



THE (FRESH) SPIN DOCTORS

Bridging past, present and future

35th Anniversary

As multidisciplinary designers, Shanghai-based Lyndon Neri and Rossana Hu often pull off the impossible, creating ultra-original projects while respecting tradition

INTERVIEW _ Simon Lewsen



RIGHT: A grid of glowing bulb lights illuminates Neri&Hu's louvred wood and gray brick Suzhou Chapel in China's Jiangsu Province. The project's rich material palette also includes terrazzo and concrete, as seen in the staircase above.

At the beginning of this century, husband and wife design team Lyndon Neri and Rossana Hu had cushy jobs in the office of American architect Michael Graves. By the middle of the 2000s, the couple had decamped to China, where they founded Neri&Hu Design and Research Office, their Shanghai-based practice. Although Shanghai has a rich architectural history — it's home to masterpieces from the Qing Dynasty to the Deco era and everything in between — the city, at the time, was hardly a global design hub.

But Neri and Hu have presided over a kind of Shanghai renaissance. Their work across architecture, interiors and furniture design is bracingly original but never iconoclastic. In their practice, creativity coexists with a strong sense of tradition. Few architects pull off this balancing act quite so well. In January, on the 16th anniversary of the founding of their firm, the two spoke to *Azure* about the surprising direction their careers have taken since they made their move to China.

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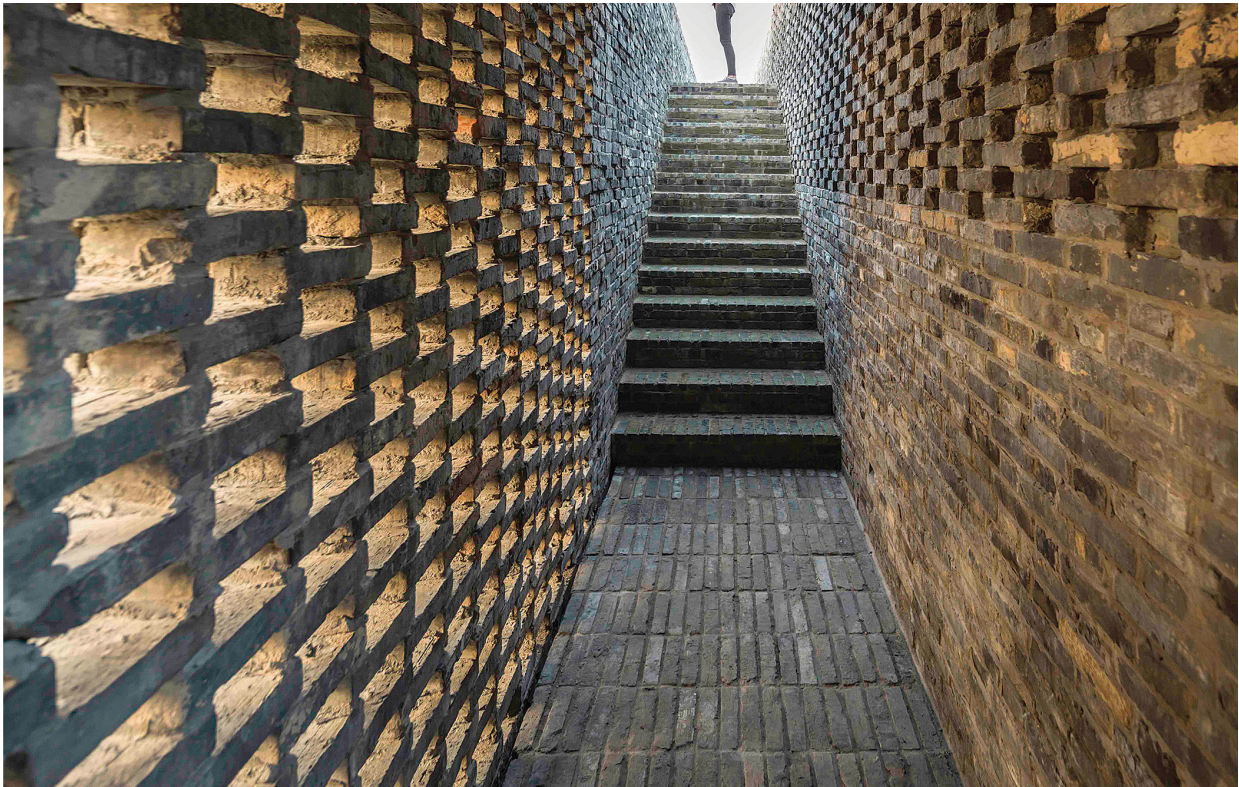


PHOTO BY ANDREW ROWAT (PORTRAIT), PEDRO PESEHAUTE (ALL OTHERS ON SPREAD)

LEFT: Lyndon Neri and Rossana Hu launched their practice in 2004, a year after moving to Shanghai to work on a project for Michael Graves.

ABOVE: Inspired by traditional courtyards and gardens, the couple studded the 20-room Tsingpu Yangzhou Retreat with a network of reclaimed-brick walls and paths, creating graphic brickwork tapestries and framed views of sky and earth in the process.

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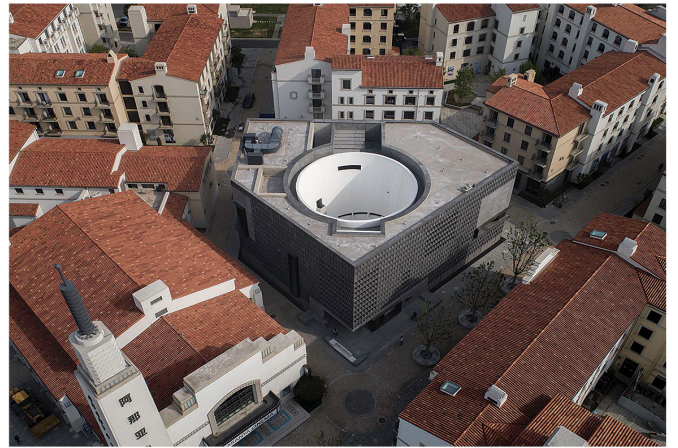
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BELOW AND RIGHT: Aranya Art Center was completed last year in the port city of Qinhuangdao; the monolithic, 1,500-square-metre facility features galleries, a café and an open-air amphitheatre that's filled with water when not in use, turning it into a pond.





LEFT: Now recognized as a masterpiece, the Waterhouse at South Bund, a four-storey boutique hotel built into a former Japanese Army building, was underappreciated by many in Shanghai when it was unveiled in 2010. Perceptions changed when global celebrities began hanging out there.

runs throughout much of the interiors. I believe it's supposed to evoke a lantern?

LN: For the client, we had to find a powerful analogy. And the lantern came to mind — a guiding light in search of beauty. So that was the analogy, but our main interest as architects was to play with the figure and the ground.

What do you mean?

RH: At different parts of the building, you perceive the latticework differently. When you're on the rooftops of nearby buildings in Seoul, especially at night, the latticework glows and seems to merge with the structure. But when you're inside the interior, you walk through the latticework as if it's in the background. It feels almost like negative space.

You're very interested in this kind of interior detailing. A building, for you, is never just a schematic shell. You even have a furniture- and interior-design practice.

Why do you insist on doing all of these things?

LN: In China, it's important to control the quality of the projects you do. When we started, we could find virtually no graphic designers or interior designers to work with. People would ask us to do these things and we'd say, "Are you kidding? Can you hire someone else?" Then they would get someone and we'd be like, "Oh, okay. Maybe we should just do it."

I feel like I can't end this interview without asking about at least one furniture project. In 2015, the company Fritz Hansen invited you and other designers to reimagine Arne Jacobsen's classic Series 7 chair. How do you even begin to improve upon something so iconic?

LN: We decided that, as in the story of Adam and Eve, this chair needed a partner — one it could converse with. Ours was one of the simplest designs of the bunch. We just added one more piece.

Having multiplied the existing design by two, you remained true to the original form of the piece and you respected historical precedent. That seems congruent with your overall approach to design.

LN: A lot of the other architects deconstructed Arne Jacobsen's piece. We thought it was just so good as it was. AZ.neriandhu.com

ramp that climbs from the entrance to the actual chapel, with viewing stations along the way. Interestingly, many people who visit the site choose to spend most of their time in that interstitial space.

They get proximity to the architecture without having to conduct themselves with solemnity, since they're not in the actual chapel?

LN: Exactly. There's some truth to the fact that people are intimidated when they're in a formal or sacred space.

I'd like to talk about another regional typology: the walled garden, which you reference in your Tsingpu Yangzhou Retreat with a series of adjacent courtyards demarcated by patterned brick walls.

RH: With that project, we were thinking about the Yangzhou garden typology. In these sites — typically a mansion owned by a rich scholar — the garden is 10 times bigger than the house. The garden is supposed to be a microcosm of the scholar's world view. The scholarly activities of poetry-making and painting and musical composition happen there. We thought it was interesting for people to gain a contemporary interpretation of this historical building type.

Speaking of contemporary riffs on classic themes, can you talk about your flagship store for the Asian skincare brand Sulwhasoo? That building appears luminous, thanks to a shiny brass latticework that