Sticks and Stone

In a bustling Chinese mall, a tailor-made boutique opens for a burgeoning fashion label.

BY LEOPOLDO VILLARDI
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ZHU RUNZI
THE MANDARIN phrase 色彩斑斓, evokes the immediate sense of old friendship that manifests when like-minded people meet. But their rapport stems from more than similar design sensibilities, or even a shared home city (in this case, Shanghai). As with the husband-and-wife team behind Neri&Hu Design and Research Office, Min runs a creative enterprise with her life and business partner, Ian Hylton. Together, they lead high-end Chinese fashion label Ms MIN, established in 2010, which quickly earned a reputation for its emphasis on fabric selection and “intelligent fit.”

With so much common ground, it only seemed a matter of time before the two couples would find a way to collaborate. That opportunity came three years ago, when Neri&Hu and Ms MIN assembled FOR, an exhibition at Design Republic Commune, the Concession-era police station adapted by the architects as a center for high-end design (record, February 2013). As the show’s name—roughly translating to “integration” or “unity”—suggested, it put on full display the harmony integral to the work of, and at work in, both partnerships. FOR was also precursor, sowing ideas that would grow and evolve in a future more significant commission: the design of Ms MIN’s second shop.

The 2,100-square-foot space is situated in Shanghai’s Taikoo Li, a new retail development in the city’s rapidly expanding Qiantan International Business Zone, which is already home to a number of luxury brands, from Balenciaga and Louis Vuitton to Hermès and Bulgari. For Neri&Hu, whose hallmark has become the imaginative reuse of the disused, working within a freshly minted raw interior presented far fewer surprises than usual. But this isn’t to say that transforming the concrete “cavern” wasn’t without challenges.

In recent years, online shopping has dramatically upended the consumer landscape, putting pressure on bricks-and-mortar businesses to up the ante—especially in China, the world’s largest e-commerce market. To enhance the in-person experience, Neri&Hu looked to the language of textile ateliers—to the process of carding, spinning, and weaving fabric by hand, to develop a tectonic expression that is tailor-made for the clothing brand. As Neri points out, fashion, like architecture, “deals with structure, with materiality, with layering, with experience.”

Inside, balanced light establishes a calm atmosphere. To achieve this, a two-story, 75-foot-long precutting ribbon window along the store’s southern wall first needed to be attenuated. In front of the glass, Neri&Hu mounted a surface with a narrow slit to modulate brightness and, in so doing, amplified the window’s horizontality. By painting the ex-
posed concrete slabs, mechanical equipment, and fire-safety systems the same shade of charcoal gray; they made ceiling clutter recede from view without sacrificing height. And, underfoot, salvaged wood or clay roof tiles, sliced into C-shaped strips, have been laid in rows of alternating curvature, giving the floor a texture that appears woven.

The Ms MIN shop has been organized into three zones—each snugly fitting into the space's irregular footprint like a Tetris block. A delicate wood frame—akin to the pole structures used in rural villages outside Shanghai for the drying and dying of fabric—partitions the space along the ribbon window into a kind of architectural book. Suspended from the frame's beams overhead, strips of sheer linen define a promenade of intimate galleries, where mannequins showcase the label's current collection. Quadrantite posts, each comprising four cylindrical colonettes arranged in a square, hold the wood in place, while beams pass through them. The posts never touch the floor—they rest on brass plates, in what Neri describes as a contemporary reinterpretation of a detail found in some traditional Chinese houses, intended to prevent wood rot.
In the store’s central area, which the architects liken to a courtyard, customers peruse garments. “But it wasn’t about racks and racks of clothing,” he adds.

Instead, clothes are hung from freestanding panels of alternating figured green marble and beige limestone, with hand-patinated brass edge-bandng, arranged in an enfilade of loosely defined rooms. In a more traditional setting, these “screens” might have been adorned with painted landscapes or elaborate brocade, but here they serve as neutral backdrops. Because the panels are not fixed to the floor, they can be moved to keep pace with seasonal collections, which might warrant different display configurations, or removed entirely, freeing up space to accommodate up to 80 seated guests for fashion shows.

Neri describes the third—and most private—zone as a house. With a slatted “eave,” this space accommodates a lounge for consultations and fittings by appointment. Flanking it on either side are discreet back-of-house storage closets, which make clever use of an odd triangular corner in the store’s perimeter.

Neri&Hu’s boutique for Ms MIN is quiet yet managed to speak volumes. The same could be said of the fashion label’s current collection, which cuts elegant figures, with reverence for materiality and neat construction. While e-commerce is steadily consuming the retail realm, there is no substitute for the tactile experience and happenstance discovery offered by in-person shopping; this is especially true when the objects on display and the architecture displaying them so clearly echo the same values. At Tsukao Li, it seems Neri&Hu fits Ms MIN like a glove.