

“NERI&HU’S URBAN INCISIONS TRANSFORM AN INDUSTRIAL APARTMENT INTO A GUESTHOUSE”

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Neri&Hu's urban incisions transform an industrial apartment into a guesthouse

Located in an overcrowded neighbourhood of Shenzhen, the intervention cuts through the massing of an old residential building to design the Nantou City Guesthouse.

by Zohra Khan | Published on : Mar 05, 2022

The practice of Shanghai-based studio Neri&Hu is driven by a range of obsessions. Of beauty, of past, of stories seeped in abstraction. For the studio founders, Lyndon Neri and Rossana Hu, the idea of reflective nostalgia – drawn from the concept of Russian-American philologist Svetlana Boym – finds deep relevance in their work. It inspires them to treat historical buildings as urban artifacts, instead of reliving their past. In their latest work coming from the city of Shenzhen, much like most of their other projects, the duo have created a poetic portal to the future.



The Nantou City Guesthouse is located in an overcrowded residential neighbourhood in Nantou, Shenzhen

Image: Chen Hao

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The project in discussion is the **adaptive reuse** of a derelict apartment building from the historic Nantou neighbourhood into a nine storey, eleven room guesthouse. What’s interesting about this work, before we delve into the architectural vision, is the spirit of its context. As is characteristic of unplanned settlements, we see labyrinthine narrow alleys, tightly packed houses, and a heterogeneous urbanism, whose beauty lies in its disorder. To cut the prevailing chaos – a requisite of the new building typology – while permeating the energy of the mundane within the architectural folds, Neri&Hu created incisions into the existing built mass and exposed the architecture to the public by peeling off its former material layers. The design team says, “A tectonic language was developed to articulate two divergent treatments that probe the notion of urban layering and the embracing of fragments.” It created a light, screen-like steel cladding for the primary **façade design** evoking a contemporary expression, while in the **interiors**, the bare structural elements nod to the building’s past.



The architecture is a nod to the concept of the urban village

Image: Chen Hao

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For Lyndon and Rossana, the building embodies the concept of an urban village. Urban villages in China, known as *chengzhongcun* in Chinese, are born out of agricultural settlements that become transitional neighbourhoods under rapid urbanization. It is largely typical of constricted roads, face-to-face buildings, a thin strip of sky, and inner streets and alleys proliferating with shops, grocery stores and service outlets. Within Nantou’s similar urban fabric, the guesthouse is presented as a portal – with countless contact points – to witness the street life while enjoying a comforting public realm on the inside.



The entrance to the guesthouse

Image: Chen Hao

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One arrives at the guesthouse’s entrance walking through a side street, and steps into the building without experiencing a distinctive transition of space. As per Neri&Hu, entering into the guesthouse evokes the feeling of inviting neighbors and friends into one’s private home. On this level is a **restaurant**, a kitchen, and an internal courtyard, created by cutting open and expanding a former stairwell.



The restaurant on the ground level

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A suspended metal staircase within the courtyard facilitates access to the guest rooms on the upper floors, and further to the rooftop garden. Filtering through the mesh and large glass windows of the façade as well as the courtyard, natural light seeps into the building and adequately illuminates the industrial interiors. The jet black metal of the stairs and window frames complement the exposed concrete structural remnants. From glimpses of the engulfing street filtering inside to contemporary spaces and décor brushing shoulders with the building’s shell, one sees a constant dialogue of the old and new.



Living area inside one of the guestrooms

Inside the guestrooms, warm wooden furnishing conjures a subtle contrast juxtaposed with blues and greens of the upholstery, cabinets, and wall tiling. A nod to the aesthetics of the courtyard, collapsible doors in jet black allow the required separation and merger of living areas and utility spaces.

The rooftop, as per Neri&Hu, captures the life of the neighbouring buildings where terraces largely feature makeshift gardens and vegetable farms. This floor houses a large bar with stunning views of the Nantou skyline. Interestingly, a metallic monolith enclosing building services is designed on the top-most level. The striking angular forms, as per Neri&Hu, “play on vernacular add-ons, which are much sought after by space starved attic level residents.”

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The rooftop features a bar and service areas

Image: Chen Hao

Speaking of the architectural thematic, the design team relays, “To cut does not simply connote destruction, but also creation, in this case, of spaces and meanings. By absorbing the urbanity into the building, Nantou City Guesthouse in turn makes its private history legible and becomes fully ingrained in the ebb and flow of the city. In that transformation, the self-healing incision opens a new portal into as much as the past, as the mundane yet singular present.”

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