

“NERI&HU EVOKES A WALLED CITY WITH THIS WELL-NESS RETREAT ALONG CHINA’S HAITANG BAY”

Stir world; NOV 2023

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Two L-shaped forms perched atop a masonry base and enclosed around a water courtyard shape the **architecture** of the Sanya Wellness Retreat in China's Haitang bay area. The **hospitality architecture** is the work of Chinese studio **Neri&Hu** whose design approaches a reverence for the building's past to create a contemporary language of built form and user experience. For the design, **Lyndon Neri** and **Rossana Hu**-led **Shanghai**-based practice drew their inspiration from ancient Chinese walled cities that were commonly elevated on high plinths and settled around water for protection. With the vast azure of the sea painted in the background, the 83,000 sqm hotel features a litany of rhythmic wooden balconies on the upper levels where the 343 guest rooms are located. In contrast, all public amenities are kept within the masonry base.



A view of the Sanya Wellness Retreat with the Haitang Bay in the background

Image: Chen Hao

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Guestrooms are located on the upper storeys while public amenities are housed in the lower level

Image: Chen Hao

“At every given opportunity, the design tries to embody the genius loci of Hainan, to blend elements from the island’s collective memory, culture and natural features,” says the design team. The water **courtyard**—a recurrent feature in works of Neri&Hu, previously seen in **The Brick Wall – Tsingpu Yangzhou Retreat** in Yangzhou, **The Chuan Malt Whiskey Distillery** in Sichuan Province, and the **Junshan Cultural Centre** near Beijing – sits as a central element within the hotel complex. Surrounding the lobby, reception, dining area, and event spaces, its calming aesthetic balances the flurry of guest arrivals, staff circulation, and movement in and out of guest rooms. Within the lobby, as per Neri&Hu, “a garden landscape with a floating lantern hovering above that allows a gentle light to filter in, and with the soft breeze that flows through, guests are immediately transported to a relaxed state of mind for appreciating the slow pace of island life.” A shallow stepped court goes down to accommodate a formal seating arrangement with built-in and movable **furniture**. The space is surrounded by thick cylindrical columns, water features and built planters. Handmade clay bricks appear on all the walls on the lower level; interesting to see are patterned surfaces defining sections of the lounge and the food and beverage area. The textile arts of the Li minority tribe inspire fabrics and rugs. The ceiling heights are kept low and ‘suppressed’ to frame views towards the sea.

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The **hotel architecture** also features bamboo as a building material. It is presented through a technique of soaking and pressing before woven rattan and yellow bronze accents are integrated into it. The materiality is seen in partitions and upper sections of enclosing walls in the dining area, in guest room furniture, and the reception area walls. As per Neri & Hu, the multi-faceted presentation of bamboo in the hotel has layers that elevate the overall aesthetic of the design.



Corridor on an upper storey that houses the guest rooms

Image: Chen Hao

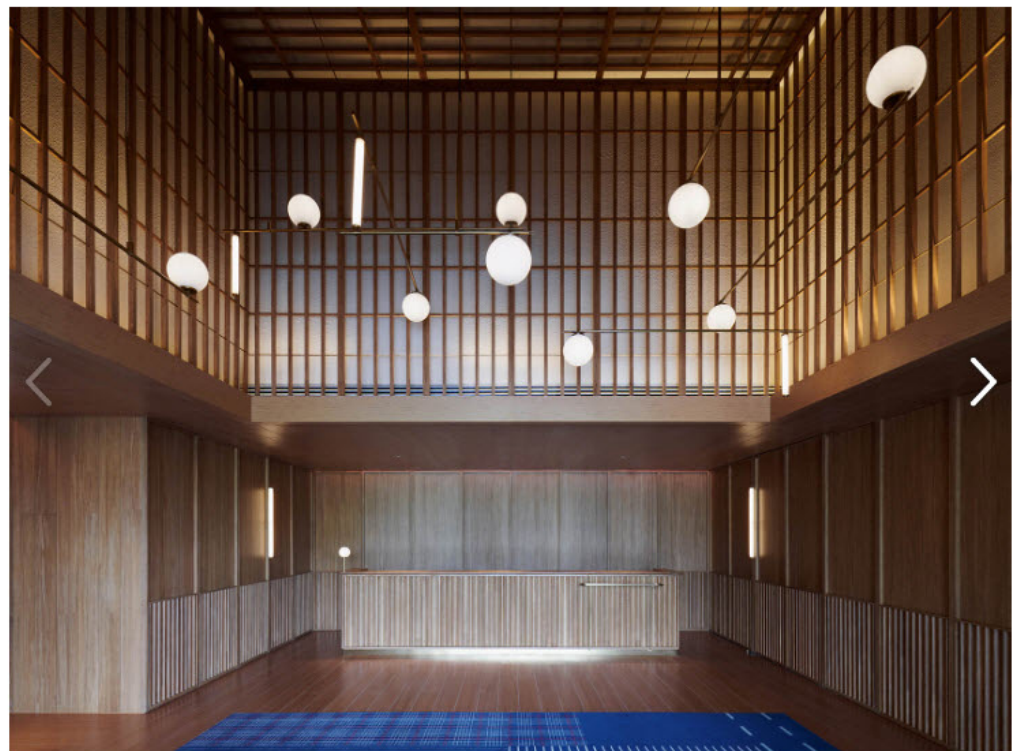
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On the upper storeys, the guest rooms are designed as ‘individual wooden huts’ linked by corridors. These connecting passages to the otherwise private quarter create an urban streetscape that allows people to explore the in-between spaces of the project. Neri&Hu describes this space as a place where ‘people can traverse and enjoy chance encounters, as such are the delights of being a traveller’. The facade here, a defining feature of the architecture, is composed of a series of continuous diagonal walls and connecting balconies. “The alternating rhythm between solid and void, the angled walls and textured material expression, all contribute to a dynamic façade that is constantly playing with light and shadow,” relays the design team.



Reception Hall

Image: Chen Hao

Previously, the globally acclaimed practice has worked on projects that explore the idea of nostalgia and architecture which includes the urban incision-led transformation of an old apartment into [Nantou City Guesthouse](#) in Shenzhen, an inner sanctuary-like [Kimpton Da An hotel](#) within a bustling Taiwanese district, and the [Alila Bangsar hotel](#) in Kuala Lumpur conceived around a mesmerising courtyard. Rossana Hu has previously talked about her inspirations and how she established the practice along with partner Lyndon Neri in a STIR-exclusive [interview](#) for the series, [UNSCRIPTED](#).