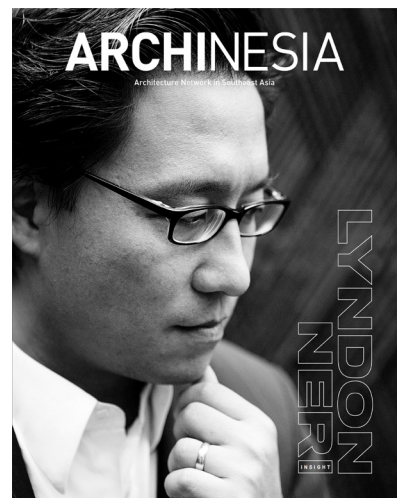




INSIGHT

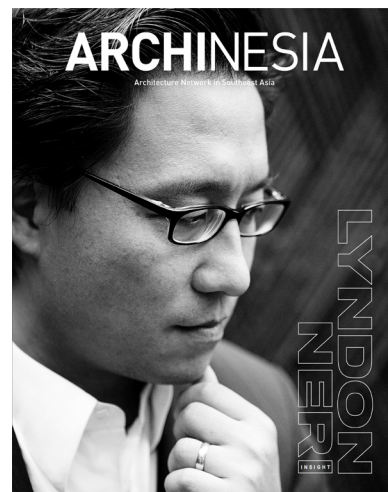
LYNDON NERI



Almost a decade ago, in 2015, I first encountered Lyndon Neri—not merely through his built works, but through a presentation of his research projects. His ideas lingered long after the lecture ended, a reminder that architecture, when rooted in thoughtful inquiry, becomes something far greater than the sum of its parts. Fast forward to 2024, ARCHINESIA had the privilege of welcoming Lyndon Neri as the keynote speaker for our ARCHINESIA Master Talk, a highlight of ARCHINESIA Week #4. Over 500 architects and designers gathered, eager to delve into the mind behind some of the most compelling and contextually rich works of our time.

Despite his busy schedule, Lyndon graciously accepted our invitation and made time to share his experiences and reflections with the Indonesian architecture community. As the co-founder of Neri&Hu Design and Research Office, Lyndon has consistently championed an interdisciplinary, research-driven approach to design—one that bridges cultures, disciplines, and generations. Based in Shanghai, he operates at the heart of a rapidly transforming global landscape, crafting narratives that intertwine material, memory, and place across scales both grand and intimate.

Beyond practice, Lyndon's commitment to education reveals his deeper belief: that architecture must be more than formal exercises; it must engage empathetically with society. Having taught at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, he challenges the next generation of designers to think critically, act responsibly, and create meaningfully. In a brief conversation during his time in Jakarta, Lyndon reflected on his journey—from his formative years in the Philippines to the forging of an internationally respected design ethos. Through his insights, he reminds us that true architecture is an act of nurturing culture, serving communities, and ultimately, leaving behind a legacy of care and compassion.



BEHIND THE JOURNEY

2

INSIGHT

LYNDON NERI

IA Lyndon, with your love for the arts, you journeyed to the US to study it. Afterward, following your father's visit, you transitioned to architecture college. So, when did your passion for architecture ignite, leading to your decision to become a professional architect?

LN I believe that ever since I was young, I've been immersed in a creatively rich environment. I have two uncles who were architects. I grew up in Los Baños, a city in the Southern Philippines. My father and grandparents were in the furniture business. They lived on the third floor, the second floor served as storage where custom furniture pieces were also being crafted, and the first floor was a retail store. So, my daily routine of going from the third to the first floor involved witnessing the complete process of furniture making and how it was displayed. Additionally, I had uncles who were skilled in painting, and my grandfather was talented in poetry. Therefore, as children, we were consistently surrounded by various forms of creativity.

Naturally, during my younger years, while I appreciated and loved spaces, I didn't really understand that these spaces were related to interior design or architecture. My initial understanding of drawings was perhaps limited to fine arts and painting. So, my natural inclination was that if I enjoyed drawing, it must be for fine arts, paintings, or sculpture.

Little did I know then that the creative field was much broader, encompassing graphic design, interior design, product design, architecture, and many other disciplines. Naturally, I gravitated towards architecture, perhaps influenced by my father's perspective of it being a more practical profession, as he always thought I would become an engineer. However, pinpointing a specific moment or period when I began to develop a passion for architecture is difficult. Providing a precise date or time is challenging because it all feels interconnected. My love for creativity has been a constant presence in my life since childhood.

IA You were born into a Chinese family, educated in a Chinese school, and having completed your studies in the US, you've been immersed in distinct cultural landscapes. How significantly do these two cultures shape your architecture, and in what specific ways?

LN I'd argue it's not just two cultures influencing me; I think it's a multifaceted combination. I was born in the Philippines, where a strong Spanish-Filipino culture thrived during my upbringing. That energy, that passion – you know, Filipinos' artistic expression, from dancing to singing, extends to their painting and architecture. They tend to be more flamboyant and full of energy.

Being educated in the Chinese education system instilled in me a strong sense of discipline. I had to maintain good grades and be very focused on my academics. So, it wasn't solely about the experiential, the tangible aspects of life, but also the empirical – meaning a focus on excelling in math and science.

When I moved to America at a young age, 15, it taught me how to think and rationalize many of my feelings. Perhaps the feelings I had as a Filipino-Chinese individual, and also the reasons behind my studies in the Chinese school – all the dogma and rhetoric I was compelled to memorize. So, America taught me not just how to think, but also to think conceptually, to be very abstract. It was particularly interesting because during my formative years at Berkeley, after high school in the US, that kind of thinking continued to develop. Then, when I went to Harvard, it became even more intense. Rafael Moneo was the Chair at the time, and he infused the entire school with European, primarily Spanish, architects. Rem Koolhaas, Herzog & de Meuron were also teaching there. Álvaro Siza had an exhibition and would come to review student work. So, within that rigorous academic environment, I experienced a significant European influence, which meant integrating many of the aspects I love, from arts and paintings to reading and writing, all converging within the field of architecture.

IA So, it's become an accumulation of all those influences...

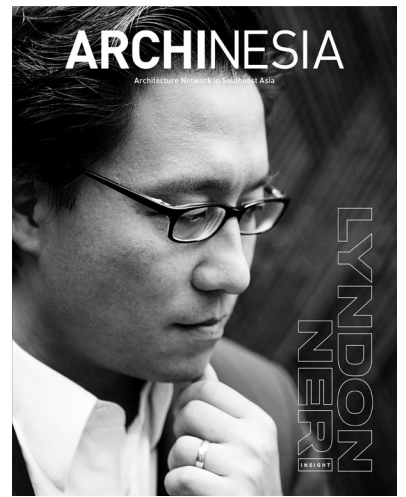
LN Yes, the accumulation of different experiences has made it quite interesting, so pinpointing one specific aspect of our profession or a single influence is going to be very difficult because I believe it's a combination of many different factors.

Some people have mentioned to me that after hearing my talk seven years ago, they've noticed a significant difference in my approach. They've observed growth and evolution, a more serious demeanor, and a sense of imparting knowledge, with the lectures becoming more academic. Even Andra Martin mentioned this. I don't believe it was intentional, but perhaps it coincides with the time, seven years ago, when we started teaching abroad. This necessitated formulating the reasons behind our design choices and ensuring that the underlying theory of our work was thoroughly tested, retested, reconsidered, discussed, refined, and calibrated. So, that's one aspect. The second aspect is simply that I'm getting older, and I also feel the need to give back.

IA
Imelda Akmal

LN
Lyndon Neri

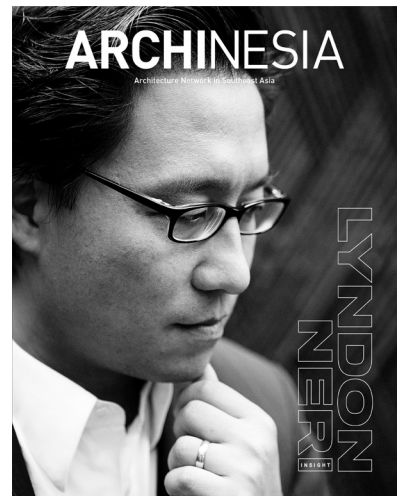
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“The accumulation of different experiences has made it quite interesting, so pinpointing one specific aspect of our profession or a single influence is going to be very difficult because I believe it’s a combination of many different factors. ”





JOURNEY IN ARCHITECTURE

4

INSIGHT

LYNDON NERI

IA In the current situation, what does architecture mean to you now?

LN Architecture means many things to me. When I was younger, I thought architecture, having been steeped and educated in modern tenets, was about the perfect, not just form, but a perfect synthesis of elements within the built environment or a built structure. It was about an idea formulated, combined with the practical aspects of human needs and conditions, coming together to create a building with tectonics, celebrating ideas of materiality. That's often how we perceive architecture.

However, I think differently now. I believe it's more than that. I think it encompasses the human condition. There's a time and a place where architecture cannot simply be about beautiful objects. It's also a shelter, a representation of a particular culture. It needs to be sustainable. It needs to make a difference in the society we live in. Otherwise, we won't remain relevant as architects. Therefore, as the world is changing dramatically, we, as architects, need to be able to address all the crises happening globally.

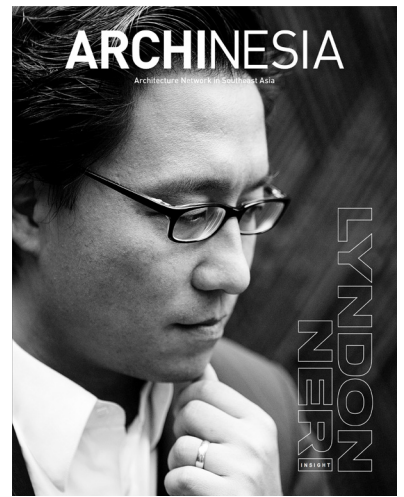
IA Perhaps you could elaborate on the crises. Having practiced architecture for over 20 years, you must have encountered various crises, such as financial and environmental. How do you maintain relevance in the face of these situations, particularly the crises?

LN You must be humble when facing a crisis. It's important to be humble and acknowledge that you don't know everything. You need to continually learn.

There's no such thing as an "I know it all" attitude. This is based on my experience; I've been practicing for over 30 years now. It's crucial to be humble enough to recognize that, first, no individual can solve these problems alone. It requires a community—a community of designers and stakeholders. So, that's one point.

Second, it's also important to acknowledge that there are many problems we're unaware of. Wars are raging around the globe. We've just experienced the health crisis with COVID. There are sustainable conditions, environmental conditions, cultural problems, cultural differences, and so on. I think, as architects, we have to be humble enough to say, "I need to absorb this and learn, but learn quickly," so we can remain relevant.





“And perhaps it’s short-lived, but I think it’s important that with the people you meet, the people assigned to you, the people you encounter in the short life you live, you show compassion, you show kindness, and you show understanding.”

IA Indeed, many audience members have shared Instagram stories commenting on your humility. However, in my personal experience, maintaining humility consistently is challenging. Could you offer some tips on how to stay humble?

LN I am naturally a very arrogant man.

I don’t believe I was born humble; I think I was born quite confident. Growing up, everything came very quickly to me. I learned things fast. I have a photographic memory, so I remember many things. Naturally, as a child, you get raised, you have good grades in school, so it’s easy to start thinking highly of yourself. But one thing that truly influenced me was my father and mother introducing me to the idea of having a relationship with God.

Since I was a child, and I remember when I was eight years old, I took it very seriously. I said, “If You are there, if there is a God out there, then I don’t want to waste my time. I want to be able to do what is my calling.” So, I had a simple prayer. “If You are there, if You’re alive, and if I seek You,” and the Bible says, “Seek Me and you will find Me.” This means God is saying, if you earnestly seek Me, He will be found. Meaning, He will show Himself to me. So, I just took it very literally and was very conscious about my walk.

In the process of doing so, I’ve encountered many challenges. I’ve lost my job, and I’ve lost projects. I’ve had people who think I’m crazy or scold me for being over budget. All these different things, right? Not winning an award, not winning a competition, many of them. Instead of growing numb with the process and saying, “Okay, I’m going to be stronger, and I’m going to be even more fierce, more confident, and more arrogant,” I started to think differently.

I started to think, “What should I learn from all this? What can I learn from this?” You know, we lost a competition three weeks ago. It was painful. Usually, it would take me about a month to recover. This time, it took me maybe about six hours. It was still painful, though.

IA It’s natural; it’s very human, right?

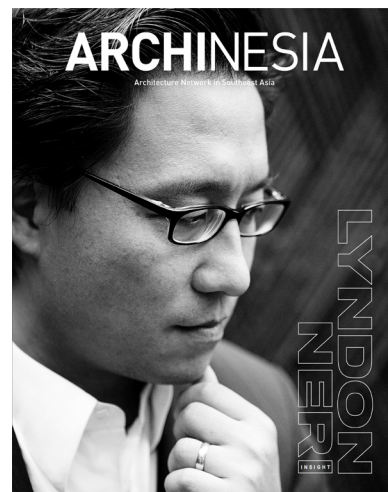
LN It’s very human. But that morning, a friend of mine called me and said, “Lyndon, can you pray for me? My wife is pregnant, and the doctor told us the baby might not be healthy.” So, compared to me losing a competition versus something eternal, a matter of life and death, I suddenly thought, “You’ve got to wake up, Lyndon. This isn’t so important.” God was kind enough to allow me to hear that first, early in the morning. A few hours later, the announcement came that we had lost. So, it was very good for me to then really focus and say, “What is important in life?” And that kept me grounded.

The Bible also says very clearly that God opposes pride and blesses the humble. So, it’s an everyday journey, and I’m learning it. I’m far from perfect, Imelda, but I realize that as an architect, even more importantly, the idea of serving others is key.

IA I believe that’s the moment that God found you, where you were, because you were disappointed. Then, on the other side, you find something else that reminds you again to be humble.

LN We’re all going to pass away, right? Some of us are in our 70s, 80s, if we’re lucky, 90s, right? Very few make it to 100. The work we do, okay, maybe you’ll be hailed as an important architect, perhaps for one or two generations. If you’re Le Corbusier, Alvar Aalto, or Louis Kahn, perhaps longer than others, right? But at the end of the day, you can’t take it with you when you go.

So, what legacy do you leave behind, right? And perhaps it’s short-lived, but I think it’s important that with the people you meet, the people assigned to you, the people you encounter in the short life you live, you show compassion, you show kindness, and you show understanding.



WORK, PASSION, AND FAMILY

6

INSIGHT

LYNDON NERI

IA You have a wide range of interests, and you not only love them, but you also pursue them architecture, product design, graphic design, exhibitions, and events. You also frequently mention your passion for teaching, learning, and sharing. How do you manage all of this? How do you technically cope with doing it all?

LN Very good question. First, I'm a person who doesn't sleep much.

I sleep maybe three to four hours a day, but that's not the main point. It's also that there are two of us, and I have to acknowledge that I have an extremely strong team behind me. Like-minded people, but it's not just an office; it's a group of people who believe in a particular mission and conviction that we share. So, when we interview people, we attract those who have the same passion.

When we started, we didn't begin teaching until seven years ago. Well, ten years ago we started teaching in Hong Kong, but in the US, it was just seven years ago. We used to take turns. Rosanna and I, would fly out, and I would come back. I would be there for two weeks, then two weeks in Shanghai, go back to the US for two weeks, and we would rotate. But you have to remember, teaching a design studio is only four hours a day, twice a week, right? So, it's Monday, Thursday, or Friday. It's from two o'clock to six o'clock. I have 12 amazing students, and when I'm in the US, I make sure I zoom in and have design meetings. It's quite efficient because there's a cycle. When China is sleeping, I'm doing all the sketching. By the time I send it to them, and I'm ready to go to sleep, they are waking up and doing all the drawings. There's a system to this method.

Now we have offices in Paris and Milan. Milan, because of our furniture projects, and Paris because of our interior design work. We have a lot of European projects now. It's quite interesting because it's right in the middle. So, some of the things I do get picked up by the Milan or Paris office, and many of them are very senior in the practice. During COVID, a lot of them went back to their home countries, but then they said, "We want to continue working with you," which was quite flattering. We went from not having a real office to now having two different offices.

We have about 50 people working outside of Shanghai. We didn't plan it; it's extremely organic. But the most important thing is that your thinking has to be very clear. Your ideas, you can't be indecisive, you need to be very clear. Your thinking and your inspiration you need to, and you should also allow other people to completely disagree with you. Rosanna and I disagree with each other, but we have a group of senior staff who have worked with us for seven to 12 years, and maybe 20 of them will tell me, "I disagree with you." In Shanghai, we also have a managing director who manages all the hiring and takes care of the logistics at the office. It works nicely. I think the most important thing is that you need to have a group of people with the same passion and conviction.

IA Same passion. So, that's about your work, job, and profession. How do you manage your family life and your work life, or your wife's work life?

LN Rosanna made it a point that, when the kids were growing up, I needed to be home by five. Rosanna goes home at three because, when the children come home from grade school—Rosanna is a musician, a pianist—she practices with them every day, cello and violin. The two oldest are violinists, and the third is a cellist. They are very, very good! They practice for an hour each.

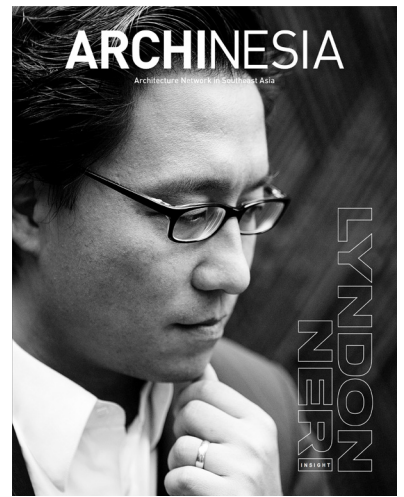
So, Rosanna would come home at 2:30 every day. She doesn't go back to the office; she goes straight home. She says, "Lyndon, I expect you to come home at six to have dinner together." So, throughout their growing up, I would come home at six when I wasn't traveling. When I'm traveling, of course, I can't. So, from six to nine, we put them to sleep, and then I go back to the office.

IA Amazing!

LN I go back to work until maybe one or two o'clock, then I come home. The next morning, I have to wake up to make sure the kids go to school and all that.

Both of us love to cook. That's very important. We have help, but we do a lot of cooking at home. It's kind of interesting because we sometimes take our kids with us when we travel for our site visits. People thought we were crazy to be taking our young children out of school to see Le Corbusier's buildings or to see our projects under construction. But if you talk to my kids now, it's amazing. The three of them aren't architects, but they can speak architectural terms. You can go to any building, and they can tell you who designed it. It's pretty amazing. So, it's part of their culture; it's part of their life.

"the most important thing is that your thinking has to be very clear. Your ideas, you can't be indecisive, you need to be very clear. Your thinking and your inspiration you need to, and you should also allow other people to completely disagree with you."



DESIGN PROCESS

7

IA I would love to know if you could explain your architectural design process—your starting point, approach, and the method you apply in your architecture.

LN We are a good combination because we are very different people.

IA How different?

LN Quite different. Very different, but we come together with the same passion and the same conviction. We try to change and make architecture more relevant within the society we live in. We also share one similarity: we aspire to do whatever we do at the highest level.

IA And there's a knot?

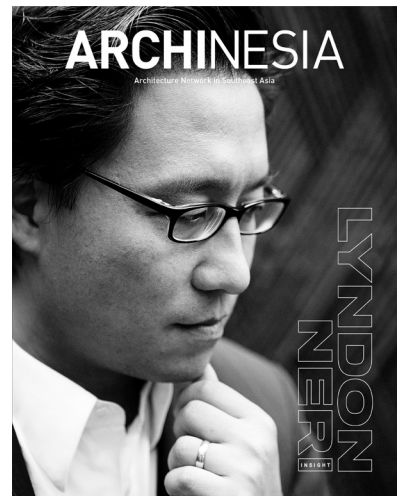
LN That's what ties us together—the desire for excellence. We're not interested in media or publicity; we are interested in excellence. I believe that if we were given a gift, we should make the most of it—applying the best of our knowledge with the best of our passion, rather than doing it half-heartedly.

We always have discussions before aligning on an idea. Many different ideas emerge, which might be about the concept of the area where the building will be located. It could be a more global idea, dealing with the notion of the Global North or Global South. It could also be about materiality or even a particular brand we are designing for. Perhaps we take on a concept and refine it. We always initiate discussions before even meeting with the team. We have intense discussions, and through them, both of us start sketching and formulating ideas based on that discussion.

IA Both of you?

LN Yes, both of us. I tend to draw more than he does, but we both contribute ideas. We scribble. Depending on which team becomes involved, we present our ideas to them, discuss them, and perhaps show them some drawings. Then, they return to their respective team members and begin developing the ideas. Afterward, we separate, and they proceed with the development.





8

INSIGHT

LYNDON NERI

IA How many people are in one team?

LN It depends. Some teams are larger, and some are smaller, depending on the project size. I have many senior members who have been with me for over 10 years, so they have become quite skilled. We also have a managing director who oversees the logistics and office structure. We check in with them weekly; sometimes, with other experienced members, we check in every few days. For competitions with strict deadlines, I check progress daily. So, it's a very organic process—it has been, and it works well. So far, we've been fortunate to experience that.

IA So, it's a loop instead of a linear process, right?

LN Correct. It's a constant discussion; it's never just a linear progression from one point to another. And it brings me back to my lecture about the notion of reflective nostalgia, as opposed to restorative nostalgia. It's about a single line—people often say it goes from beginning to end. My argument is that perhaps the world doesn't necessarily need to be so logical about beginnings and ends. Maybe, in the process, there's a journey. And within that process, I became interested in finding an answer.

IA So, the starting point is the idea, and then you explain it. But I believe there is another approach that you've already mentioned regarding nostalgia. Is there a particular approach that you usually employ?

LN We also use another approach, like a diagram. In every project, there is a diagram. You have your book, right? In one graph, there is always a figure. Sometimes it's a plan figure, sometimes it's a sectional diagram, and we also build a lot of models. I do a lot of sketches throughout the process. So, those are the different tools we use in our projects.

IA What kind of model do you use? Digital or manual?

LN Oh yeah, the team—I'm not proficient with digital tools, but my team is very skilled. So, sometimes we use technology to help us understand space, how to walk through it, and how it's perceived.

IA So, you treat technology as an opportunity, as a tool?

LN As a means to an end.

IA Is there any challenge in integrating new technology within your team?

LN No, my team is quite young. They are very, very good with computers, so they are very good at manipulating digital tools.

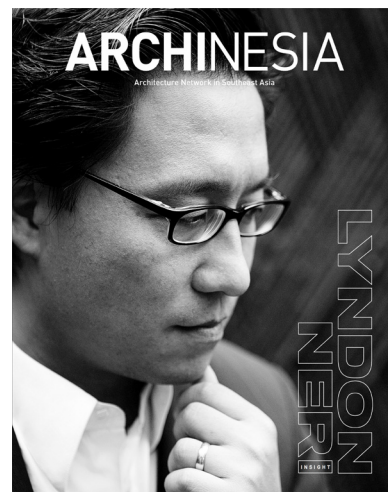
IA And there's no gap when they don't do sketches and jump straight to digital?

LN Of course, there is. A big one. It takes a while, requiring a lot of refining. Sometimes, it comes back and it's not correct. We re-examine and redo it. We think, revise, and refine.

IA That's the other side of working with tools, with the help of technology.

LN Right, technology helps us move forward, both in process and ideas.

“ It's a constant discussion; it's never just a linear progression from one point to another. And it brings me back to my lecture about the notion of reflective nostalgia, as opposed to restorative nostalgia. It's about a single line—people often say it goes from beginning to end. ”



CLIENTS, CHALLENGES, AND CONFLICTS

9

IA That's true. But even with technological advancements, the challenge remains how do you convince your clients? It's a question that always comes up at our event.

LN That's interesting because both Rossana and I tackle problems differently. Rossana is a peacemaker; she does not like conflict. I thrive in conflict. Sometimes, when there is no conflict with the client and everything is supportive, I agitate the client. They're shocked. Conflict is not necessarily a bad thing. Conflict also allows you to examine your own stance, whether you hold that position strongly or whether you have that conviction.

But I think one of the ways I convince them of some of my ideas, which I don't think are crazy (you might, but I just think this is how it should be done), is through strong belief. I believe that if you believe in something strongly, clients will respect you. They will know that you care. I think many times, Rossana and I care more about the project than the clients themselves, right?

It's not just about the design; I also inquire about their program. Will it be a good business model? I challenge them on many aspects. So, they come to realize, "Oh my goodness, they care more about the projects than about themselves," right? That is the most important thing. But also a sense of conviction and a sense of calling to understand what your conviction is.

I'm a man of faith. I know many of you probably have different faiths, but for me, every morning, I spend a relatively significant amount of time reading the Bible to calm myself down. Because often, when you're elevated to a higher level, sometimes you start attributing it to your own skills. You're wrong. That comes from above, from a higher being that gives you these skills, this talent, for a time when it's needed, right? And so, when we are low, when things don't go well, when you lose a project, when clients are not okay, you also don't get too down, right? Because you know that you have inherent worth. So, reconnecting with a higher being allows one to humble oneself, but at the same time, to also strengthen oneself when everything is going against your will, right?

So, I spend a lot of time meditating, I spend a lot of time praying, and I always try to ensure, you know, there is this powerful Bible verse. My wife reminded me of this: "Do not make me so rich that I forget your name, or so poor that I despise your name." That's a really powerful Bible verse. "Do not make me so rich that I forget your

name, or so poor that I despise your name." We are all here for a reason and a purpose during the short time we live. Some of us might be lucky to go beyond 60, 70, 80, or 90, if that, right? I think it's important to be kind, humble, and have a sense of empathy, right? To be a kind human being. I think that's a calling that's higher than just architecture, design, and ego.

IA It's beautiful. This encourages me to ask you more about conflict because conflict is a significant aspect for architects, I've heard, within projects. This is the first time an architect has told me conflict is good. How do you believe it's beneficial?

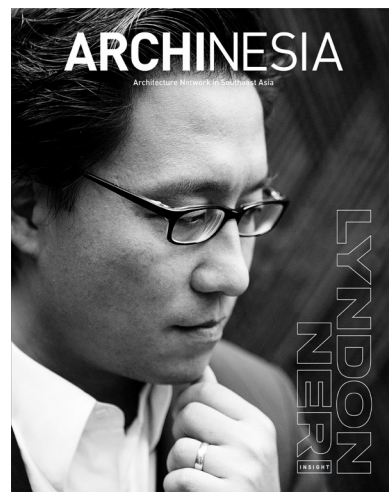
LN Yeah, because there's a Chinese word that says wēijī. Wēijī means crisis. In Chinese, wēi (危) is wēixiǎn (危险), which means danger. But at the same time, the other character is jī (机), which is jīhuì (机会), meaning opportunity. So, wēijī is wēixiǎn and jīhuì. It means danger, but also opportunity. So, when you're in a crisis, yes, there is danger, you are in danger, but then there's also an opportunity.

IA But to what extent is conflict beneficial? I've also heard that sometimes you turn down clients. How far is it good?

LN Conflict that doesn't stem from being egotistical, upset, angry, mad, or arrogant, right? Conflict based on a value system. For example, when someone simply wants to use your name to make money and replicate your work.

I had a potential client who said, "Can I just copy your project? I'll pay you, okay, you don't need to design again. I'll just take that and change the top, but I'll pay you the same fee, you know, it's perfect." When conflict arises from such a situation, I can't proceed. And also, the reason why we turn down projects is simply because we don't have the time to do them. So, it's not fair to the client.

I know many people always say, well, I was in Puerto Rico, Mexico, and this one client approached me. He had hired Manuel Cervantes to finish his project, and he came to my lecture and said, "I just want you to know that five years ago, I called you, and you simply didn't have the time. So I went with Manuel Cervantes, but I still hope that you will design my second home, so I continue to attend your lectures." I said Manuel Cervantes did an amazing job; you don't need me. It's in Mexico City, you know. So, I think it's also important to understand your capacity and not try to take on everything.



TEACHING AND ARCHITECTURE

10

INSIGHT

LYNDON NERI

IA I find that you love to teach and share. I want you to elaborate more about teaching architecture, what subject you teach, and how you teach your students. I believe your approach is quite different. What are your specific goals and targets that students should aim to reach?

LN So, teaching has always been important for both Rossana and myself. We both love to teach. Time is very limited, but what is important is the process of teaching. It's crucial to understand the goal because if you don't understand yourself, then the students themselves also won't know what you're aiming for. I'm not interested in the student learning my style, nor am I interested in them copying my work. My focus is on ensuring that their idea is completed by the end, meaning they achieve their initial vision for the project.

We taught design studio, and within the design studio, we would have lectures, but I would lecture about precedents, history, and typology. Most of the time, it's purely a design option. We call it Option Studio at Harvard. It's Option Studio, meaning many experienced individuals from different parts of the world come to Cambridge, and students are given a choice to select a studio that they can study for the entire semester. So, we have people like Kirsten Geers, Christ Gunn Bentley, and people like Zhang Ke from China.

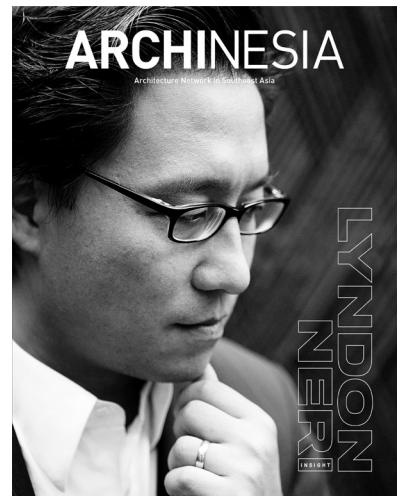
IA So, you provide more of the foundation, the fundamental principles, and also the framework?

LN Correct. Of course, we would have the brief and the program.

IA And what do you want students to become?

LN It's important for me and Rosanna. Both of us used to teach at Chinese Universities like Tongji, or we would teach at Hong Kong University. But it was seven years ago, actually in 2017, that we made a conscious effort to go to Shanghai, a 30-minute drive from my office in Shanghai. I decided we were invited to teach at Yale, and we took that opportunity. Subsequently, the year after, it was Harvard. We teach design studio, and it's usually the last year, the third year before their thesis. It's a Master's program. So, by then, most of them will probably have four years of undergraduate and maybe another two or three years of experience. By the time they come to our studio, they would probably already have seven years of experience in architecture education. We teach what is considered the highest level of design studio. Having said that, I think recently I have been talking to Rosanna, and we've been wanting to teach more about the core, meaning the more basic principles.





“We both love to teach. Time is very limited, but what is important is the process of teaching. It’s crucial to understand the goal because if you don’t understand yourself, then the students themselves also won’t know what you’re aiming for.”

But what we do is we usually start with a brief, and that brief always deals with an issue. It’s either reflective nostalgia, adaptive reuse, or perhaps tourism. And there’s always more to it than just solving problems; there’s always the architectural problem, but there’s also the cultural tension and the programmatic tension. We’re always giving them hybrid programs, meaning you’re not just designing a museum. Perhaps what would a museum be if it’s next to a hotel? What would it be when it’s next to another program like a cemetery, something you’re not so used to? Then it forces you to really think rather than just going, “oh, this is a hotel,” and relying on that typology. We engage in research, ensuring you understand the hotel, what a cemetery is, and what a museum is. Of course, you also have to research the idea and the topic that you’re interested in.

So, usually, that takes the first three weeks and involves a significant research component for the studio. Then, they proceed to solve a problem with architectural solutions. That takes a while because then we break it down into different aspects. So, you start with a conceptual idea, an architectural idea. Then, we ask people to start exploring floor plans, elevations, and sections. Then we start going into details, how things come together. In almost all the studios, we also explore the idea of smaller objects, like furniture, and how furniture and built-in components are part of architecture. The interior component is also important.

We have this assignment called Object of Encounter. Often, it’s an object that you encounter. If you look at Louis Kahn’s work, Le Corbusier’s work, or Alvar Aalto, there’s always furniture that they have designed for a specific project. When you take the furniture out, it looks a little bit strange, but if you put it within the building, it makes a lot of sense. It tells the whole story. So, that’s very important to us, and usually, surprisingly, people are quite good at it. They’re quite

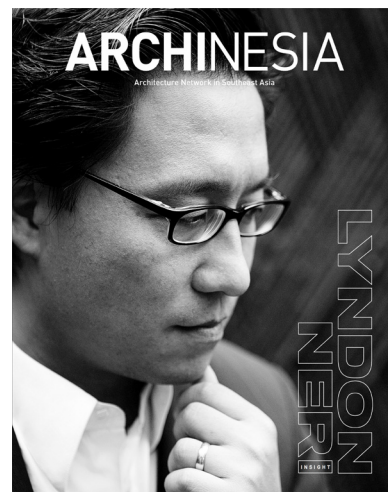
good at it because it’s very tangible; it’s their everyday object. Then, through solving that problem, so it’s macro, micro, macro, micro, a constant interplay between both, and it becomes quite rich, really. If you look at our studio and the production, we push people to create big models to explore, as well as detailed sections, and it’s very enriching.

Of course, for the final review, we don’t just invite architects or professors. We also invite cultural critics, people in literature, and people in history. It forces the student to engage in a process where you’re not just catering to architects and designers. You have to ensure that your ideas can be articulated and understood by many different facets of humankind.

IA Of course, it provokes their sensibility of the context, of the senses, not only the context of the community or surrounding environment or whatever, but also the everyday life object. Wow.

LN Also, I think it’s important to note that, as I was saying, when we invite critics, we want to make sure they’re also open-minded. Because sometimes people are only very interested in their own ideas. We’re interested in the students’ ideas and in developing their ideas. So, when they come to our studio, my goal is not for them to become a version of me. Some of them might be pursuing architectural ideas that are so different from what we do. My goal is to ensure that what they do is rigorous and consistent with the very good idea they started with, so they push the boundary and the limit of what they’re aiming for.

IA Oh, I love it! It really made me think because a lot of critics say that architects have an ego, that they’re only thinking about building a self-sculpture and don’t consider the surroundings.



PUBLICATION IN ARCHITECTURE

12 INSIGHT LYNDON NERI

LM Having published numerous books with modern publishers, what are your observations? How does the global perspective change when your books are available internationally, and how does that affect your own perspective? Given your experience with publications, could you share some best practices for enlightening our friends, both locally and globally?

LN We didn't create books to make money; we produced monographs to document our work, not just the printed work, but also the written word. So, much of our thinking, much of our dialogue. Rosanna and I both love to read. We've read many books since we met. We realize the written word is crucial. We often complain that people in the West don't understand us. They don't recognize the work in Indonesia, Malaysia, or Thailand. This is because we don't take the time to put it in writing. We simply produce work and then say, "Well, people are just going to find us on Instagram."

That's why we were teaching in Hong Kong about seven years ago. We decided we had to return to the West, to teach at Harvard, to teach at Yale, to teach at some of the top schools and engage in discussion and discourse. We need to tell the West that we have a voice. Not that we are better; I'm not saying we are better. I'm saying we have a voice, and that voice is just as important. It's hard because, at Harvard, there are only a few of us Asian faces. We're very loud, but there are only a few of us. It's hard, but it's worth it.

Rosanna and I always believed, when we started our practice, that we were just bridgers. Our work might not necessarily be the most important in a hundred years. But I hope we will act as bridges for the next generation to move forward. That's why publication is very important to us. It's not just about the publications of our work, but also the publication of young architects. We're telling a whole story through Platform Design Republic. We are creating whole stories, and also talking about Asian issues. We talk about reflective nostalgia. We talk about hemophilia. We talk about Asian issues and put them out in the West for study.

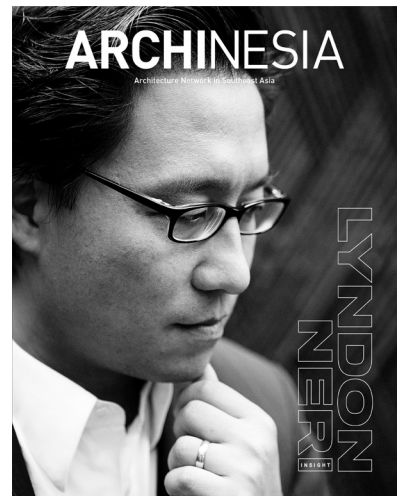
It was interesting because someone told me that in one of Rem Koolhaas's projects, when they were unearthing old and new, they used a lot

of our writing as a reference. That, to me, was a compliment, to bring forth a discussion in the West. It's very important because the written word is a very powerful thing. It's not just a visual thing. I know the internet, the digital world is there, but a lot of people are still reading.

For instance, I was telling colleagues here that when the Chinese swimmers won gold in the Olympic 4x100 relay, I can't remember exactly, the first line by the Americans and the Australians was, "Oh, they must be doping." A very powerful word, "must be doping." Everyone starts reading and thinking they are doping. Why didn't we question when the Americans won? Why didn't we say, "Maybe they are? How come their face is so red? They're probably doping." A country that uses drugs more than Asia starts to criticize Asians when they win. It's a very strange phenomenon. As Asians, we just keep quiet. We say, "It's okay, we're on board. It's okay, let them make the noises." It's not okay, and I'm just as contentious.

In terms of publication, I encourage you to do more because that's how the West markets itself. There's always a saying, and it's funny because in Asia, there's always a joke. In Asia, when you go to Japan, everything is clean. When you go to China, the money is there. They tell you what they want in a deal, they put the money in front of you. When you come to Indonesia or Malaysia, the money is under the table. When you go to the Philippines, it's not on the table, it's not under the table, it includes the table. This is an American friend who told me this joke.

I said, "You're very good at saying that, but the Americans use lobbying firms. In Washington DC, they have lobbying firms. They don't put money, but they pay people. Marketing firms, that's the same as bribery. They just make it a bit more scholarly, and it sounds so much better. It's called marketing firms, it's called lobbying firms. The tobacco company hires so many millions for lobbying firms." At the end of the day, we all, human beings, have goodness, but we also have evil. The West cannot tell us that evil only persists in Asia. It also persists in their region. It's about dialogue and conversation. So, having the written word is very important.



“Our work might not necessarily be the most important in a hundred years. But I hope we will act as bridges for the next generation to move forward. That’s why publication is very important to us.”

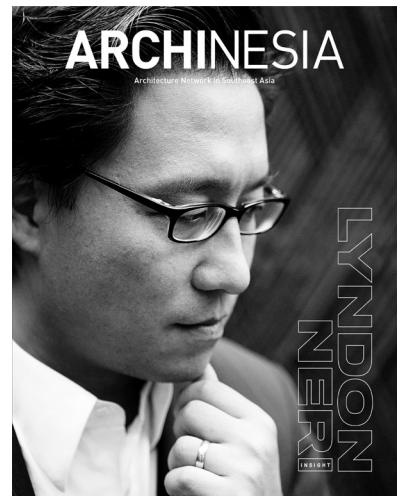


IA You emphasize the importance of publication, and indeed, it’s beneficial that you view it as a means to deliver a voice to people, not only for marketing purposes but also to effect global change, particularly in Asia. I also encourage architects to create books and documentation, as I believe there are stories behind those documents, beyond just pictures, potentially even compelling narratives. Could you elaborate on this further?

LN Yes, because many people cannot travel to see our work firsthand. Therefore, video is crucial for conveying the experience of the space itself, as our architecture ultimately revolves around spatial constructs, it’s not just visual images seen on Instagram. This is why Rosanna and I made a conscious effort to ensure the space is effectively communicated.

The descriptions in our classes at both Harvard and Yale compel students to write. Often, in the creative

field, we are lazy; we simply draw. Many of us can draw beautifully, with color and detail. However, we sometimes neglect to think critically. But to communicate with a diverse audience, such as clients, we cannot rely solely on drawings. They may not even understand our drawings. We might present axonometric projections or beautiful cut sections, and while we’re excited by these visuals, clients might look at them and wonder, “What are those floating rooms?” They likely don’t understand because we have our own specialized language. We become insular, pleased with each other, praising each other’s work. The drawings become increasingly abstract, sometimes depicting buildings that don’t even appear grounded. It’s no wonder clients become confused and frustrated. We then blame the client. So, it is important to be able to communicate effectively. That’s why video is very important. That’s also why writing forces you to think. It compels you to think critically about what you do.



ARCHITECTURAL CHANGES AND SOUTHEAST ASIA ARCHITECTURE

14

INSIGHT

LYNDON NERI

IA Actually, I met you in 2015; it was the first time I attended your presentation in Ayutthaya. You came with Rosanna, and at that time, you showed some research projects, even in Singapore, with a little wild area in the forest, and some other things. What I want to know is, that was almost 10 years ago, right? I can see a significant development in your projects and also in your way of thinking about them. What I would like to ask you, because you are between Shanghai, the US, and, I believe, all over the world, how do you see architecture within the last 10 years, within the fast-moving changes of the world? Especially in Asia or Southeast Asia, what do you see there?

LN It's interesting. Our projects have grown larger and are now being built in more locations. We've won maybe six competitions in the last three years: one in Jeddah, four in Europe, and one in South Africa. All of them are either being designed or under construction. They are huge projects, many of which are cultural projects. So, it's getting harder and harder because, you know, our practice is very much interested in details and how they're executed within spatial constructs. It's a little bit harder to control. But what I realize with the internet world, the whole Instagram world, and the TikTok world is that things become so fast that people don't take the time to study architecture. I get worried because, with so many superficial images, people will copy certain things. After all, "this is famous," but they've never personally seen it. I think it's important to visit the building.

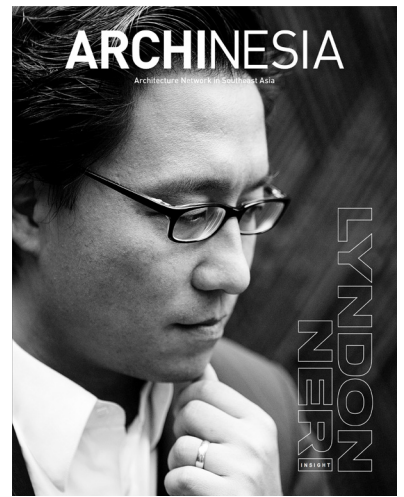
IA ...it's important to visit the building.

LN ...to be able to visit buildings, to understand why they are strong, more than just the Instagram images. You know, I love a lot of Cesar Pelli's work, for instance. If you look at his work in person, it's powerful, right? Of course, Le Corbusier is amazing. People like Louis Kahn, and there are so many today. Peter Zumthor and Kazuya Sejima (SANAA)—all of them have amazing work that warrants a visit. I find the movement of Southeast Asian architects encouraging, I truly do.

Before you invited me, I had wanted to do this. I convinced Rosanna that our next project is to do an exhibition on Southeast Asian architects. That's my goal: to bring some of their voices to America or Europe, especially in America, to schools like Harvard, the UN, or Yale, to have an exhibition of works from Indonesia. One of the best here is Andra Matin. He's truly phenomenal. I always say that he's the Geoffrey Bawa of Indonesia, and you guys have to protect him. I feel like I protect him more than you guys protect him. He is a national icon, so I do think you have to protect him. He's really good.

But today was encouraging, to see a whole generation of phenomenal architects. If you guys didn't come and see their work, I was blown away. I have a sense of encouragement. For a long time, I always thought Southeast Asia might not be able to have the gravitas





of the northern Asian neighboring countries, like Japan or Korea. But China, in the last 20 years, has exploded. So, there are several architects, like Zhang Ke from standardarchitecture, Dong Gong and Vector Architects, and Liu Yichun (Atelier Deshaus). I mean, I can name 20 significant Chinese architects now, globally. Of course, the Japanese have moved ahead of us. Koreans, probably not as much, but they're starting to evolve.

But I was encouraged today, and I do think this could be a pedagogy that ties a lot of the Southeast Asian architects together. I also have a soft spot because I was born in the Philippines. I was educated in a Chinese school. In my first 15 years, I traveled between China and the Philippines. I gave a lecture in Manila three weeks ago, and I'm still trying to find interesting voices in the Philippines. I think there are important voices. I'm not saying to showcase them to the world to say that we are better, but I'm saying that there is a voice. It's equally as good. It's equally as relevant, but we need to put into words what that means for the West to understand.

I encourage you to buy Andra Matin's book, not because I have a small contribution, but because for the longest time in the West, even in China, he was the biggest secret, I think. But after the book, he is no longer a secret. He was my biggest secret.

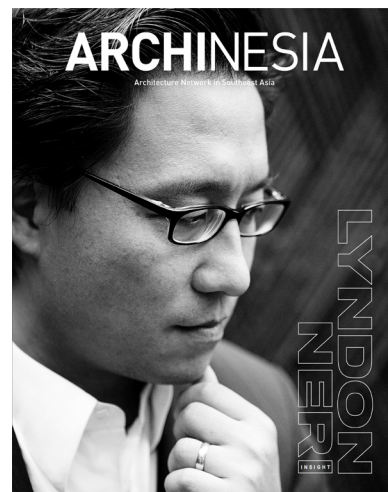
I always tell people, when they ask about good architects in Southeast Asia, you can see Wolkenstein, obviously Foster's work in Thailand. I want to emulate some of his ideas. It's just brilliant. Vietnam, of course, always. Malaysia, Singapore, right? Phenomenal. Obviously, with Indonesia, I saw in Hernan's work, and I realized it's not just Andra Matin. There's a whole new generation.

IA Briefly, could you describe your experience visiting Jakarta and seeing the Southeast Asian young architects? How was it?

LN I think, specifically for Southeast Asia, there's a recurring issue with Asian countries and Asian culture in general: we tend to be very busy. We create things, we do things, and we don't engage in conversation. We lack a clear statement or conviction. The West excels at being very vocal. They're trained to be marketing-oriented. People often criticize, and as I mentioned in my lecture, "Oh, if you're from Asia, there's always bribery involved, there's always payment involved, all that." In America, it's the same; it's called a marketing firm. It's called a lobbying firm.



"I realize with the internet world, the whole Instagram world, and the TikTok world is that things become so fast that people don't take the time to study architecture. I get worried because, with so many superficial images, people will copy certain things. After all, "this is famous," but they've never personally seen it. I think it's important to visit the building."



INSPIRATION AND MESSAGE FOR THE READERS

16

INSIGHT

**LYNDON
NERI**

IA What kind of project do you want to work on in the future, and why?

LN I think right now, I'm interested in affordable housing. We haven't fully ventured into housing yet, but I'm interested. I'm currently exploring avenues where we can be involved in affordable housing. We're also interested in public schools—schools that serve a larger community. Of course, architects love to design museums, chapels, and churches.

IA I'd like to ask you a message to our readers. What is your message?

LN I think it's important to understand that the pursuit of architecture, interior design, or product design is not an individual pursuit. It's not something you do solely by yourself. It's a generational movement of like-minded people. Some are talented in certain typologies more than others. Some excel at interior design, some at product design, and some at architecture. Even within architecture, there are different specializations. I think it's essential to understand that it's a collective movement rather than an individual endeavor. If you think of yourself as a "star architect," just as an individual, I think all the work will become purely vain. If it's about how many publications and how many awards you receive, those things should come as a result of the work you produce, not because you actively pursue them. They should be a means to an end. The end is really to change one person at a time, one society, one mayor, one government official, and it takes a community to do that.

We need more people to understand the importance of quality, rigor, and high excellence in design. It takes a larger group of people. I'm trying to encourage the best minds at Harvard, ETH, Yale, and Princeton to make sacrifices. They could be consultants, IT professionals, or doctors, and they would make more money. There are enough of those professions, and I think if you're creative and you have the gift and the talent, and I see it, I need to nurture that. And I see so many of them. Some leave the profession because it's not a very high-paying one. Some leave because they don't see great opportunities. It's a profession that will require sacrifice from all of us, and I think it's important because it contributes to a better society. I've said this during my lecture,

"We need more people to understand the importance of quality, rigor, and high excellence in design. It takes a larger group of people."

and I strongly believe that a society without writers, painters, thinkers, philosophers, and architects—without creative people—is a city or a country without a soul.

If it's only left to lawyers and business people, that city, that country is dead. You have to consider certain countries around the world that do not have significant architects, product designers, writers, or painters; oftentimes, they are soulless cities. Sometimes I'm very critical of cities like Hong Kong, for instance, where money reigns supreme. Often, architects are very frustrated; sometimes, they don't have a voice, while writers and painters are compromised.

I like countries like Thailand, for instance, where they are so vibrant. The Philippines should be, but I don't know what happened.

At least in China, there is a balance of that. It's important to stay relevant. I know some of you might be frustrated. You guys are young, and you're thinking, "I'm working long hours, and I'm not getting that reward." You guys are given a gift. A gift from above that many of your parents and your colleagues might not even appreciate or understand. It's a gift nonetheless, and it needs to be nurtured and given back to the society you were born into. Otherwise, it will be a waste, because you will end up working high-paying jobs and you will not be happy. Therefore, your production will be toxic; you will not produce very good things.

IA Thank you. That means a lot to us. Last question, which figure or architect has inspired you the most, and in what ways?

LN It's a very interesting question. I wouldn't say one or two architects; I think several architects have been influential in our work. I think Rafael Moneo, my thesis advisor at Harvard, was central to the influence of how we think about architecture and how architecture relates to the urban condition. We're also very much influenced by Álvaro Siza. Naturally, because of Álvaro Siza, you understand his penchant and his love for Alvar Aalto and the idea of spaces and how spaces move from one space to another. He uses humble materials. It's nothing specific. It doesn't cry out loud, but it's quite interesting to note spatially.

I think SANAA is quite experimental in the manipulation of materials, but if you were to look at the older architects, naturally, people like Louis Kahn, in terms of his rigor and his consistency. Of course, Le Corbusier goes without saying. There are a lot of figures. I love Adolf Loos. We love Sigurd Lewerentz. These are figures. Of course, you have Aldo Rossi, who became quite integral in how we think about architecture.