

“SHANGHAI ARCHITECTURE”
SCANDINAVIAN TRAVELER; OCT 2018, P65-68, 72



Shanghai architecture



Old bricks

From the classic colonial glamor of the Bund to the skyscrapers that form a futuristic mirror on the opposite bank of the Huangpu River, Shanghai is a masterclass in balancing the past and present.

By CRYSTAL WILDE
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...new starts

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Architect Lyndon Neri has completed seven architectural projects in Shanghai.

I was at Xintiandi – an affluent downtown shopping and lifestyle district – that the “re-use and improve” approach now synonymous with Shanghai’s urban development was arguably first applied. Composed of reconstituted 19th century shikumen houses, the area of low-rise grey stone buildings connected by a warren of narrow alleys is dubbed where “yesterday and tomorrow meet in Shanghai today.”

Developed more than 20 years ago by American architect Benjamin T. Wood and Japanese design firm Nikken Sekkei International, this modern representation of Shanghai’s past quickly became one of the most expensive addresses in the world, with real estate going for more per square-meter than property in Tokyo, London or New York. The fact that Xintiandi was so readily received, with the district and the neighboring Tianzifang art street attracting thousands of visitors each day, spurred other ambitious developers to attempt similar feats of renewal, which would ultimately result in a city-wide wave.

INTERNATIONALLY-ACCLAIMED Filipino-Chinese architect Lyndon Neri knows the cityscape and its subtleties better than most and is well aware of how transient Shanghai’s urban sands can be. Having opened his first design shop in 2006 with life and work partner Rosanna Hu on the Bund, the city’s most sought-after strip of real estate, the pair – known collectively by their architecture practice Neri & Hu – have had to move three times. Once the rent rocketed, another time the new subletting laws left them scuppered, but with each relocation they bounced back with a bigger, better and ultimately more interesting property to call their base. A paradigm of Shanghai’s architectural nature as a whole, Neri & Hu work to enrich the legacy of a landscape that’s constantly changing.

Despite the fast-moving nature of retail rentals in the city, Design Republic Commune, Neri and Hu’s flagship interiors store, has held on to its enviable Jina’an location for more than six years. The former police headquarters, built by the British in the 1930s, was serving as a school, but well past its peak when Neri first stumbled upon it. “The children were running around as the plaster was literally falling off the walls,” he says.

The couple took over the neglected red brick property when the school gave up its lease, and promptly

Interior of Design Commune, a café located in a renovated former police station.

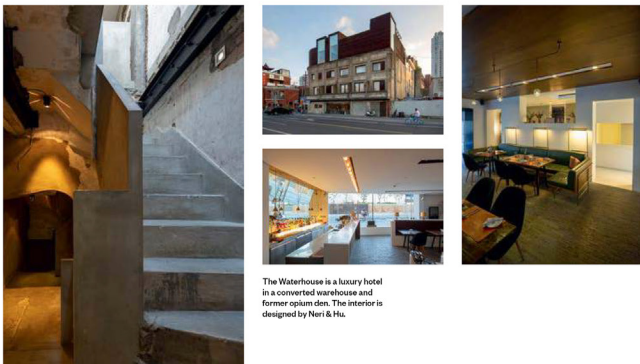


“Yesterday and tomorrow meet in Shanghai today”

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The Waterhouse is a luxury hotel in a converted warehouse and former opium den. The interior is designed by Neri & Hu.

set about nursing it back to health. Taking a surgical approach to the renovations, they cut away crippled appendages, such as mismatched window frames and crumbling walls, and added selected prosthetics, including a modern glassy shopfront on the street level. What emerged from the rubble was a clear intention to connect the past and present, allowing a historical relic to be experienced afresh.

A stone's throw away, amid the wide leafy streets of the city's former French Concession, the theme continues at Columbia Circle. This gaggle of 1920s to 1930s buildings originally served as a country club for foreign leaseholders, before housing biological experiments after WWII and eventually being left to ruin.

A 2016 RENOVATION at the hands of overachieving Dutchman Rem Koolhaas, described by Neri as “probably the most important architect of our generation,” has finally seen the complex overhauled in the same vein as Milan's Prada Fondazione. The original Spanish Revival buildings have been reanimated with new interiors, modern cladding and fresh purpose: an industrial metal canopy adorns the luxury shops that now sit in the clubhouse, the former gym has been re-invented as a small-plate Mediterranean restaurant and the painstakingly-preserved swimming pool is now a pop-up event space.

Also still standing in Columbia Circle is the 1930s Sun Ke Villa, a residence built for the son of Sun Yat-

Sen – the founding father of the Republic of China – by legendary Hungarian architect Lazlo Hudec. Hudec, who came to Shanghai after jumping from a Russian prisoner of war train during WWI, is revered in these parts. In the years following his long march from the edge of Siberia, the prolific architect had a huge impact on Shanghai's cityscape.

STANDING OUT ON another French Concession street like the world's most awe-inspiring sore thumb, Wukang Mansion is not Hudec's most famous Shanghai building – that accolade probably belongs to the monolithic 22-floor Park Hotel – but it's probably the one most cherished by the locals. Also known as the Normandy, owing to its boat-like form deliberately reminiscent of the French battleship of the same name, this 1924 masterpiece of red brick, wrought iron and glass occupying a corner on a bustling intersection is the oldest veranda-style apartment building in Shanghai. Despite being dubbed “The Diving Board” after several of its set-up celebrity residents committed suicide during the Cultural Revolution, Wukang Mansion is remarkably still thriving in its original function.

Gazing adoringly at its facade while taking photos of a nearby muddle of bamboo scaffolding – “that's a restaurant interior right there” – Neri makes no attempt

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stripped to its raw concrete and brick walls, making its decay – the very reason the developers originally wanted it razed – its defining feature. The finished but unpolished product, complete with paper chandeliers, defunct service staircases and weather-stained walls, has proven to be a hit with those who can afford this new breed of distressed luxury. In recent years, David Beckham, Lady Gaga, and Justin Timberlake have all stayed here, with Beckham booking the entire building for himself and his entourage.

BACK AT DESIGN Republic Commune, Neri explains how the government is considering ordering the removal of his glassy shopfront extension. But with old Shanghai as the keeper of his heart, he can't argue with the impulse to preserve.

“FROM A COMMERCIAL point of view, everyone thinks I'm nuts. But I'm kind of excited about giving the building back its original facade,” he says. “Renovating here is always a bit of a crap shoot, but urban renewal and regeneration are key to Shanghai's future.” ◊

‘Urban renewal and regeneration are key to Shanghai's future’



BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS ◊ Sample a range of Chinese breakfast staples at this sweetly-executed Taiwanese chain. Neri is addicted to dipping crispy dough strips (you-tiao) into sweet soy milk.
Taiwan Village
67 JingFu Li

SHANGHAI SNEAKERS ◊ China's answer to Converse, this Shanghai sneaker brand is sure to take over the world one day. The cool retro-looking shoes are currently criminally affordable, so grab yourself a pair (or two) before they triple in price.
Felix by Culture Matters
206 Middle Wulumuqi Road
foxyso-shoes.com

MADEN IN CHINA ◊ Described by Neri as a high-end Chinese Ikea, this furniture store is bringing a whole new meaning to “made in China.” With Italian designer Luca Nicetto serving as creative director and all products made on the mainland, it's the place to source the city's best-priced original statement pieces.
Zuoze
388 Panyu Road
nicettozuoze.com