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# Unorthodox office designs

The future of workspaces is anything but conventional based on overseas projects shown at the Kuala Lumpur Design Forum (KLDF) and International Architectural Design Conference (DATUM:KL) 2014.

**D**UBBED "The Black Box", the Neri&Hu Design and Research Office in China makes a defiant statement against the Shanghai skylines with its sleek, smooth and modern box-like exterior even as it breaks the taboo associated with the generally conservative Chinese society in using black as the colour cladding the entire building.

"I appreciate the ability of foreigners to challenge strongly held local convictions. There's always a Chinese component, but not necessarily in a way that people can easily see. There's an abstract thinking so you need to understand the essence of what we're trying to do. People ask me why I have a black building as my office. So I tend to be academic and ask them 'What's the colour of your hair?'"

"When they answer 'black', I tell them that the French concession were full of French people – and that's why they have yellow buildings. Now that we're back in Shanghai, let's make the buildings black," said Neri&Hu Design and Research Office founding partner Lyndon Neri. Happy to dispel the taboo normally associated with black, which is normally shunned, he instead chose this shade for its inherent striking look.

"Sometimes, in life, as architects – forget the academics, we just do what we want. Hence, the choice of my office space that has been reinvented from the French concession. We completely stripped the building down and reframed the windows to create the sense of having them extruding out of the facade and then cutting them to reveal the windows inside," he shared with the audience at the International Architectural Design Conference (DATUM:KL 2014) recently.

This architecture graduate who holds a master's degree from Harvard University is no stranger to breaking away from convention when it comes to creating architectural projects, including offices with a difference.

Among his list of accolades include being selected by *ID. Magazine* as one of the 40 designers globally who deserve more attention in the "I.D.40". His firm was also chosen as one of the Design Vanguard in 2009 by *Architectural Record* (US). Having won the AR Awards for Emerging Architecture 2010 by *Architectural Review* (UK), it also emerged as the 2011 INSIDE Festival Overall Winner.

To him, rejuvenation is not a matter of choice. "Rejuvenation is about trying to keep the heritage, essence and spirit that made Shanghai what it is today – alive and relevant for the next generation. It's important for us to find that meaning and to hold on to it, all the way from start to finish. Without history, we will not have tomorrow."

Aside from designing architecture and interiors with partner Rossana Hu, he also works on industrial designs for famous European brands, including MOOOI, LEMA, Parachilna, Classicon, Gandia Blasco, Stellar Works, Meritalia



MOD's Seah came up with the fingerprint concept (far right top and bottom) for The Mark project in Beijing, China, and the interior design of the Leo Burnett office in Singapore (centre). – Photos courtesy of Ministry of Design.

and BD Barcelona Design.

In 2013, Neri was inducted into the U.S. Interior Design Hall of Fame with Hu and was selected as AD 100 top talents in architecture and interior design by *Architectural Digest China*. This year, both partners emerged as UK Wallpaper 2014 Designer of The Year.

This alumni of the University of California at Berkeley, having completed his bachelor of architecture prior to starting his practice with Hu, was the director for projects in Asia and an associate with Michael Graves & Associates in Princeton for over 10 years.

Neri is also the founder of Design Republic, a retail concept store based in Shanghai that offers a unique collection of products created by the world's best design talents, many of which have never before been made available to consumers in China.

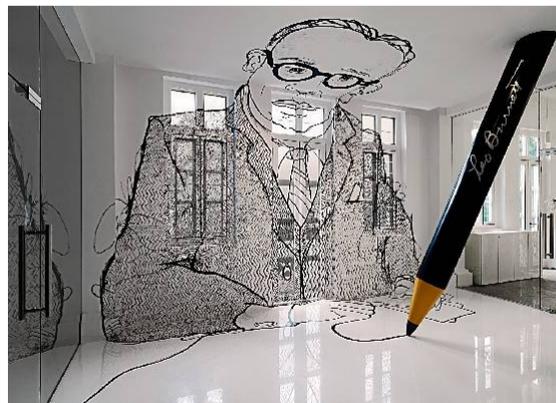
## Celebrating raw creativity

Forte, Gimenes & Marcondes Ferraz Arquitectos' (FGMF) Rodrigo Marcondes Ferraz who has sound knowledge in high technology structural systems shared on the firm's contemporary architecture reditions of office buildings that are created without restraint in the use of materials and building techniques. Showing an unusual looking office with raw, semi-finished interiors, it is obvious that the firm seeks to explore the connection between architecture and its environment in all the projects that it undertakes.

Besides the spiral staircase that pique visitors' interest and an industrial looking reception area, he also shared on the Brazilian firm's Vista mixed-used commercial development's retail and office components. The office space infuses a sense of rejuvenation to what would otherwise be seen as a



Brazilian firm FGMF's Ferraz used his knowledge of structural technology systems to design this unusual semi-finished, raw looking office reception area (right). – Photos courtesy of Forte, Gimenes & Marcondes Ferraz.



conventional working area. A case of an office that is not a chip off the old block of conventional workspaces.

"My two business partners and I graduated from the same college. We talked a lot during college days about doing our own version of architecture and discussed at length on being innovative. We are in a profession that requires a lot of thinking and (adapting to) change fast. It's crucial for us to think about innovation when designing a building because if you don't think about it – when its ready it's 'already born old'," he said.

Emphasising on the need to come up with creative design interpretation, Ferraz said that creating unusual looking offices spaces can spark interest, inspiration and imagination for the workers and visitors to the space.

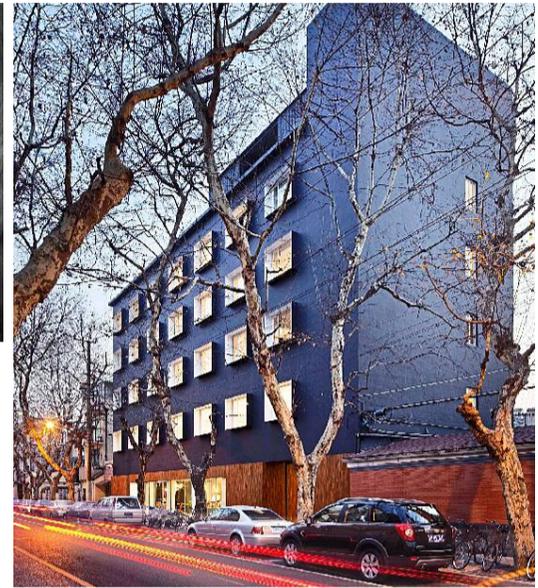
The firm believes in discovering new interpretations of office spaces besides other projects. "Rejuvenation is about how we can interact with our buildings. Brazil had a lot of important modern architecture in the 1960s. In fact, when we were in college, we could see a lot of people doing modern architecture. It was good architecture then, but now we are in the 21st century, and need to ask ourselves, what else can we do? Based on that idea, we began our practice. We never wanted to be an office that specialises on one type of project."

## Quirky and contemporary

Ministry of Design founder and director Colin Seah who has the distinction of being named Designer of the Year by International Design Awards USA 2010, believes in adding a personalised touch to the interpre-



Neri&Hu Design and Research Office founding partner Neri and his unusual Black Box office building in Shanghai, China (right). – Photos courtesy of Neri&Hu Design and Research Office.



tation of projects as seen in the creative design of the Leo Burnett advertising agency office in Singapore.

His firm also undertakes hospitality, F&B (food and beverage), retail, commercial buildings and interior, educational institutions and other mixed development projects besides product design. "It's a whole combination coming together that stimulates life and other product designs. We need to come together to give people the rejuvenated spaces that they need."

"That was the preamble and that is based on the theme of rejuvenation," shared the two-time recipient of Singapore's highest accolade, the President's Design Award, he said.

Speaking on the subject of designing bespoke offices such as those undertaken for advertising agencies,

he said that they also design generic offices but with a special touch especially for its mixed-use projects.

"We created the office for Leo Burnett, the cool advertising agency in Singapore. Every Leo Burnett office needs a picture of the founder somewhere. Most of the offices in other parts of the world just have a poster so we designed a big, three-metre high graffiti which you can see the moment you step out of the lift."

Since Leo Burnett is a creative agency, it's about breaking rules. So instead of having rules, we had a graffiti of the founder three-metre high.

"Then, there's The Mark where all the offices buildings are boomerang-shaped undertaken for our client, The Maxon Group in Beijing, China. Those are all offices in a business park. Each building gets sold to a different owner."

"It's called The Mark as it's like leaving your mark and fingerprint or thumbprint in the sky. We did the branding for them as well. In this case, we developed a new building footprint so that all the buildings have rich spaces in between them. It's like rejuvenating the conventional way of thinking for buildings that veer away from the normal, boring and conventional rectangular layout."

"We created a floorplan that is versatile to make an enigmatic space. For the same price, you get so much more value out of it, so why not," he shared of the creatively interpretation he lent to the architecture of the building.

He believes there are three ways to view the subject of rejuvenation.

"There are several ways to define rejuvenation. You can rejuvenate an existing context, condition or a building or you can rejuvenate a convention, a way of thinking which we think is more powerful. You can rejuvenate from the way you approach things. You don't ask old questions, but new and relevant questions. Instead of always building and tearing down buildings, what if a building or space has the inherent ability to rejuvenate constantly."

"People and culture are very important. We need to rejuvenate because people and culture are revolving whether you like it or not. Architecture can play a role on many levels," he concluded.