

“CONTEXTUAL HOTELS”  
FRAME; JULY 2022



HOSPITALITY

# contextual hotels

Abandoning glitz and glamour, a number of new hotels in China are connecting to their context in thoughtful – and at times, philosophical – ways, unearthing history for a modern audience and offering new perspectives on their neighbourhoods.

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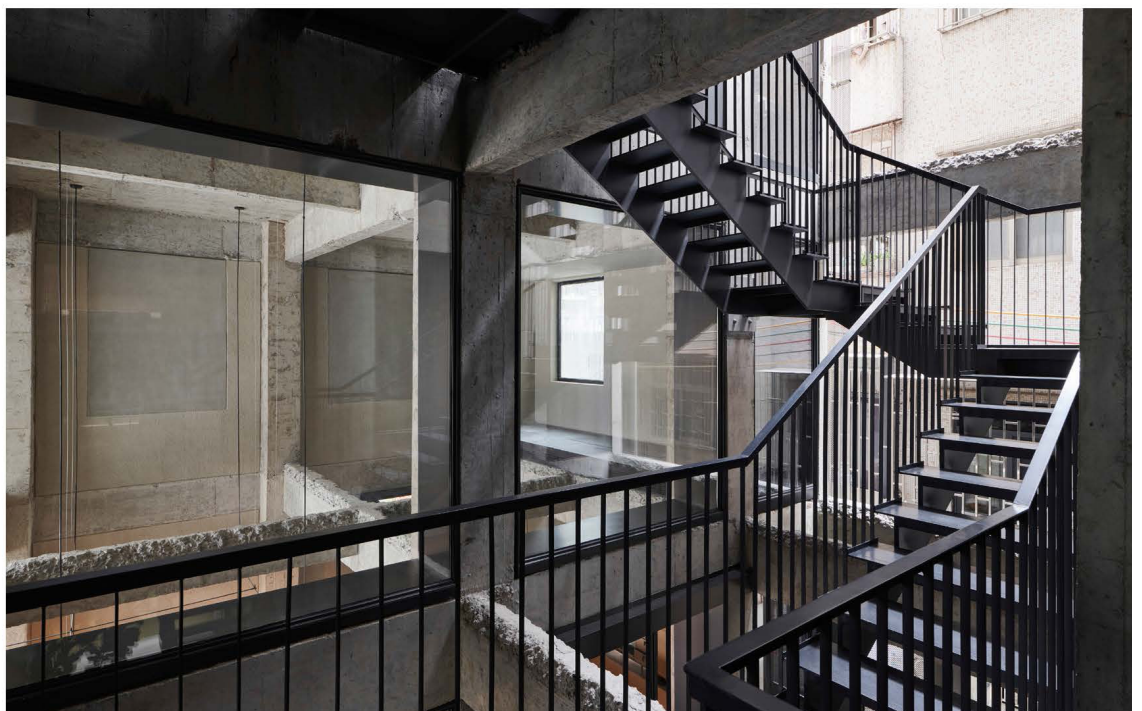
David Wang, a professor of architecture at Washington State University, writes in his 2016 book *A Philosophy of Chinese Architecture* that calligraphy traditionally influenced the design of town plans across the country. For centuries, Wang notes, the *qi* or vital energy of built environments in China has flowed through the writing that adorned homes, entrances and gardens. Contemporary Chinese architecture continues to be permeated by the calligraphic spirit through, in Wang's words, 'the fusing of nature with material production into one seamless, seemingly organic operation, from conception to empirical expression'.

This synergistic interaction between the artificial and the biological is increasingly being brought to the fore in some of the most recent hotel designs to emerge in China, especially since the beginning of the pandemic. In May last year on Frameweb.com, our contributing hospitality editor Kristofer Thomas explored one of the key reasons behind this trend: gone are the days of the early noughties, when China was experiencing an economic boom, and the hospitality market catered to a desire for 'aspirational glitz and glamorous spectacle'. The accumulation of national wealth over the last two decades engendered greater curiosity towards and appetite for a more toned

down 'residential aesthetic', one that suggests a quiet confidence in China's place in the global order, and that doesn't need to announce itself by way of opulent splendour.

This return to the serene, calligraphic fluidity of the philosophical roots of Chinese architecture has been especially evident in the restoration and conversion of urban complexes into hotels. The pandemic has also given architects the opportunity and time to mine the rich sociopolitical potential of creative interactivity between buildings and their forgotten, buried history. China's stringent quarantine rules upon returning from outbound travel have led to a tremendous uptick in domestic tourism, with CNN reporting an expected €484 billion in revenue from the latter. What this means is that guests are more likely to fully appreciate how the revamping of these hotels has been done in ways that are spatially and historically sensitive.

In Xing Ruan's book *Confucius' Courtyard: Architecture, Philosophy and the Good Life in China*, the academic explains how traditional courtyard buildings are a physical enactment of the Daoist concept of 'void out of substance', quoting ancient Chinese philosopher and writer Laozi: 'We pierce doors and windows to make a house; and it is in these spaces where there is nothing that the >>







### Slices of life

When converting a residential building into Nantou City Guesthouse, Neri&Hu likened the intervention to cutting the building open. Seeking to reveal its original character and highlight its rich layers of history, the designers maintained the building's façade but added a screen-like covering. The exterior screen – along with other cut-out windows – are so-called 'urban incisions' that create a conversation with the greater bustling urban environment.

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