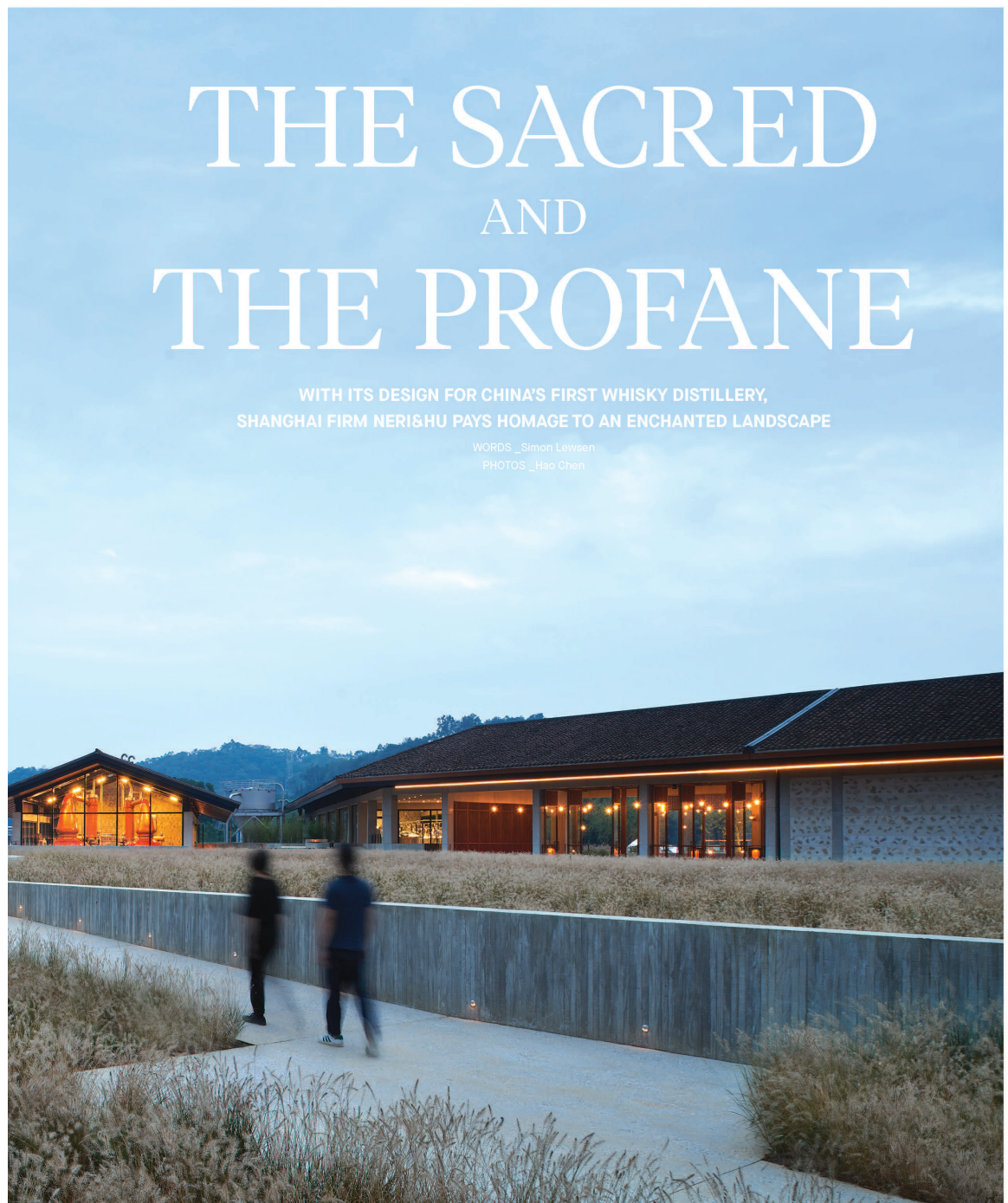




Located at the base of Mount Emei in Sichuan Province, the distillery includes a rotunda housing an experience centre and three gabled buildings for whisky production connected by a meandering path.

“THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE”
AZURE; MAR 2022





Shanghai architecture firm Neri&Hu Design and Research Office makes buildings that envelop but never overwhelm. Its work is modern, even modernist, but stands apart from the kind of monumental architecture that dominated the 20th century and still proliferates today — the stark, monolithic forms of Louis Kahn, Rem Koolhaas, Herzog & de Meuron and Peter Zumthor. While these practitioners did (and still do) projects that announce themselves from miles away, Neri&Hu specializes in a craftier brand of design. Its buildings seem coy. They reward exploration and withhold their secrets from casual passersby.

Lyndon Neri, who co-founded Neri&Hu with his wife, Rossana Hu, in the mid-2000s, believes that the firm's layered aesthetic reflects an Asian influence epitomized by the modular tea houses of Japan, the serene scholars' gardens of Song dynasty China and the Buddhist temples of both countries (as well as Nepal, Korea and Vietnam), with their beautifully tiered pagodas.

Theirs is an architecture of interiors, passageways and hidden sanctums. Their Tsingpu Yangzhou Retreat in the Chinese province of Jiangsu is a series of interlocking walled courtyards. To reach their Suzhou Chapel — also in Jiangsu — you must ascend a circuitous ramp with brick walls on either side to eventually arrive at a gabled sanctuary situated, deceptively, in a giant metal cube. Perhaps their most radical project is their flagship store for the skin care brand Sulwhasoo in Seoul, Korea, sited in an old five-storey building, which they gutted for the renovation. Instead of leaving the interiors open — as a European or American modernist might do — they shaded in the negative space with an elaborate brass latticework. The elegant scaffolding fills up the otherwise cavernous structure, demarcating openings for hallways, shops and showrooms.

In 2017, Pernod Ricard, the French beverage company — and owner of

some of the world's best-known scotches, including Ballantine's, Glenlivet and Chivas Regal — asked Neri and Hu to submit an architectural proposal for China's first whisky distillery, to be located at the base of Mount Emei, in Sichuan Province. The client envisioned a large, glitzy building, but the architects countered with a more restrained design, partly because glitz isn't their thing and partly because Mount Emei, the location of China's oldest Buddhist temple, has long been a beloved pilgrimage site. Neri reasoned that, if you're going to build a commercial venture near such a hallowed locale, your design should convey reverence — the profane, in other words, should defer to the sacred. “The site was already sufficiently rich,” he says. “There's no need to impose another story on it.”

The firm refers to the distillery project as *Shan Shui*, a reference to a Chinese style of ink-brush landscape painting that depicts craggy peaks and cascading freshets. (The literal translation of *shan shui* is “mountain water.”) The work is itself a kind of landscape painting. It is nestled into a foothill. It is meandering, varied and serene. And it flows. “We tried to minimize the footprint,” says Neri. “Instead of having one big building, we designed buildings that would be dispersed and connected by pathways.” In their previous projects, they had created interior architectural geographies; for this one, they sought to honour an exterior geography that already exists.

You approach the property near the highest point, where you're confronted by a trio of open rectangular huts, each beneath a gabled tile roof in terracotta and grey hues — a nod to local vernacular. The five phases of the whisky production process (including fermentation, distillation and finishing) happen across these three buildings. An exterior pathway weaves between them, enabling you to admire the copper stills and oak barrels. The pathway then leads you downslope, first to an “experience centre”— a

BELOW: In the visitors' lobby, lined with doors that open onto courtyards, a sunken lounge features built-in benches and Neri&Hu's Denglong lanterns for Parachina.



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ABOVE: Water rains down from the oculus of the rotunda, creating a meditative waiting area for visitors.



RIGHT: The circular experience centre also features grotto-like tasting rooms outfitted with Neri&Hu furnishings.

BELOW: A reflecting pool in the courtyard at the centre of the restaurant building fills with water that flows down a dramatic staircase.





domed rotunda, clad in flinty concrete brick, where you can sample the whisky — and then to a restaurant: a square building with an interior courtyard. A tunnel in the courtyard takes you underneath and then beyond this structure, into a region of terraced green spaces that step downward to a river at the base of the property. The layout doesn't aspire to geometric coherence; it is random and changeable, like nature.

The interiors are equally varied. Three in particular merit mention. One is the visitors' lobby, located in the first of the gabled production buildings. It is a rectilinear, fieldstone-clad foyer with a sunken gathering pit at its centre — a conceptual room within a room. “We searched for ways to break the interiors down,” says Neri, “and to make them more intimate.” Millwork benches line the edges of the pit, further demarcating space, and various accents, including the firm's Parachilna light fixtures (glowing ovoids enclosed in wire-mesh cages), reinforce the layered aesthetic.

That aesthetic reappears in the experience centre, accessed (like the firm's Suzhou Chapel) by a series of walled ramps that encircle and hide the inner building, which is partly buried anyway. After negotiating the ramps, you arrive in a domed concrete agora with an oculus at its peak — a circular skylight with water cascading from the edges of the window. (This space is the central waiting area. The tasting rooms are tucked discreetly to the side.)

While the experience centre is round and closed-off, the courtyard in the middle of the restaurant building — located further downslope — is square and open to the elements, making it a kind of metaphoric counterpoint. The courtyard also perfectly frames the mountain, which looms over the edge, its rock face appearing to merge with a waterfall that cascades down the steps in the centre area to the reflecting pool below. Nature and architecture cohere, although nature clearly predominates. “The mountain overwhelms the site,” says Neri, “making the building seem insignificant by comparison.”

When Pernod Ricard first contacted Neri&Hu, it said it wanted the distillery to be so iconic that visitors would buy key chains of it, like tourists do of the Eiffel Tower. But the architects pushed back, insisting that the best souvenir will be the memory itself, which will likely evolve over time into a series of dreamy impressions. “There's a difference between memory and memorabilia,” says Neri. “Memory is powerful because you don't need an object to represent it.”

As a final touch, the firm planted a mixture of thick, hardy grass species that evoke the feeling of barley fields in the flat space surrounding the experience centre. “Right now, it's knee height,” says Neri. “Once it grows, it will reach your waist. At that point, you will barely see the roof of the building. The landscape will cover everything else.” **AZ** thepractice.neriandhu.com

BELOW: A view of the terraced green spaces that link the square restaurant building, and the rotunda beyond, to a river at the base of the site.

