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When it comes to women

an impressed by the female characters

complex and extremely painful for young people. I wanted to show that this virtual world, which can be hard and horrible, can also be positive," he said.

Suzu and her computer geek friend are far from the women that usually populate Japanese anime — which is where Hosoda takes issue with Miyazaki, the Oscar-winning legend behind classics such as *Spirited Away*.

"You only have to watch Japanese animation to see how young women are not taken seriously in Japanese society," he said.

"It really annoys me to see how young women are often seen in Japanese animation — treated as sacred — which has nothing to do with the reality of who they are," Hosoda said, with evident frustration.

Without naming Miyazaki, Hosoda was unsparing about the Studio Ghibli founder.

"I will not name him, but there is a great master of animation who always takes a young woman as his heroine. And to be frank I think he does it because he does not have confidence in himself as a man."

"This veneration of young women really disturbs me and I do not want to be part of it."

He wants to free his heroines from being paragons of virtue and innocence and "this oppression of having to be like everyone else."

Hosoda and Miyazaki have history.

The 53-year-old was seen as the natural successor to Miyazaki after he was called in from the outside by Ghibli to direct the Oscar-nominated *Howl's Moving Castle*. But Hosoda walked out midway through to set up his own studio.

The director prefers stories that "show the good and the bad in people. This tension is what being human is all about."

Which is why he was also drawn to bringing *Beauty and the Beast* up to date. "In the original story the Beast is the most interesting character. He is ugly and has his violence but he is sensitive and vulnerable inside too."

"Beauty is just a cipher. It is all about her looks. I wanted to make her as complex and rich."

That duality is also there in his fascination with the digital world that began with his first hit, *Digimon: The Movie*.

"I keep returning to the internet. First with *Digimon* and then with *Summer Wars* in 2009 and now again."

And he is more convinced than ever that we cannot keep dismissing it as the source of all evil. "Young people can never separate themselves from it. They grew up with it. We have to accept it and learn to use it better."



stival last week. Photo: WireImage



The Tsingpu Yangzhou Retreat, a boutique hotel designed by Neri&Hu, used "garbage" such as old bricks from the area to tell the story of the region. Photos: Handouts

BUILDING DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Shanghai-based architects and designers Neri&Hu root their contemporary visions in local history

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Lyndon Neri and Rossana Hu, the duo behind Neri&Hu, published their first book four years ago. It documented the first 10 years of their architectural practice, which they founded in Shanghai in 2004. "But it was kind of anticlimactic," says Neri.

A publication delay meant that it had already missed several years of evolution in the duo's work by the time it came out. It also missed a pivotal moment in China, which had developed an appetite for thoughtful, sophisticated architecture after years of rampant economic growth.

And so the architects got to work on a new book, *Thresholds: Time, Space and Practice* (Thames & Hudson). It is an ambitious attempt to capture the intellectual currents that course through Neri&Hu's work, which encompasses architecture, interior design, products and branding.

The book includes essays by other architects, among them Pritzker Prize winner Rafael Moneo and Harvard professor Sarah M. Whiting, who offer succinct analyses of exactly what it is that makes the Shanghai firm's work so interesting. Whiting describes it as a "doubled blackjack bet", combining seemingly contradictory concepts like "future artefacts" and "inhabitable strata" in spaces that raise more questions than they answer.

Heady stuff — but the book's photo spreads, diagrams and illustrations make it easy to appreciate why Neri&Hu have earned international acclaim over the past 15 years.

Along with dozens of small retail spaces, residences and conceptual installations, their key



Top: The Waterhouse at South Bund, Shanghai. Above: Lyndon Neri and Rossana Hu.

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LYNDON NERI, NERI&HU

projects include The Waterhouse at South Bund, a boutique hotel fashioned out of a decrepit 1930s warehouse, as well as the Suzhou Chapel. From the outside, it appears to be an ethereal glass box set atop a sturdy base of local grey brick, but inside it contains a luminous wood nave that is as warm as the exterior is cool.

Most of Neri&Hu's projects layer forms and materials in ways that feel contemporary yet rooted in local traditions. The Yangsheng Lake Villas in Suzhou offer a modernist interpretation of traditional courtyard houses, with metal screens that call to mind the bricks used in the area's historic architecture.

A new lobby for the Shanghai Theatre — an art deco palace that had been heavily modified with piecemeal renovations — recalls the theatre's original splendour through moody granite-coloured spaces with bronze accents.

In designing a new Shanghai campus for Swiss lift manufacturer Schindler, the architects created a massive grey brick wall whose variety of textures makes it look deceptively ancient.

The couple explain how their work is underpinned by the interconnection of old and new, rough and smooth, transparent and opaque. "Most architects like the idea of tabula rasa, starting from scratch," says Neri. "But Rossana and I do not always believe in that."

When they moved to China in the early 2000s — Neri is Chinese Filipino, Hu is Taiwanese American, and both had been working in the United States — the couple were shocked by how disposable so much of the country's built environment had become.

Entire cycles of development, abandonment and redevelopment had been compressed into

just a few years. "How do you deal with abandonment in a society that deals with new, new, new?" asks Neri.

It comes down to a few of the ideas that Neri&Hu explore in their book — the idea of the vernacular, how to represent local culture and why architecture must accommodate the change and decay that comes from age. Hu says these are concepts that came to fruition when they began working on The Waterhouse in 2006. Although it was an old building, it wasn't considered historically important by officials, and the client expected to demolish it. But Neri and Hu's first site visit revealed a building rich in character, patina and quirks such as stairs to nowhere.

"We came home and said, 'What if we try to preserve the parts we thought were interesting?'" recalls Hu. "The client was shocked." But they successfully argued their case.

The result marked a turning point in the historic conservation in Shanghai, highlighting the value of the ordinary buildings that give the city its unique feel.

Their experience with that project has informed many others since. The Design Republic Commune in Shanghai, which houses a design hub and a flagship location of Design Republic, Neri&Hu's own brand of shops, takes what the architects call a "surgical" approach to adapting a historic police headquarters in a stately Edwardian building from 1910, removing small parts of the original structure and adding steel and glass additions to accommodate new uses.

In the Shanghai neighbourhood of Tianzifang, the architects plugged in the vacant space between two historic rowhouses with a radically transparent glass

facade that emphasises, by way of contrast, the architectural details of its neighbours.

In Yangzhou, where the firm designed the Tsingpu Yangzhou Retreat — which is arranged around a series of courtyards made with local brick and timber — he says they started going around asking people for their "garbage" — old bricks, things with different shades and materials. The material tells the story of a particular region.

That has become a guiding principle for the practice, whose projects span the world. Although most of their work is in China, Neri and Hu have designed buildings and interiors throughout Asia, Europe, the Americas and Australia.

In Kuala Lumpur, the Allia Bangsar caps a high-rise hotel with a surprisingly intimate courtyard. In Paris, for a Japanese-Italian restaurant called Papi, the architects embraced the decay of a 19th-century Haussmannian retail space, installing cheerily curvaceous interior amid exposed stone and peeling plaster.

In one of their current projects in Murano in Venice, Italy, they are exploring the Austrian influence that pervades the surrounding region, which was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire for much of the 19th century. "The idea of creating vernacular is a global issue," says Neri.

The couple and their practice have no shortage of opportunities to explore those issues. But they are choosy about what kind of projects they work on. Neri says they were approached by 500 prospective clients last year. "We took on 12. As the practice has grown, we realised we were not so interested in the commercial aspect of architecture. We're more interested in how culture can be represented in architecture." There are still a lot more ideas to explore — and perhaps more books to write.