A Hidden Treasure

In Fuzhou, China, a modern teahouse by Neri&Hu embraces an ancient structure within.

BY ARIC CHEN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY HAO CHEN

The roofline, with its three wide gables, gives only a hint of what lies within the rammed-earth and copper-clad building recently completed by Shanghai-based Neri&Hu in the southern Chinese city of Fuzhou. But inside, a Qing-dynasty (1444–1912) timber structure—once framing the house of a high-ranking official—stands like a forest of slickly carved wood, dappled by natural illumination as it emerges from the shadows of the interior.

The name the architects have given the project—Foolish Baker—indicates its intended effect. The building’s carefully choreographed pathways, rippling water features, and shafts of light washing wood carvings and dark gray terrazzo floor tiles create a high-polish exercise in creating an architectural symphony around the existing historic construction.

Not bad for a real-estate businessman.

The building will eventually function as a teahouse. But for the moment, its semi-private nooks and elegant meeting areas are where home buyers and sales reps haggle over finishes, appliances, and unit prices for the two luxury high-rises under construction next door.

“All developers now see green spaces as a mandate to do a library, a park, a community center,” explains firm co-founder Lyndon Neri. Under
“A HIDDEN TREASURE”
Architectural Records; June 2021, P90 - P94

A DODGER-CLAS second floor hyper-volume a
noticed eight-base (this page). A courtyard
and is a lobby for the apartment courts,
into 27, and apartment towers (opp.)
HOSPITALITY

pressure to provide social, recreational, and cultural amenities, but short of funds, local governments throughout China often rely on land sales—out of their primary sources of revenue and leverage—to require developers to provide them instead. (This helps explain, for example, why so many museums in China are built and run by real-estate companies.)

These public-private facilities have a mixed record of success. However, the government got involved and told us we should really do this, because it’s not just a showcase,” Neel says of the project. “After this is done, the developer—Venga Group Fuzhou—will give it back to the city.” And in Fujian, a province famous for its tea culture, whose Fuzhou is the
THE RESTORED lintel frame of a Qing dynasty house is the main hall's centerpiece (opposite). A moat encircles the historic structure (above). Level changes offer various vantage areas (right).

The old structure, taken from Anhui province, would have originally been a Han-style house of whitewashed walls organized around wood-framed courtyards. It was probably dismantled a number of years ago by a private collector when such buildings, usually in a severely dilapidated state, were plentiful throughout the countryside. Preservation policies were lax, and, often, dismantling was the only option short of demolition. (The situation has improved since then.) Yang's Group acquired the wooden piles midway through design work and asked Neri&Hu to incorporate it. "At first, I thought it was crazy," Neri recalls. "There's no roof, no walls, it's just the structure itself. But then we had an epiphany with the team one night. We realized we could leave it as a relic while using architecture as a way to shelter it" — a building within a building. The architects have done a delicate, sensitive job integrating the historic structure as an organizing element. Its barred houses, having now undergone eight months of painstaking restoration, form a cathedral-like nave and side aisles while new skyscapes, pools, sunspun mesh screens, seating groups, and other devices evoke the building's original courtyard configuration.
As in other Neri&Hu projects—going back as far as their Warehouse hotel in Shanghai (reviewed, September 2009)—the building is punctuated by strategic gaps, reveals, and openings that frame interior and exterior views. Meanwhile, a sense of precision is heightened by level changes leading to a mezzanine that often views both down into the historic structure and, closer up, onto its elaborately carved brackets and beams as you circumambulate them.

Outside, a circular courtyard acts as a fulcrum among the main ball to the west, multi-function rooms to the west, and access to the apartment towers to the north, with a gap in its perimeter wall offering a glimpse over a reflecting pool out toward the street. Similarly, in the basement, an oculus connects

underground parking to wine-tasting rooms that look out to a hidden waterfall trickling down from the pools above.

Neri&Hu have long been known for their fashionable interiors, impeccably detailed spaces with all the right touches. In recent years, they have also built a body of projects, ranging from a chapel in Suzhou to an art center in Qinghuangdao, that embed moments of Paternoster movimento within sequences of meandering courts and oblique sight lines, often to striking effect. As the still frenetic, build-in-first-and-figure-in-later context of architectural production in China, this is no easy task. Yet in projects like the Bello Shaker, it can seem that what Neri&Hu are in fact preserving is that old-fashioned notion of architecture as an act form that elevates whatever it engages—whether an historic artifact, a culture of tea, or a real-estate deal.

Art Chow is the general and artistic director of Hu Nan Wood Factory in Rotterdam. For the past 17 years, he was a curator and director based in China.

Credits
ARCHITECT: Neri&Hu Design and Research Office—Lyndon Neri, Rossana Hu, partners in charge; Scott Hu, senior designer in charge; Jia Bi, Fanyi, Kathy Que, Fongshuang, Liang Binhudai, Yanxi, Jason Catterson, Daf Shangmyung, Bingqiao, Li, Einshin, Jun, Grace, Huijun, Hu, Jiaying, design team.
LOCAL DESIGN INSTITUTE: Fujian Boyong Architectural Design
ENGINEER: Fujian Boyong Architectural Design
GENERAL CONTRACTOR: Nenghui Construction Engineering Group
CONSULTANTS: Shanghai Edutad Architecture Consulting (structural); Shanghai Aimin Art (interior); Shanghai Matt Lighting (lighting)
OWNER: Rango Group (Hong Kong)
SIZE: 16,975 square feet
COMPLETION DATE: January 2021

Sources
TEXTILES: Knoll
LIGHTING: Artemide, Louis Poulsen, Stellar Works, Patina Design, Giorgetti, Artemide, Tom Dixon
FIXTURES: Grafa, Duravit