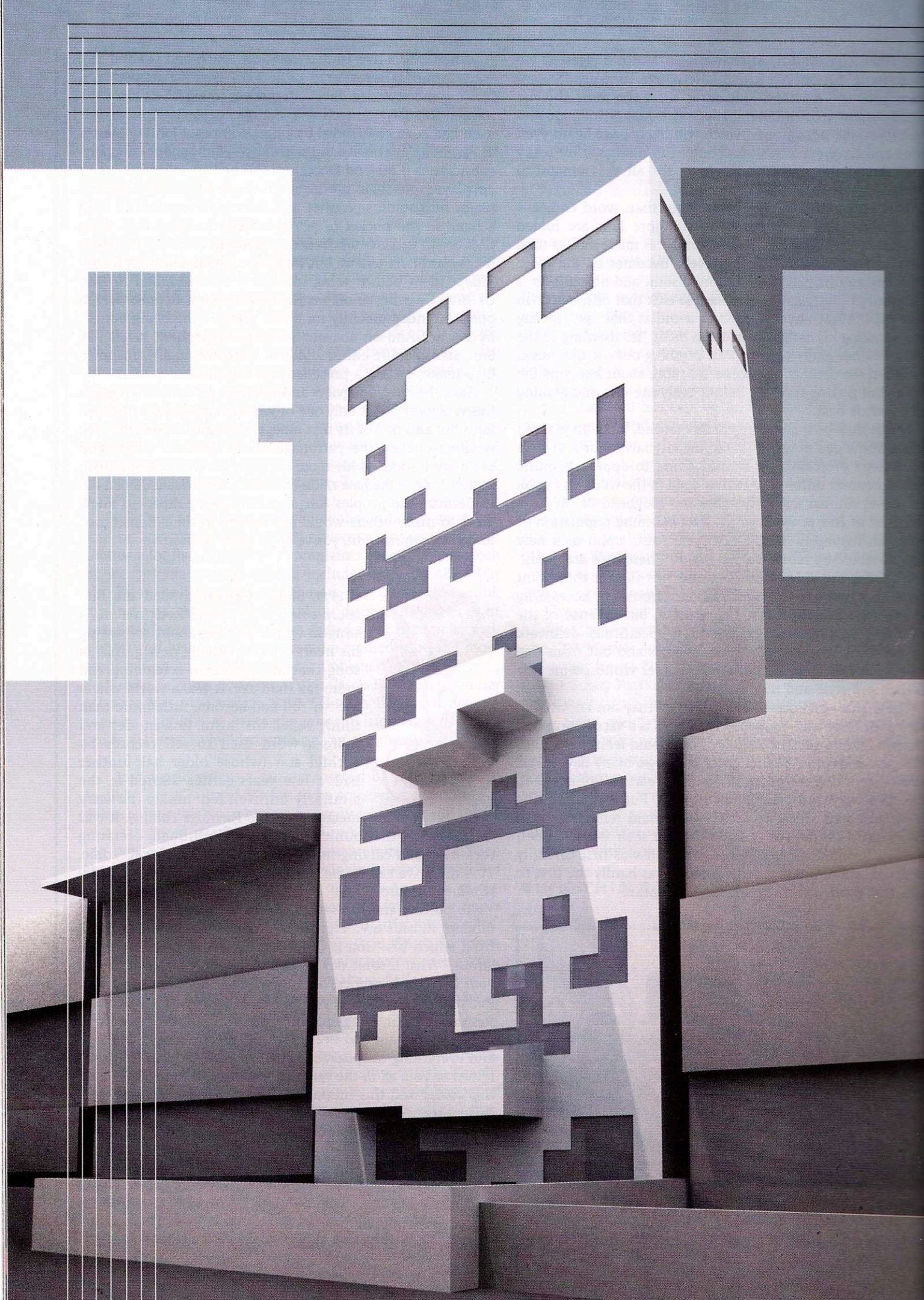
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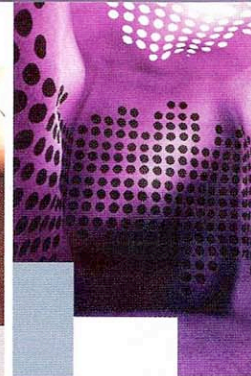
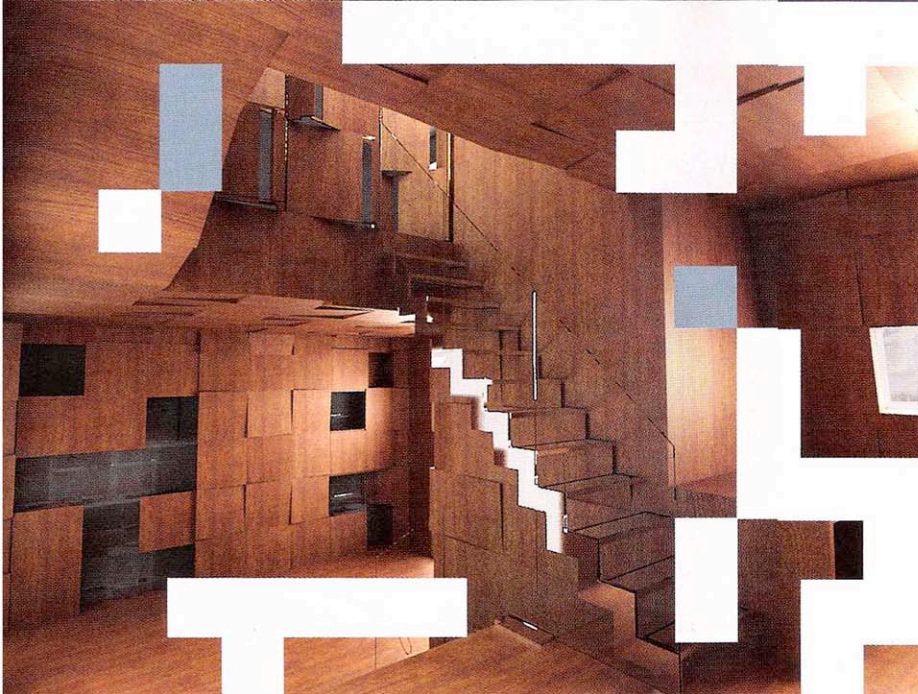
BY SHANNON WERLE

Nestled along the fringe of northern Taipei, a city of 2.6 million people cradled in a basin on the tip of Taiwan, is a peculiar structure punctuated by patchwork windows set into concrete with the whim of a jazz solo. The five-story tower sits just a block from the metro station, amidst a rambling array of apartment blocks, an elementary school and a pastiche of shops, but you'll have to crane your neck to catch a glimpse of the building, which is framed by nondescript neighbors in the pocket of a residential alley. The exterior hints at the sonic splendor inside—it's an inhabitable music box with the power to tune the sounds of a private dwelling.

The cost: \$900,000. The clients: former symphony conductor Chiu Chun-chiang and his wife, Wanchen

Hsieh, an award-winning oboist. The architects: another married couple, Grace Cheung and Royce YC Hong, co-founders of Taipei-based architecture office XRANGE, which has a history of unusual design. The firm's 2006 Ant Farm House, an interwoven network of narrow living spaces wrapped around an indigenous stone house in the manner of an underground ant colony, received a coveted glossy spread in *Phaidon Atlas of 21st Century World Architecture*, an industry Bible. Cheung and Hong's newest house is defined largely by its wooden Music Box, a "reverberation chamber" that dominates the tower like a wedding-cake centerpiece, allowing residents to tune the sounds floating through their home.

"The idea is of putting a performance hall—like an auditorium space—inside of the house," Cheung explains. A swarm of 375 walnut modules, wrapping the walls and sprouting out of the ceiling, protrude at slightly different angles in order to prevent direct echoing. Particular panels can be pushed, pulled or pounded shut with louvers, as if an elaborate off-switch. Although the architects intended to construct the Music Box out of ebony, the ink-black wood usu-



Grace Cheung (green dress) and the XRANGE team.

"I'M ALWAYS INTERESTED IN HOW SPACES FLOW INTO A BUILDING, AND CREATING FLOW OF FORM. SO INSTEAD OF SUPPRESSING THE SOUND I WANTED TO FIND A WAY TO MOVE IT AROUND THE HOUSE."

ally restricted to smaller portions such as the accidental keys on a piano, walnut proved more feasible and a better fit for the budget. Centralized on the third story, the Music Box—where music is created, and sounds throughout the house are channeled and "tuned" by louvers—flows as a vertical link throughout the tower, eventually spilling over into stadium-style seating for impromptu gatherings and formal recitals alike.

Although the designers were tied to the two young musicians by family friends, they weren't introduced until the musicians moved back to Taipei three years ago after spending more than a decade abroad, initially as students in Germany and later developing their careers throughout Europe.

"When they came to us," Cheung says, "I thought, obviously, music is a really important element in their lives. I can imagine how, in their daily lives, they will talk about music—like every second of the day. My husband and I talk about design all of the time, not necessarily about work, but it just comes out in the conversation."

After a visit to XRANGE headquarters, the design process for the house began in 2006. Chun-chiang and Hsieh already had a location for the project, a 1,600 square-foot urban plot handed down to the conductor following his mother's death. It had been the site of a former family home, and the couple had a deep, sentimental attachment to it. "We wanted this to be a very unique house," Chun-chiang and Hsieh wrote in a recent email, translated from Chinese. "The architecture will tell our story—a story that connects our past, our work, our hobbies, our family and our future."

Fitting that story—and a house—onto the modest urban

lot was another challenge. "It's so incredibly small that it's a bit like one of those little Japanese houses," Cheung says. "In order to maximize all of the square footage that we can build on that site, the house took the form of a five-story tower with five floors and a cellar." Each floor is essentially its own room: The cellar is located below the first floor bedroom/multipurpose space. The third floor is dedicated to the Music Box core, which is sandwiched between combined living, dining and kitchen quarters on the second floor and a master bedroom on the fourth. A roof terrace and Buddhist shrine caps the additional fifth-floor bedroom.

The musicians' two Steinway pianos, which combine to weigh a half-ton, are already factored into the structural calculations. (Design team member Dema Chang says the pianos will be added halfway through construction, then built around—it's the only way they'd fit.) The finished house, according to the clients, "will be a place of free interaction, where one can enjoy music and wine in any corner of the house, sitting or lying down." They mean it about the wine—their cellar currently holds more than 500 bottles. Their new wine cellar, designed in a bold shade of purple, assures storage for an additional thousand. "We started with the idea of a cup of wine," Chang says, "so the shape of the cellar is like the form of wine moving in the glasses."

Construction on the House of Music began in June 2009; it's slated for completion in December 2010. At this point, though, the architects agree that most major hurdles have been crossed. Anxieties peaked before a Feng Shui master was invited to inspect the design, as is customary practice in Taiwan. Qi (roughly pronounced 'chee')—a positive or negative energy—plays a central role in the ancient Chinese art of Feng Shui, along with the strategic placement of traditional Chinese elements such as the dragon, a symbol of prosperity. "I thought that the Qi of the music would be very good for the house," Cheung says. "I'm always interested in how spaces flow into a building, and creating flow of form. So instead of suppressing the sound I wanted to find a way to move it around the house." As it turns out, inhabitable music boxes are particularly suited for transporting positive energies. "The Music Box punches through the bedrooms and ends on the skylights, and the master believed that particular space is where the dragon could stay," explains Cheung.

"Saved," she adds, "by a Feng Shui master." *Fin*