

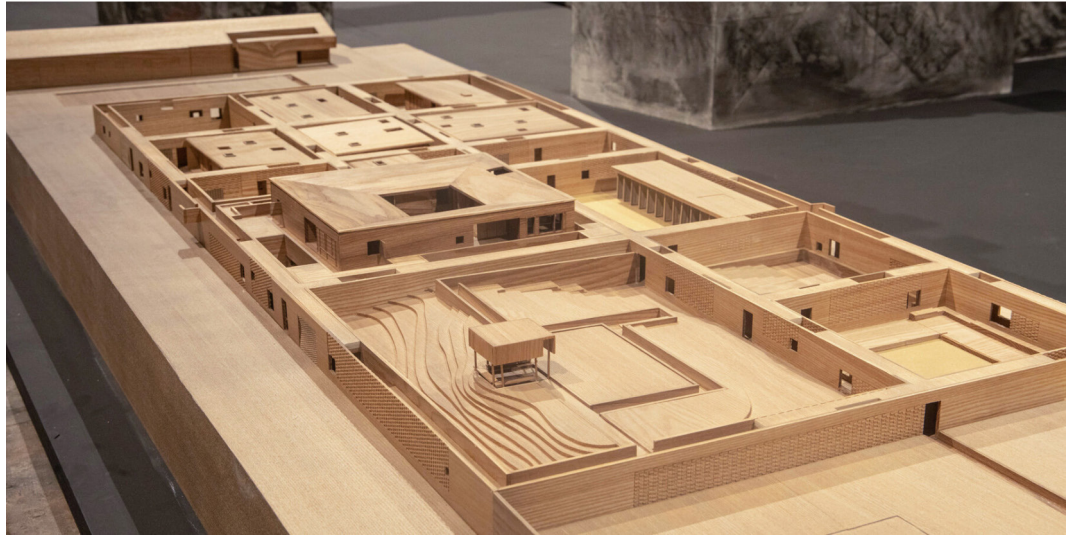
“NERI & HU ON THE DISRUPTIVE POWER OF LIMINAL SPACES AT THE 2023 VENICE ARCHITECTURE BIENNALE”

designboom; MAY 2023

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INTERVIEW WITH NERI & HU AT THE VENICE ARCHITECTURE BIENNALE

Venice Architecture Biennale 2023: At the 'Dangerous Liaisons' section of the Arsenale, designboom met with Neri & Hu co-founders Lyndon Neri and Rosanna Hu to discuss the practice's research-based exhibition that shines a spotlight on liminality in architecture. Founded on post-colonial thinking, the idea of liminal spaces, or third spaces, is defined as a kind of threshold, a stage for transitory and frontier events that give rise to new possibilities, instigate change and, more importantly, challenge the status quo. Through models, drawings, and film, Neri & Hu cast liminality as a zone between design practice and theoretical exploration by revisiting three adaptive reuse projects highlighting the studio's research.

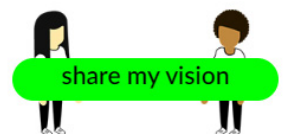


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'Liminality' by Neri&Hu Design and Research Office | image © Marco Zorzanello



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EXPLORING LIMINALITY BY REVISITING THREE ADAPTIVE REUSE PROJECTS

Depicted as large-scale models at the Arsenale, the projects on view for the Neri & Hu exhibition are, in order of completion: 'The Waterhouse at South Bund' (2010), 'Tsingpu Yangzhou Retreat' (2017), and 'Nantou City Guesthouse' (2021). The practice selected all three works in line with the 'Dangerous Liaisons' theme, as Lyndon Neri tells designboom:

'The idea of the brief [for Dangerous Liaisons] deals with the notion that we are living in a world wherein colonization and carbonization are at the forefront, and whether or not sustainability is also at the forefront of the discussion. So, how do you tackle these issues? We thought it would be interesting to see the span of our practice over the course of many years. We started with an old project completed about 12 years ago in a highly urban setting. We then picked a rural project completed about six years ago and finally selected a more recent work that is both urban and rural. All three share the idea of recycling, reuse, and hopefully revitalization and restoration.'



Lyndon Neri (left) and Rosanna Hu (right) at their Arsenale exhibition | image © designboom

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Furthermore, each project highlights the role of representation in the dialects between past and present, old and new, smooth and textured, refined and raw. According to the practice, liminality as a construct allows one to traverse both physical as well as allusive temporal thresholds, creating a visceral perception of the intersections of past, present, and future. **Neri elaborates on that point:** *'So what is this liminal space for us? It's all about the new, past and present, exterior and interior. So we start dealing with the questions: how do you navigate an architecture that's outside the box? Can we hold on to the idea of the 'existing', to the notion of historical transcendence and what it means to have that cultural continuity happen in our society?'*

Beyond its temporal dimension, liminality also alludes to a safe space where controversy and sensitive topics can be tackled. *'It is in these liminal spaces [...] that you can say things that are a bit more controversial. You know, like the alleyways that you traverse are the things that you say secretly, the things you wish could happen but could never do in your parents' home — maybe with your friends or outside of the confines of your home,' adds the architect.*



'Tsingpu Yangzhou Retreat' (2017) | image © designboom

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PEELING BACK LAYERS, DISSECTING, AND GRAFTING

At a more concrete level, all three Neri & Hu projects showcasing at the Arsenale share similar architectural strategies using material contrast, tectonic differentiation, formal assemblage, and surgical grafting. Adding in the temporal dimension (past), the selected works ultimately speak to an archaeological approach to peeling back the layers and working with deletions as much as additions.

As Rosanna Hu explains to designboom, this meant focusing more on the process and the details that enrich each project: *'[Lesley Lokko] wanted us to think about a different way of representing our previous work and to keep in mind the importance of showcasing process. So that is why we are creating these huge models. Of course, we've had big models before, but these really show the details of designing and working as well as construction, and how each of the materials and many of the details and spaces through the sectional models tell the story of the project.'*

'It's also about the fragmentation because the nature of these projects is weaving different things – from industry to culture. So the weaving means cutting things up, putting different things together, and then stitching them up, so that's why we wanted these fragmented objects that kind of stand on their own for their sculptural quality – but are, of course, a part of a bigger whole.'



'Nantou City Guesthouse' (2021) | image © Sanif Xu

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By adopting this 'liminal' way of thinking, Neri & Hu completely abandons the standardized way of representing architectural works with plans, sections, elevations, and drawings. According to Neri, architects have been, in a way, conditioned to rely on those traditional visualizations to fully comprehend what architecture, or even a full-scale model, should be. *'We thought: what if we start cutting and abstracting them to give them a new understanding? Maybe through that liminality, that in-between space that is neither concrete nor abstract, you find intellectual curiosity,'* notes Neri.



'Nantou City Guesthouse' (2021) | image © Marco Zorzanello

Concluding our talk, Rosanna Hu brings to attention the exhibition's final piece — a film that encapsulates the practice's lifelong thinking and addresses the issues at the forefront of this year's theme. *'The film [is] more spatial — as the camera moves through the space, you can pretend to be there, and the movement is something you can't show through our models only. [...] It is all about the materials, tactility, and craft of making rather than just having something pristine. And it's about the overlapping of the old and the new.'*

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'Nantou City Guesthouse' (2021) | image © Marco Zorzanello



'The Waterhouse at South Bund' (2010) | image © Sanf Xu

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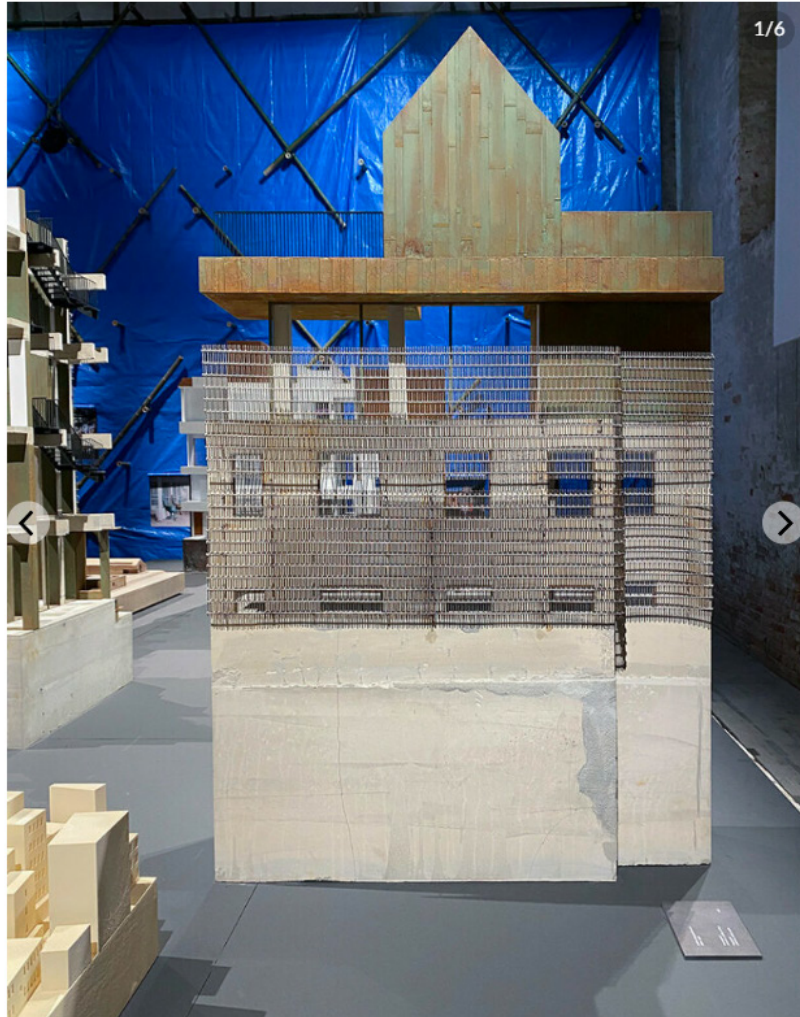
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Image © Marco Zorzanello



'Nantou City Guesthouse' (2021)

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exhibition info:

name: Liminality

location: Arsenale, Venice

program: 18th International Architecture Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia | @labiennale

section: Dangerous Liaisons

exhibition by: Neri & Hu Design and Research Office | @neriandhu

team: Christine Chang, Federico Saralvo, Chris Chienchuan Chen, Guangyi Niu, Jieqi Li, Yingxin Zhang, Yinzhu Shen, R.L.Nitya, Luna Hong, Lyuqitiao Wang, Serein Liu, Amy Cao, Hazel Zheng

with the support of: Shanghai Yi Xuan Model Design and Manufacture Co., Ltd., Pegenaute Studio, Jeremiah Neri Studio, Novità

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