

DESIGN REPUBLIC COMMUNE

PROJECT

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COMMUNE

DESIGNERS

NERI & HU DESIGN +
RESEARCH OFFICE (NHDRO)

LOCATION

SHANGHAI, CHINA

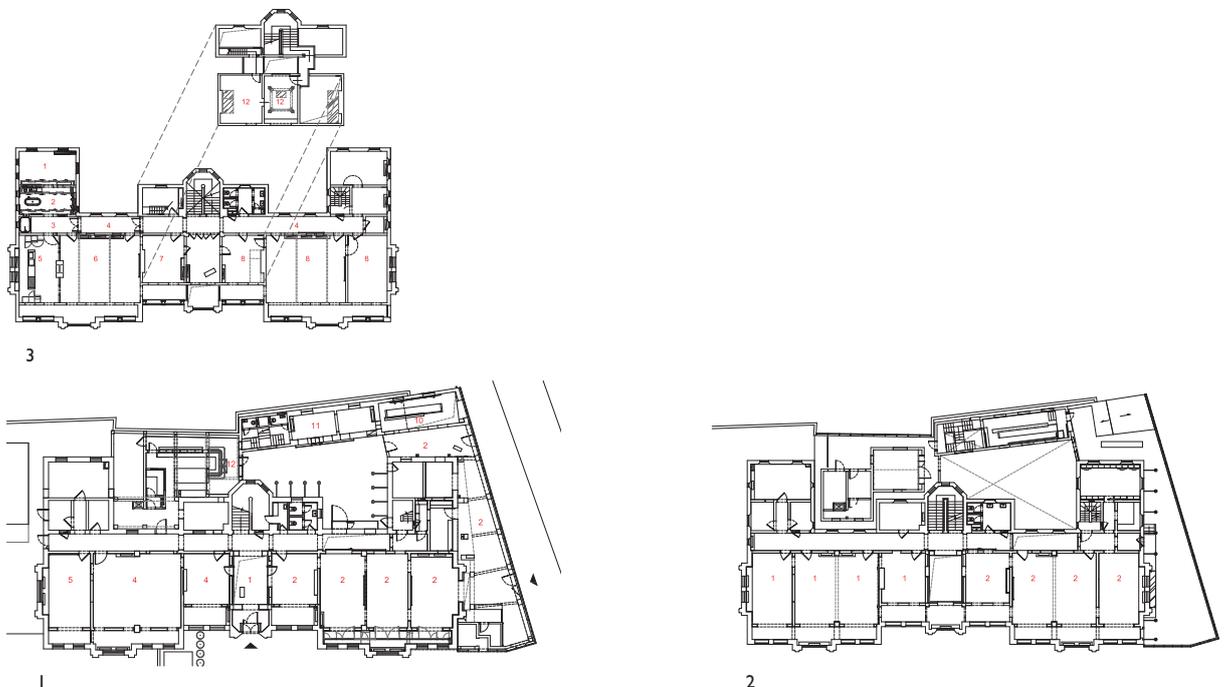
DATE

2012

“Buildings are fixed entities in the minds of most—the notion of the mutable space is virtually taboo—even in one’s own house. People live in their space with temerity that is frightening. Homeowners generally do little more than maintain their property. It’s baffling how rarely the people get involved in fundamentally changing their place by simply undoing it.”⁴

When reprogramming an existing building with a new use, deleting certain elements of an interior can be a useful approach to creating order and coherence in a space. In order to articulate a new interior space, the subtraction and deletion of parts of an existing building can sometimes be as important as the addition of new elements. This can be described as the act of “undoing” a building, fundamentally changing a place not necessarily through the addition of new elements, but instead clarifying its meaning by emptying it of added accretions.

NHDRO designed the Design Republic Commune, a gathering space for designers and design patrons to enjoy and explore all aspects of design. It houses Design Republic, a contemporary furniture retailer, alongside a mixture of retail spaces that display and sell books, fashion, lighting, accessories, and flowers. The commune also contains a design gallery, an event space, a café, a restaurant with Michelin-starred Chef Jason Atherton, a one-bedroom apartment, as well as a satellite office for NHDRO.





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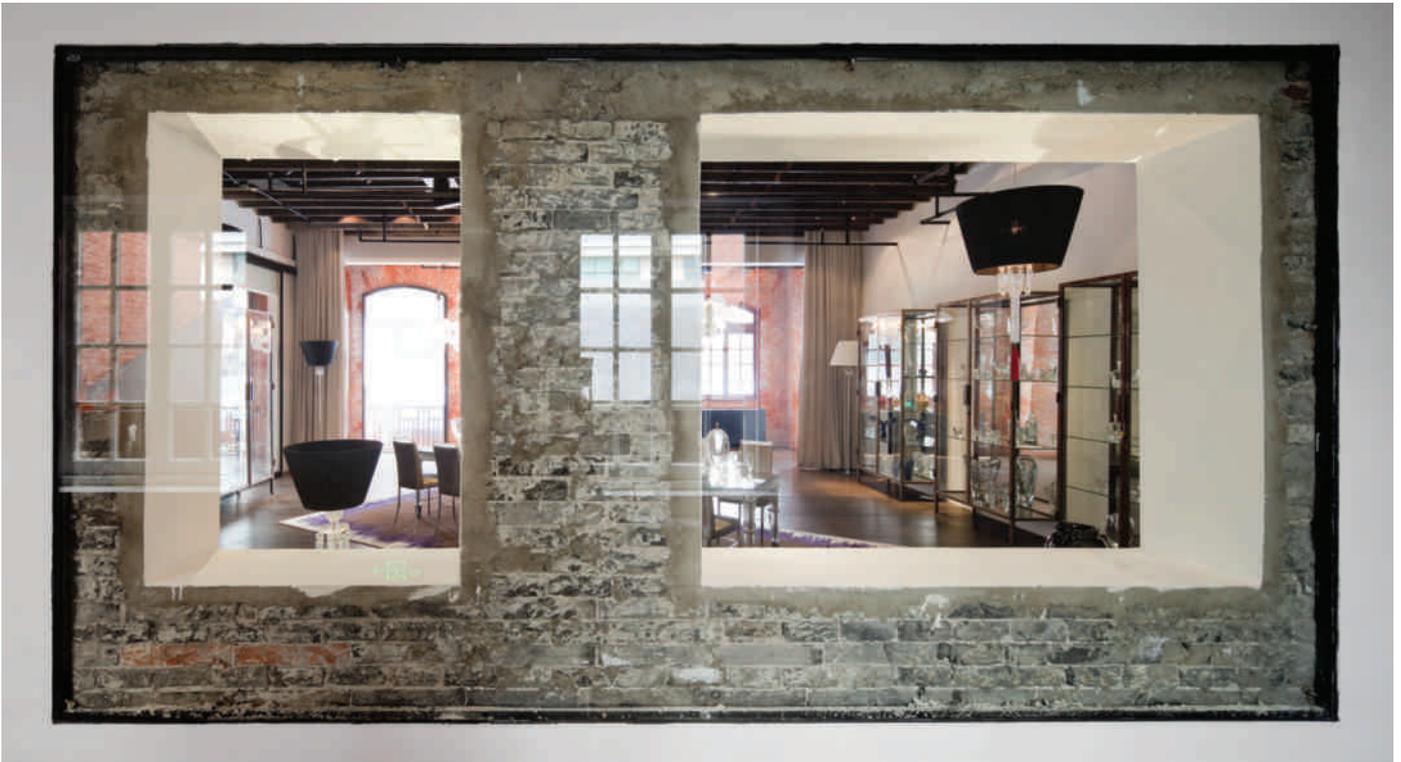
- 1 First-floor plan.
1—Lobby
2—Design republic
4—Retail
5—Bookstore
10—12—Dining

- 2 Second-floor plan.
1—Retail
2—Design republic

- 3 Third-floor plan.
1—7—Apartment
8—Gallery
12—Office

- 4 The glass-fronted showroom on the eastern side of the building is built upon the outlines of where the old storefronts once existed.

The host building, a police station constructed by the British in 1910, had changed use many times, most recently hosting an elementary school. Over the years, the changes to the building ensured that layers of alterations and adaptations had made the interior cluttered and incoherent. Realizing that not all of the changes were bad, and that some of the layers of change contained the stories of the building's history, NHDRO set about analyzing and taking stock of the many changes. They decided to retain some of the features that resulted from changes while eliminating others; removing unwanted elements with a series of strategic cuts and changes designed to enhance and clarify the fabric of the building. Where layers of previous uses had significantly accrued, the designers left them in situ, occasionally even framing them in glass to ensure they were represented for the next stages of the life of the building. Other parts of the building were radically altered. To impose a more ordered sequence of circulation the designers removed floors and walls to facilitate views through the rooms of the building akin to ensuring a flow through the spaces from room to room like a museum. The most significant addition was a new glass façade on the eastern, street side of the building. This replaced a series of illegally erected storefronts. The designers convinced the planning authorities to have them removed and then their outlines reinstated with a new transparent façade and a rooftop terrace extension.



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5 Areas where significant layers of adaptations were revealed have been enclosed in glass and framed in order to preserve the past life of the building.

6 Removing the second floor lobby resulted in a new two-story entrance. The sleek, white box and frameless glass openings contrast with the clean red brick of the existing building.

Contrasting with the exterior, which was mostly left intact due to historic preservation requirements, the interior has been completely transformed. The starkly modern white rooms are juxtaposed with untouched remnants of brick walls and, in some cases, exposed wood lath underneath crumbling plaster walls. The clear and distinct detailing of the connections between the old and the new has created a visual and spatial tectonic balance between new and old elements in the reprogrammed building.

