

Brave new world

After a triumphant first decade in China, Lyndon Neri of the acclaimed multi-disciplinary practice Neri&Hu reflects on what being Made in China means and divine inspiration

MUCH has been written about China's emergence as a global superpower. In just three decades, the world's most populous nation has transformed its fortunes with an economy that runs like it's on steroids, enjoying an average annual growth of 10%. But with great progress comes great cost, and just as many reports have surfaced about China's alarming hyper-consumption as well as its laissez-faire attitude to the environment, business practices and work safety. It also seems that in the process of becoming the world's factory, China has also become the world's largest consumer of luxury goods and, on the manufacturing end, the best copycats.

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Lyndon Neri moved to China with his wife Rossana Hu and their three children just as Shanghai was becoming China's financial hub and at the start of the great expat migration. The couple, who had been colleagues at the New York office of Michael Graves & Associates, were architects with a laundry list of Ivy League qualifications and had previously held positions in prestigious practices.

They left a comfortable life to strike out in Shanghai after Neri saw that Shanghai was in the process of an interesting germination when he was stranded there during the SARS epidemic while still working for Michael Graves. He was intrigued enough to want to be part of this great experiment.

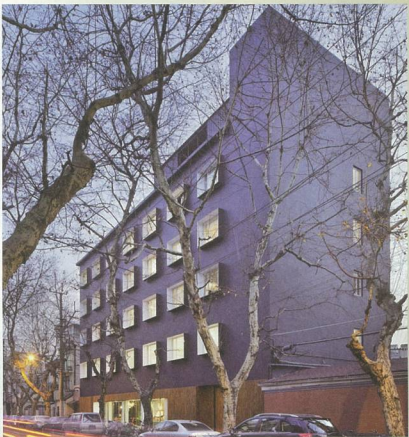
The couple set up a product company called Design Republic in 2004, specialising in product design, swiftly followed by Neri&Hu, a multi-disciplinary architectural design practice. In the decade that followed, as Shanghai and China boomed, so did Neri&Hu. The practice now employs 90-odd people in Shanghai, London and New York, who work on an extensive range of international projects in architecture, interiors, master-planning, graphic design and product design.

Over the past decade, the couple's research-driven approach has yielded a diversity of furniture, interior design and architecture projects and accolades including the AR Award for Emerging Architecture 2010 from *The Architectural Review* in the UK and being inducted into *Interior Design* magazine's Hall of Fame in 2013. Neri was in town recently to speak at the Kuala Lumpur Design Forum 2014 on the theme of rejuvenation; where he charmed the audience with his approachable demeanour and original ideas. The effortless architect made time to chat about how Neri&Hu manages to remain authentic in this copycat world and their journey so far.

As a child in the Philippines, Neri wanted to become an artist despite the reluctance of his father, who had his heart set on his second son becoming an engineer, so the inventive Neri junior decided to take art classes in college in the US without being completely truthful to his father.

"Being from a very traditional Chinese background, I didn't want to fight my father so I led him to believe that that his dream was going to be fulfilled. My brother, who was older but a bit more honest and perhaps more stupid, decided he was not going to study law or be an economist and wanted music, so he fought my dad head-on. I saw that firsthand and thought, 'Finn, no good result', so I decided I should focus on doing what I wanted to do and tell my dad I was doing another thing," smiles Neri.

"So when I applied for college, I was taking painting classes in my first two years until my dad decided to visit me and that's when I panicked. I moved to architecture but I realise now that architecture became what I liked about art. It gave me the medium to express what I could not articulate in words. When I was growing up, I stuttered; I



Above: The Black Box in Shanghai. Right: Design Republic's flagship. Pictures courtesy of Derryck Menere



by Jennifer Choo



photos by DD Hee



was never articulate or eloquent in any form, so I needed a medium that I could hold on to – which was art. "Architecture became the natural extension of something that could translate professionally and yet allow me to hold on to myself, because it was the medium through which I could express myself. People often ask me today how come you get to do what you do today yet it seems your work is so radical? Well it's not; it's just me; I'm just expressing myself."

Neri's bit of misdirection was finally revealed to his father last year when Neri&Hu was inducted into *Interior Design*'s Hall of Fame and he told this story: "My father just laughed when he heard this but if I had told this story to him 10 or 15 years ago, he would not have accepted it; but now that I've managed to turn it around and gone over the hump and am actually able to feed myself and create work that he can be proud of, he can sort of understand."

After working in the US, the couple moved to China partly because Neri felt burnt out in architecture and, after honing their multi-disciplinary skills at Michael Graves, developed their own practice in the same vein.

"What I learned from 10 years at Michael Graves was the discipline to be multi-disciplinary; not to think purely architectural, not to think purely interior; there was always the graphic component and the product-design component."

However the couple put their own spin on this by putting

research at the starting point of each project. "We start with research at the beginning of every project because we need to understand a concept that we hold on to. In a big project especially, you need to have multiple interests and multiple concepts to survive the intensity and brutality of practice."

"So what we need to do is understand the history of the site, the context of where we are, the issues at hand that we are dealing with. The more we do that, the more we can educate the client as to why we are doing what we are doing. You should even include in research the aspirations and motivations of a client in a particular project as well the social context with which you are dealing."

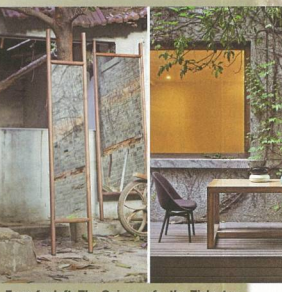
Research is such an integral part of their process that their Shanghai office goes by the name of Neri&Hu Design and Research Office. "We develop our research through a group of people we hire. We don't say you should be able to speak English or you should be able to speak Chinese; but many of our associates and senior associates were hired based on a portfolio because in the portfolio you can see how they think. It's merely a pretty building and just beautiful rendering. I'm not that interested after the interview. I prefer to see how they think, how they go through the process, because the process is very important."

While this makes for a sensible strategy, as Neri&Hu has grown in stature and become a powerhouse brand, how does this work when companies come to it for an infusion of the Neri&Hu style?

Without missing a beat, Neri cites Gandia Blasco, the Spanish outdoor furniture specialist, with which Neri&Hu collaborated to design the Jian collection, launched at the Milan Furniture Fair this year. "Gandia Blasco came to us with a very strong essence of what it has, so if you look at our work for Gandia Blasco, people may say it doesn't look very Neri&Hu; but the idea behind that is very Neri&Hu."

"We named it Jian which, in Chinese, means 'in-between', and is one of two characters that form the words space, time and people. We wanted to create a collection that has an ethereal quality, capturing both time and space, the sky and the land, something to give poetry to outdoor living and offer a restful sanctuary from everyday busyness," explains Neri.

"So it's not so much that we have rattan wood or recycled wood; to me the look is actually fleeting but the idea is important because it will last through time; style won't. Like one of my favourite quotes from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*, 'We don't



From far left: The Opium sofa; the Zisha tea series; Extend mirrors; the Structure table

ask to be eternal beings, we ask only that things do not lose all their meaning."

Despite this dedication, it must be like swimming against the current especially in a country where copying is not confined to smartphones and bags but where whole cities like Manhattan and Venice have been surreally transplanted in another location. While Neri is quick to stress that he does not support copying, he takes a more philosophical (and optimistic) view. "I think the copying is a phase; think back to Japanese goods like Aiwa, Panasonic and Sony in the last century; they were dismissed as copycats but look at them now. Copying is very Asian and hard to shed. Like when you write poetry, you study the master and copy what he does. Painting is the same way because you copy first because you have to be disciplined at

what you do; and it is only through copying that you understand the technique. Hopefully one day when you become creative, you become something else," he says.

"The Japanese have developed their own global voice and the Koreans are doing that now. For China, I believe it will happen and it's only through time. It's a bigger country so it's a harder situation but eventually it will come, that's why I always believe that Rossana and I are just building bridges for the next generation to cross. And I do feel that responsibility because I have worked in America for many years and, at the end of the day, I am Chinese. I mean I went to graduate school at Harvard, I worked for the best architects, my thesis supervisor was Pritzker Prize-winner Rafael Moneo; but at the end of the day, I still am Chinese. Doesn't matter if I'm the copy version, at the end of the day my blood is Made in China," he stresses.

"Having said that, having this cultural labelling is unconstructive. When we went to China, if there was a Chinese show among emerging architects, they didn't put us there; but when there was a foreign show of foreigners working in China, they didn't put us there, either. That's good for us because then we don't waste our time trying to fit different labels and, as a result, we focus on what we do. People often say, 'Lyndon, why are you so prolific?' I say partly because we don't spend our time politicising about whether we're Chinese or American. We just focus on what we



The overlapping Land/House in Singapore. Picture courtesy of Pedro Pegenaute

express ourselves to be. And when it comes out, a part of it is very Western and a part of it is very Asian. It's because that's our background. And if we become who we are, people will either like you or hate you and at least they know who we are; we are true to ourselves – and that's the most important thing."

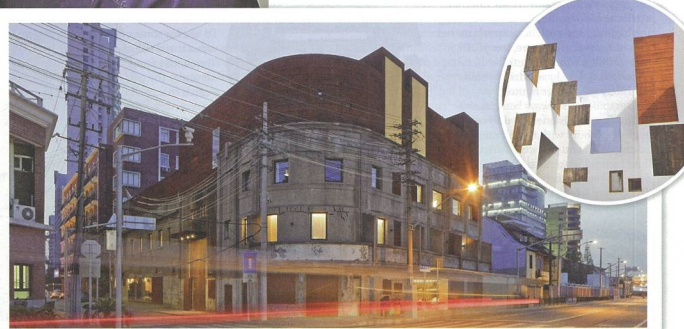
A man of conviction, Neri often visibly when he speaks about Rossana: "I'm glad we work together because if we didn't, I don't think I'd have much time with her; so working with her 24/7 is truly a blessing. Of course, she is the love of my life and it is still difficult to leave her when I travel. We balance each other and our last 10 years in China have been a good ride."

When asked what inspires him, Neri does not hesitate to cite his relationship with God. "There are many things which inspire me – I can talk about art, food or culture; but I think the one thing that truly inspires me is my relationship with God. I read the Bible every day and I think man cannot be so proud of himself as to think there is no one up above controlling his destiny. We are in a position where, in the Book of Luke, it says to those who have been given much, much is expected. To those who have been bestowed much, much will be expected of them; and I believe that. I believe in spending time to try to understand so I pray a lot because I think this world is limiting. The press can lift you up, they can tear you down, clients can bestow on you a project and can take it back as well."

"But at the end of the day, the joy of it all is despite all this, we need to be careful and have a sense of peace within. If we can't have that, it doesn't matter if you win the Pritzker Prize or have the best Guggenheim Museum – everything will be empty." **FOCUSM**

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The Waterhouse at South Bund. Picture courtesy of Pedro Pegenaute