

**Neri&Hu Brings “Liminality” to the
18th International Architecture Exhibition
of La Biennale di Venezia**

(Venice Italy, May 22, 2023) Neri&Hu, an interdisciplinary architectural design practice based in Shanghai, with studios in London, Paris and Milan, present *Liminality*, a multimedia exhibition in the *Dangerous Liaisons* section of the 18th International Architecture Exhibition of the La Biennale di Venezia at the Arsenale. The thoughtful exhibit was selected by exhibition curator, Lesley Lokko, as part of *The Laboratory of the Future*. In response to Lokko’s curatorial statement, Neri&Hu investigated and addressed the brief with an installation rooted in the concept of liminality. To cast liminal space as a zone between design practice and theoretical exploration, Neri&Hu present three adaptive reuse projects – Waterhouse at South Bund (Shanghai, 2008-2010), Tsingpu Yangzhou Retreat (Yangzhou, 2015-2017) and Nantou City Guesthouse (Shenzhen, 2020-2021), that represent the practice’s research in Reflective Nostalgia, Recasting Vernacular, and Ruinophilia/Future Artifact.

Lesley Lokko explains, “La Biennale di Venezia is a laboratory of the future, a time and space in which speculations about the discipline’s relevance to this world – and the world to come – take place. We envisage our exhibition as a kind of workshop, a laboratory where architects and practitioners across an expanded field of creative disciplines draw out examples from their contemporary practices that chart a path for the audience to weave through, imagining for themselves what the future can hold.” In the *Dangerous Liaisons* section, the 37 practitioners all work in hybrid ways, across disciplinary boundaries, across geographies, and across new forms of partnership and collaboration.

“As we imagine for ourselves what the future holds, we collectively occupy the liminal space of experimentation both in theoretical constructs and in design practice,” explains Lyndon Neri and Rossana Hu, founding partners of Neri&Hu. “In today’s post-colonial world, Homi Bhabha speaks about boundaries in culture as a place of liminality or ‘third space’ where translations and negotiations occur. Liminal space and the notion of the threshold represent a space of ambiguity that engenders new possibilities and changes. These spaces become the stage for transitory and frontier events that possess agencies for disrupting and challenging the status quo.”

As a collective the three projects share similar architectural strategies using material contrast, tectonic differentiation, formal assemblage and surgical grafting. However, each project comes with its own set of issues related to how one engages in remnants of past occupancy. The selected works speak to an archaeological approach to peeling back the layers, and working with deletions as much as additions.

Along with site models, each project is also represented by large conceptual models displaying sectional fragments capturing isolated moments of tension. Building off of fragments and relics of post-industrial, rural and urban heritage, these models highlight the role of representation in the dialectics between past and present, old and new, smooth and textured, refined and raw. *Liminality* as a construct allows one to traverse both physical as well as allusive temporal thresholds, creating a visceral perception of the intersections of past, present and future.

Waterhouse at South Bund questions the typology of a hotel, how one interprets notions of “home” and domesticity in a foreign environment, and how to give meaning to the experience of a traveler. In response to adapting the original structure, a Japanese army building from the 1930s, Neri&Hu exercises restraint in the restoration process by resisting the impulse to cosmetically fix every flaw, intentionally leaving portions of walls crude and exposed, at times even encasing raw wall sections and details behind a glass shield to convey the archival treatment of a museum display. Drawing from the rich experience of a typical Shanghai *longtang* alley where true privacy does not exist, Neri&Hu challenges conventions of inhabitation, notions of comfort and the boundaries between public and private.

For **Tsingpu Yangzhou Retreat**, addressing a scenic site dotted with small lakes and a handful of existing ruinous structures, Neri&Hu has overlaid a grid of narrow walled lanes as pathways to integrate otherwise incoherent programs and spaces. The resulting organization creates multiple courtyard enclosures as a modern reinterpretation of the vernacular Chinese courtyard typology and employs an orthogonal landscape strategy which critiques the traditional Chinese garden’s artificial representation of “nature”. Within the walls, which are constructed entirely with reclaimed grey bricks, several of the courtyards are occupied as guest rooms and shared amenities, while others are left unoccupied, serving as pockets of lush gardens.

The found conditions, a village cocooned within the hustle and bustle of Shenzhen, compelled Neri&Hu to rethink the notion of interiority across scales: in a city, among densely populated buildings, and within a single structure. At the **Nantou City Guesthouse**, Neri&Hu devised several ways to shift, overlap, and blur the boundaries of inside and outside to celebrate the vibrant energy and everyday objects in the streets. The existing stairwell is cut open and expanded to create a new vertical courtyard, inviting the urban alleyway and natural elements into the heart of the building. A new lightweight, meandering stair serves both as an architectural promenade and as a social space, where chance encounters take place. The absorption of urban conditions is further intensified by the celebration of ruins, such as existing raw concrete structures and traces of former tenement occupation.

This year, La Biennale di Venezia is working concretely towards the crucial goal of fighting climate change, by promoting a more sustainable model for the design, installation and operation of all its events. Neri&Hu worked closely with the curatorial team and carefully collected recycled local terracotta ceiling tiles. These reclaimed tiles, laid out in a stacked bond pattern, transform individual building remnants into a monolithic display podium.

Neri&Hu Design and Research Office

Founded in 2004 by partners Lyndon Neri (Guo Xi-En) and Rossana Hu (Hu Ru-Shan), Neri&Hu Design and Research Office is an inter-disciplinary architectural design practice based in Shanghai, with studios in London, Paris and Milan. The practice’s burgeoning global portfolio includes commissions ranging from master planning and architecture, to interior design, installation, furniture, product, branding and graphic works. The diversity of the team reinforces a core vision for the practice: to respond to a global worldview incorporating overlapping design disciplines for a new paradigm in

architecture. Neri&Hu and their designs have been recognized by a number of prestigious international awards: Architizer A+ Awards Jury Winner (2022); Dezeen Awards Architecture Studio of the Year (2021); Frame Lifetime Achievement Award (2021); Architizer A+Firm Awards Best Firm (2021); Madrid Design Awards (2020); Design for Asia Grand Award (2020); Blueprint Overall Award for Design (2019); The Plan Award Overall Winner (2018); Wallpaper* Design Awards Designers of the Year (2014); Architectural Review Emerging Architecture Award (2010); Architectural Record Design Vanguard (2009).

Lyndon Neri (Guo Xi-En) and Rossana Hu (Hu Ru-Shan)

Lyndon Neri and Rossana Hu are Founding Partners of Neri&Hu Design and Research Office. Whether through objects of intimate daily use or vessels of inhabitation, they seek an approach to design that draws from multiple disciplines to provide experiences that enrich contemporary life while still keeping a critical linkage to a collective history.

Alongside their design practice, Lyndon and Rossana have been deeply committed to architectural education and have lectured across the globe in various universities and professional forums. They were appointed the Howard Friedman Visiting Professor of Practice at the University of California, Berkeley in 2023, the Design Critic in 2023 and the John C. Portman Design Critic in Architecture in 2019 and 2021 at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, the Eero Saarinen Visiting Professor in 2022 and Norman R. Foster Visiting Professor Chair in 2018 at the Yale School of Architecture. Rossana was appointed as Chair of the Department of Architecture at Tongji University in 2021 and Chair of the Department of Architecture at the University of Pennsylvania Stuart Weitzman School of Design, effective January 1, 2024.