Open Mic
A Conversation with Lyndon Neri and Rossana Hu

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FLORENCE PROGRAM

Made by students enrolled in the "Video, Media, and Architecture" class taught by professor Marco Brizzi at Kent State University in Florence in Spring 2019.

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Biography

Founded in 2004 by partners Lyndon Neri and Rossana Hu, Neri&Hu works internationally providing architecture, interior, master planning, graphic, and product design services. Currently working on projects in many countries, Neri&Hu is composed of multi-cultural staff who speak over 30 different languages. 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's location is purposeful. With Shanghai considered a new global frontier, Neri&Hu is in the center of this contemporary chaos. The city's cultural, urban, and historic contexts function as a point of departure for the architectural explorations involved in every project. Because new sets of contemporary problems relating to buildings now extend beyond traditional architecture, the practice challenges traditional boundaries of architecture to include other complementary disciplines. Neri&Hu believes strongly in research as a design tool, as each project bears its unique set of contextual issues. A critical probing into the specificities of program, site, function, and history is essential to the creation of rigorous design work. Based on research, Neri&Hu desires to anchor its work on the dynamic interaction of experience, detail, material, form, and light rather than conforming to a formulaic style. The ultimate significance behind each project comes from how the built forms create meaning through their physical representations. Neri&Hu has been featured widely by the press around the world and its designs have been recognized by a number of prestigious international design awards. Neri&Hu is named Maison&Objet Asia Designers of The Year 2015. UK Wallpaper* announced the founding partners Lyndon Neri and Rossana Hu as 2014 Designers of The Year. They were inducted into U.S. Interior Design Hall of Fame in 2013.

INTERVIEW WITH

LYNDON NERI + ROSSANA HU

FLORENCE 2019

The contents of this interview focused initially on Lyndon Neri and Rossana Hu's current work and their personal experiences designing internationally. These are topics that relate very much to the student's semester abroad in Florence, therefore they formed the starting portion of the interview.

VMA | What sort of inspirations do you pull from outside of architecture, such as art or precedents, that inspire your work?

Hu | "I think architecture itself is an inspiration for architectural production, but maybe in your research a lot of the answers we gave to that specific question, "what is your inspiration?", we liked to expound more the non-architectural because the architectural would be so obvious. Since we're both trained with undergraduate 4-year degrees, and then both of us went to master's programs in the US also in architecture, and then internships, and worked in architecture offices, so our professional life is so deeply rooted in the discipline of architecture that we like to expand our imagination and horizon outside of that. For me, a lot of it comes from the abstraction of the non-formal artistic expression - literature, words and music sound, these two are really important. And obviously, painting, the visual arts, and sculpture. But I think those two have a certain visual form language that is less abstract and more directly related to the making of architecture.

Neri | "I think to me, very similar to Rossana, art played a key role in how I grew up. I was a painting major in college, but being born in a Chinese family, painting is not a choice. My father and mother would not allow that - over their weather decomposed bodies. That was rather obvious, so I lied to them for a long time and told them I was studying engineering because to them they can grapple and understand how you can make money out of it, but art they can't, even though artists make a lot of money now. Art is very important to me, partially because I think there isn't a lot of constraint in art compared to architecture. So it allowed me to express my cultural ideas and metaphors through my work. Another one is fiction; I like reading. I mean, history is interesting, but perhaps to me, fiction is the most inspiring, partly because there is

Rosanna Hu. Lydon Neri. (Left-Right)
Not Pictured | Michael Randza. Justin Meikle. Reis Petrovich. Abdullah Samarin. Trisha Kreydt. Caitlyn Wolford.Keyarash Montazeri. Pat Hickey. Jonathan Bonezzi. Tim Jockers. Marco Brizzi.

a lot of imagination. If you look at master planning, James Joyce probably can come up with the best definition of an ideal city because it does not need to be constrained by government officials or other investors; it is pure imagination. Italo Calvino for instance, their stories reenact a particular spatial sort of configuration or spatial dimension that architects or urban planners will never be able to reach. So I find them, especially when I have bad clients, I go back to read, and in many ways, it helps me. It's therapy, it allows me to go, "okay, this is a place to escape." I think both painting and reading allowed me to escape. I also think both Rosanna and I like to travel and to eat, so that is very important to us as well. I think often times people in my office realize very quickly that I rate them by how good their tastes buds are, and they know it. That is also part of a cultural expression that is very important. A city just filled with lawyers, business people, and government officials is not complete. To me, it is actually a city that will eventually die. A city needs the artists, the musicians, the architects, the planners because it is through our craft that we can express a part of the city that is important to the lineage. Look at Notre Dame, burning in our midst, and now all of a sudden people are shocked that we took for granted the significance of it. When it's burning down all of a sudden (because we're always moving forward and thinking about the future without really thinking about the past) everyone is kind of shocked that people took it for granted, the significance of it. But when it's burning down, all of a sudden you are starting to."

VMA | We use this word, "architecture" as a very held fast ideology. For instance, we build buildings, but in your work, you guys reach out a lot and do retail and furniture and other types of work. So with that, how would you say you went into that part of your firm, and expanding into those other creative design fields?

Neri | "It's a matter of survival for us. When we went back to China, I think we were quite frustrated no one wanted to give us all the projects, all the high-rises that you see in the newspaper. In fact, if you look purely at CNN, or The New York Times, or Fox News, or whatever you follow (I am just talking the US; I am using the US as context even though we're

Mercato | Hong Kong, China
Interiors 2016

in Europe), they like to portray China as big. They like to portray China as not delicate, but fast. A group that just copies. That is a very hard stereotype to fight against, so when you do something small, when you do something exquisite, it's just not Chinese enough. If you care, and are sensible, and sustainable, and want to work on the rural areas, that is just not Chinese enough. That's all wrong. But that's just the perception the world likes, and it sells newspaper, but we're fighting against the odds of all of these. If we were a bunch of Chinese that play along the Bjarke Ingels route, I mean we would get a lot of projects because it fits that stereotype - big, huge-scale urban planning. I am not saying they are bad, I am just saying that it fits that stereotype. So for us, it was a matter of survival, because we would try to specify some furniture and it would take 10 months just to arrive in China. Sometimes it is not even guaranteed that it would come out of customs, so imagine the frustration we had to deal with. We wanted to hire graphic designers, but not a lot of them were very good. The good ones are either abroad and it takes a long time, or the clients find them very expensive.

When we started 15 years ago, we started hiring landscape designers, and eventually, we had no choice but to end up doing it ourselves, kind of forcing ourselves to be ingrained. It's not different from the Renaissance period. For instance, having a store, we thought by creating a store called Design Republic, we would sell some of the world's finest furniture. We thought we were being clever. We thought we were really new, but it's not. Alvar Aalto did it with Artek. In fact, our name, we called it, Design Republic, DR, and we thought, "oh, that is really clever," and I saw this book when I was in San Francisco, and it was also called D.R. and I was like, "what the hell?" I was reading it, it was Design Research by Walter Gropius and The Architects Collaborative. They created this in the '70s, and I was reading, and I was like, "WOW!" It was the same ideology. When he was in America, he was frustrated because Americans didn't really understand European or beautiful furniture. And that was the same plight we were in China, and we thought we were visionaries. Sure enough, 10 years later, I was like, "well, not really." So, it was a matter of circumstance, and perhaps stress."

Hu | "Lyndon debuted the backbone of how it started, but earlier than that (it is really interesting because we are in Florence and you guys are from the U.S.), I remember the first time we came to Florence. It was our first trip to Europe, actually. I was in graduate school at Princeton, Lyndon was working for Michael Graves, and Michael was my professor, also, at Princeton. I remember coming here and walking, we went to and saw a lot of stores, and people here in Italy actually know Michael Graves really well because of his teapot. Alessi is a big Italian brand, and they hired Michael to create a teapot. And that teapot, I think, still today is the best selling item from Alessi. I think somehow that professional lineage, Lyndon working in Michael's office for…"

Neri | "...10 years."

Hu | "...over ten years, I worked there for five years after I graduated from Princeton. So, in many ways, that kind of circled us around his ideology, which is very much based in the Italian kind of Renaissance, I think. Also, working alongside product designers who were designing watches, teapots, and jewelry, and then (we never really worked on those projects but)

we were very much brought into discussions with Michael and those designers. The interior design aspect, as well, is from his office. He had a store across the street from his office in Princeton. All of that, coming from that background, makes it much easier for us to see ourselves also engaging in those different aspects of design.

Another one, again very much related to Milan, was this cultural and personal identity. Lyndon started coming to the Milan Design Fair, the first time with Michael. So, that's maybe over 20 years ago. And I started coming here when we started Design Republic, and we wanted to do some buying, we wanted to see adventure. We would have these tags that said "China" because you have to identify where you're from. And because we had that tag, there were some people that would not allow us to go. Of course, we also had our camera - that did not help. Just the kind of rejection very directly against the kind of cultural identity made us really keenly aware of the problem that existed. Coming from a country that is known for copying, we very much wanted to offer a different kind of perspective for the creativity that is coming out of China. So I think that is really very mindful of that international identity, and wanting to change. That is what lead us to designing products. I think designing architecture, interior design people may not know you, and also it's not as fast, whereas starting to do product design, very quickly you are spread around the world because the brands are sold around the world. Two years ago, when we won the Aldeco - every year in Milan - a deed award, and they have different categories, and every year they have a "Designer of the Year" that's kind of like the Pritzker Prize of product design. And well, we were nominated, we won, we just thought, "wow, how amazing!" For, it was about, maybe 11 years, since the first time that we started in Milan to get to that point. So very much it was a kind of personal agenda."

VMA | To run an operation at that scale, with so many different facets into what you do, so much work, such a bountiful portfolio, it's clearly a product of a strong personal bond between you two. How do you keep staying motivated and innovative while keeping your personal lifes in check and separating work from play?

“They’re like “how could a tall woman be married to a short man. They just don’t know my brilliance.”

Le Meridien | Zhengzhou, China
Architecture 2013

Le Meridien | Zhengzhou, China
Architecture 2013

Hu | "We get asked that all the time. First of all, we are business partners and we're also partners in life. Sometimes we get invited to events and they provide two bedrooms."

Neri | "They're like "how could a tall woman be married to a short man. They just don't know my brilliance."

Hu | "I don't think we would be able to do what we do without the partnership that we have, both professionally and personally. You really need to be able to trust each other completely, and then you can act like one person. So we're able to finish each other's sentences, we're able to attend events that the other person cannot attend, and just really act like one person."

Neri | "We're also very lucky to have found each other, and we do believe that in this short life we live, there is a higher being up there that had given us this position and this platform, and had prepared this - the two of us together. In many ways, we are very similar, but also very different. In many ways, we challenge each other, but without really questioning that intention behind our provocation. I think we are very

different in that Rosanna likes to think, I like to draw. Not that I don't like to think, she doesn't like to draw, but that's the emphasis. I tend to add a lot of things, she tends to deduct. Every time I leave my office, by the time I go in the morning, half of the schemes are gone. I knew that she had gone into my desk and changed a number of things. So it's a constant push and pull, and to have all these different facets. We're also curious about different things. And if you come to our studio it's very much like a school. So even though we have a fairly big practice, we don't often work like a corporate practice - it's very much like a "mom and pop shop". Some people get very frustrated because it takes a while to get our answers, or we are constantly changing designs, but now they've gotten used to it. So there's this very diverse culture - we have many international workers from different worlds from Europe. Maybe half of the office have Asian faces, but they're all from different parts of Asia - from Japan, from Korea. So they can't even speak to each other but in English sometimes. It's very interesting, this sort of phenomenon that's happening. It's happening in offices everywhere. This phenomenon of having the most interesting talent come together and interact in a place."

VMA | Could you explain to us your thoughts on how education is being taught today? We feel that school is pushing students more towards developing individuality but with little opportunity to work on cross-disciplinary projects. Is this is a good tactic and strategy to get us prepared for the professional world or are they doing a bit of a disservice by not allowing so much of an interaction to happen between students of other disciplines?

Hu | "We call our practice an "interdisciplinary practice" because we believe that when you engage the interweavings of disciplines, you create more energy. But, the foundation of that is that each discipline is rooted in itself.
For example, we have different departments: we have architects working on architecture, interior designers working on interior design, our product designers who have product design or industrial design or graphic design degrees. When we come together to work on a project, they offer different

Elle Decor Grand Hotel Exhibition

Suzhou Chapel | Suzhou, China
Architecture 2016

Tsing Pu Yangzhou Retreat | Yangzhou, China
Architecture 2017

things because they are very good in their respective fields. They're able to offer things that are founded in their field. So, I would say, before you expand and cross boundaries, you need to grow within the boundaries. Maybe because you are undergrad, you are still being confined to architecture, but I do believe that is very important. You need to really know the foundations of architecture; to the point that it's even back to the classics. You need to know the classics before you get to the modern, and before you get to the future of the unknown. It's important to have that foundation. What I often tell young people is that when you build a skyscraper, the foundation is the most important thing because if you don't dig deep, you can't go high. So, the more time you spend digging down to build that foundation, the higher you can go in the future."

Neri | "I don't know if I would consider you guys millennials, I guess you're on the border. So I guess, also, that the tendency is to try to know many different things at the same time. I think the ability to specialize in one thing is still important. For instance, if you

“Sometimes in the normal media they are more interested in the Kardashians than the architects. So it is kind of sad but that is the reality...”

The Waterhouse at South Bund | Shanghai, China
Architecture 2010

have a major tumor in your brain and you've been given two choices between a brain surgeon and a general practitioner, which one are you going to pick? I think it is obvious which one you will pick. We don't take our architecture seriously sometimes. I also think sometimes trying to pick the best architect is life and death, and if you don't take that seriously, often times you will end up with a mediocre architect or architecture."

VMA | To follow up on that question, can you speak on your firm's successful teamwork and the complexity of transitioning students into to the workplace?

Neri | "First we make a point to pay interns, contrary to a lot of practices. Getting into our firm's practice is hard, but we made sure that if you do get a position in our practice, you get paid. So that's first and foremost. Unless there are people who get grants and come to us and say, "look we get grants from the university." But even with that, we have to make sure your portfolio is up to par because if you come to our practice, there is this rigor and intensity that

you need to almost know. With some of the basic architecture history, if you don't even know, then it's hard for you to have a discussion within our studio. Once you're in, we make an effort to make sure you are actually experiencing different facets of the practice, from small interior renovations to architecture. Sometimes in architecture, you are exposed to product design, you are exposed to graphic design, and that's constant. And you see it everyday, anyways, in your friends, you meet in the practice. But, we do make a point to have lunch with the interns. We take in about three or four interns every summer (sometimes even more) from different parts of the world. We know they are only there for three months, so we try to make sure they have a full three months. Obviously, the problem is this program has gotten so big. For instance, this year we've had seven hundred entries for three positions. It has gotten really quite large, so now they realize once they get in that it is really intense and quite full. We make a point to take care of interns, and obviously, we have ulterior motives. We want to make sure that they have a good experience and come back."

VMA | Your office, which you talked about a little bit, is composed of many different cultures and backgrounds in your staff. Can you talk about if there are any barriers that you come across like languages or different cultural styles, and how you overcome them?

Hu | "There are definitely a lot of obstacles and barriers. One is language. Like you said, because we're bilingual we speak Chinese and English, but there are people who don't speak Chinese nor English."

Neri | "So we draw."

Hu | "There was this Italian girl, Mary Rosa. She practically learned English when she went to China."

Neri | "She became quite high in our office."

Hu | "She did, but it was all just drawing. The other thing that we can communicate is architects' names. She knows [Carlo] Scarpa, she knows [Aldo] Rossi, so if we say names, then she would know. Otherwise, you can't really communicate with her. The environment becomes challenged,

New Shanghai Theatre | Shanghai, China
Architecture 2016

but it also becomes a very positive experience for people who have very good language skills. We also have people who, after two, three years of being in China, their Chinese becomes fluent even though they are French or Japanese. The cultural side is compensated by the fact that the architecture language can take over because we're always just talking about design. There are a lot of nuances that we sometimes don't anticipate becoming a problem, but it does become a problem. For example, every country's architect pay is different. In China, it might be of a higher paying scale compared to the other professions, but maybe in Spain or Italy it's more low. So, our human resources department actually has a real hard time trying to figure it out. It's hard to come up with a standard because everyone comes from very different perceptions of what is normal."

Neri | "Also in terms of barrier, let's talk about architecture. Initially the first three, four years were probably very difficult because people didn't really know what we do, or what our convictions are, or what we were passionate about. But after the first few built works, then you start seeing

people who are interested in the things were interested in, the issues we're dealing with, and some of the agendas we're propagating. It's so much easier now because a lot of the people that come to our studio, you can tell the portfolios that are coming in are clearly of a certain camp. I don't know if that's healthy, but you can kind of tell. Certain schools gravitate towards what we do and you can see. I was just seeing a lot of people who work for Valerio Olgiati's office and Alvaro Siza's office naturally come to our office if they come to China. It's very, very interesting. It's a big group of people from David Chipperfield's office. We even have a a few people from Peter Zumthor's office, so you can kind of tell. If you had worked for Zaha Hadid, you probably would apply for Ma Yansong, MAD, in China. It's kind of a bit different.

VMA | "People find their niche."

Neri | "It makes it easier for us. I don't know if it's really healthy because sometimes I do like the challenge and the provocation. We have this Dutch guy who worked with Rem Koolhaas, and he came, and he challenged the program, and I actually liked him. I liked him to a point that I think he's growing quite fast in our practice, meaning I'm giving him more responsibility.

VMA | Regardless of the scale of the project, a clean elegance seems to always be achieved without ever missing the chance to utilize a dense amount of detail. Do you ever feel yourself over-complicating ideas and having to take a step back, or have you been able to find a design process that is more effective in controlling this design hierarchy in a more efficient manner?

Neri | "I love to over-detail because I know the clients. They are all cheap anyways. They'll cheapen the project. I was really heavily influenced at Harvard by Rafael Moneo and what was important to him. He was not interested in elevations. When we were drawing, he was interested in the details or the tectonic of a project."

Hu | "Just the opposite of Michael Graves."

Neri | "The opposite of Michael Graves, yeah. But he was also very

interested in how, as a human being, you walk through that space. That is the reason why he has a fascination for Alvaro Siza. We even went as far as to build full-scale models to really understand the nuances of how the light comes in, or how a curve changes your perception. It's never easy. It's a struggle. The studio is full of, I call it agony. There's a lot of torture, and I'm not making that a spectacular moment. There is a struggle. There is and there should be. If it's too easy for you, I think you're either extremely talented or you're extremely lazy. And I think we're not extremely lazy, but we're not extremely talented either. So we have to really work, Rossana and I. In fact just last night, we have two projects we're just not happy with, and the problem is the client just needs to move on. The project needs to go on. It's not school, you can't say, "Oh, I'm so sorry. It's not going to work." There is time behind every project, so we're under intense pressure. You're looking at Ponte Vecchio or the Brunelleschi dome, and you're struggling, thinking, "Can I just stop the project?" She's very responsible, while I'm irresponsible. I do want to stop the project. I think that's constant, that struggle. Sometimes when we don't have time and when the budget is of a certain amount, you can't spend on all those things, so it's actually easy to pair it down or to simplify things. Rossana always says things that scare me a lot of the time. She says, "I'm not afraid to be ugly. I'm not afraid for our buildings to be ugly as long as there is meaning." And I'm like "Uh, I'm not sure." That's probably why she married me."

> ***VMA | With the [ ] project being furniture, it has a lot of flexibility, but also that flexibility and movement almost creates the same structure non-formally that a built space would have. So in regards to your product design, do you design them as individual pieces or do you design them as something that would fit into a grander idea or a surrounding context?***

Neri | "Both. Obviously, we are not architects that are interested in the spectacular or the object. Not saying there's something wrong with that, I mean there's a group of people interested in the notion of objecthood, or the notion of monumentality, or spectacular things. We're not of that genre.

Suzhou Chapel | Suzhou, China
Architecture 2016

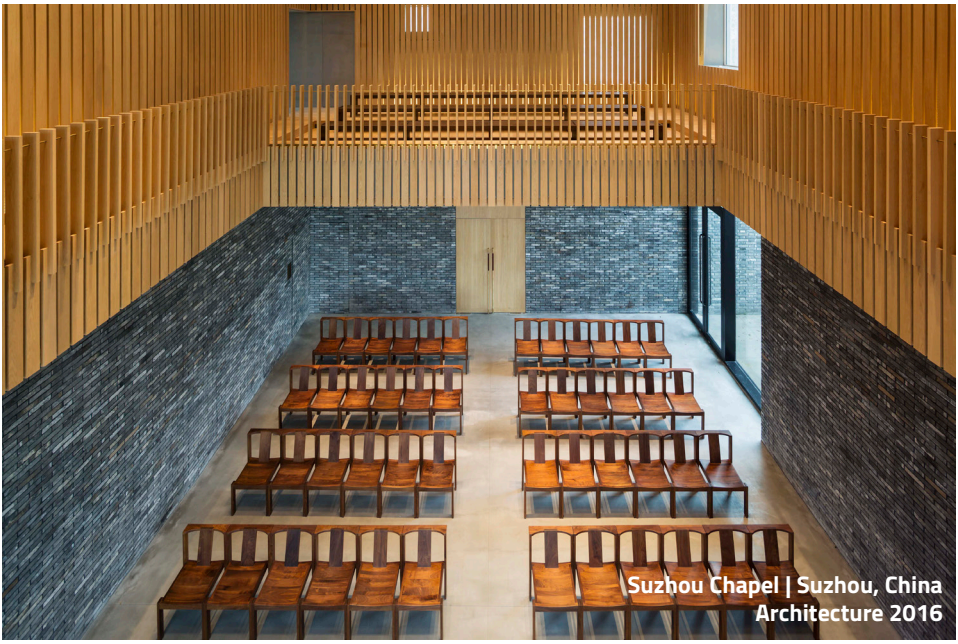
We're a bit on the quieter side. We believe in holistic nature of how things come about. In fact Rachel [ ] had a exhibition on objects, and how objects interact with each other, and how the in-between spaces of all these objects are of equal value to the object itself. We find that very interesting. When you put your furniture, when you go to someone's house, there's a certain path that you cross. You're asked to put a sofa and two chairs, but eventually things get moved. And there's a certain way, and those spatial configurations are important. Having said that, I think trying to create a typology to have a certain breakthrough is also important to us. So we're constantly challenging these two realms. Constantine [ ], which is an amazing German product designer, talks about some of his furniture being not extremely comfortable, and he questions the notion of comfort. He starts saying, "Should the chair be all about comfort, or should it force you to be in a position where you are actually constantly standing up, not sitting down, or using that chair to perch, or using that chair as a way to use a pedestal for something else?" So those questions, I find very

interesting."

Hu | "I think while speaking of product design, the context is the space that it occupies as well as the relationship between itself and other products. But also, there's another context that you don't really see when you look at product, but one that is very much in the mid of the product design - the context of the brand. So the heritage, the family that owns the brand, other designers, big masterpieces that have come out of the brand are things that we also like to consider when we work with a brand because things never really exist in a vacuum."

VMA | You're work ranges all over the world; China, London, Malaysia, etc. I noticed in your works that you've done in different countries, Alila Hotel in Malaysia, the Library in China, they have a similar palette and style while the Together Restaurant in China has a completely different material palette and style. What influences your style choices in a given site and do you look for similarities throughout your sites to create a connection between projects?

Neri | "I think one thing that's constant is that we're not interested in style, so there's no one clear signature that you can pin it down. If you do know enough of our work, however, there is a signature whether we like it or not. The people that have studied us very closely clearly state that there are 5 or 6 obsessions that we're interested in. As subtle as we try to keep our signature, I think it does come out, and that's natural because it's our personality. One of them, if you look at how we deal with old and new, how we deal with public and private, we are constantly blurring that. How we deal with program and typology, questioning it constantly, and definitely how we manipulate space and proportion to change a certain dimensions. We are going to talk about nostalgia today, which is another obsession that we have. So, if you've been to the space you'll know, but actually, if you're looking at a picture it's hard. If you go to Alila and you walk, it changes your perception. In a typical hotel lobby you would see a reception. In this, you go in on the ground floor, and it's literally just filled with plants, and you're like "What the heck? Where am I?" And there will be one person that says go up, and you go up to the 44th floor, and as



Suzhou Chapel | Suzhou, China
Architecture 2016

you come in, there's another set of trees are in the 44th floor indoor. You come in, and there's this almost stadium-like steps that go down to this big gigantic pool, and that's how you enter the space, instead of surrounded with a big lobby, restaurants, and stuff a typical hotel would have. You don't see any of that, and only after you've been there a while will you see the restaurants around this bar around the pool. So that spatial kind of configuration and constant questioning of what is public, what is private, what is inside, what is outside, (in this case, there's no old and new because it is new and new,) and that kind of subversive nature of how we approach things. In fact, that Malaysia project is so strange. What happened was, this group of architects were hire to do a building 44 stories high. By the time it was on the 35th story, the developer and the owner had seen our work and called me and said "I love what you do, but unfortunately I chose the wrong architect." I flew in and he said "I know you'd probably so no to me because I'm going to request you to do the interior of this project." I said, "Yeah, you're right. I'm gonna say no." And he's like, "Why don't we do this - why

Canton Table | Shanghai, China
Interiors 2017

don't you start on the 36th and go all the way to the 44th floor?" This group of architects were hired to do a building 48-stories high, but by the time it was on the 35th story, the developer and the owner had seen our work and called me and said, "I really love what you do, but fortunately, I chose the right architect." In his words, "Could you fly to Kuala Lumpur?" And I did. He's like, "Why don't we do this - why don't you start on the 36th and you take it all the way to the 48th?" I thought about this and I'm like, "This is very strange, but sure, why not?" You can imagine the other architect was all over the details, and all kinds of what a corporate practice would do with certain fins and stuff, and we just added a brutal box. Maybe a little bit disrespectful, but you can immediately see that contrast, and if you're far away it's very obvious. I also kind of forcibly just painted it all black to make it all look the same. But then again it's this kind of subversion and constantly questioning what is the norm."

Hu | "No, I just think that we're quite unconscious of the styles. If you think of music, if you think of the composers, they're always operating

within themselves and their time. They each have their motifs. You would never mistake a Beethoven for a Bach, or a Mahler for a Debussy. I don't think they compose because they're like, "Oh I need to be impressionist, so I compose this way." I think the same thing goes with architects. You would never confuse Corbusier with Louis Kahn, but it's not because they are mindful of a stylistic composition that they need to abide by. It's just who they are, and it's the same with what we do. We design with the things that we know how, responding to each specific program and context."

VMA | The next question would be looking at projects like the Walled and the Design Republic and the Unfolding Courtyard. I've noticed a really narrative approach to the design, and maybe you touched on it earlier with your inspiration from fiction, but do you find yourself coming up with the story of the experience and the sequence to be followed first, or do you create the story out of some other form of design, creating it first and then discussing with yourself about how that story unfolds?

Neri | "The good thing about practicing in China today is there are so many opportunities. The problem is, often times, clients do not have a brief. They have a piece of land and they're like, "Can you do something?" They don't even know what type of architecture, they just need to build. It's so crazy. And yet, I have a lot of people who are working for me that struggle with this. I remember a German associate who works in my office who was like, "Lyndon, we can't do this. We don't have a program. How are we going to design?" And I'm like, "All your life you've been fighting against professors in school because you hated their brief. You want your own brief and your own agenda. And yet, now you're frozen because they gave you nothing to work from." So it's a dream come true, but with that dream comes a big burden. Often times, it's crazy, a Chinese client will say "a hotel," but what kind of hotel? They don't even bother going to an operator. They think the operators are all the same and just want to make money from them, so they go to the architects because they think the architects are to be trusted. They have this idealistic state. It's very

nice at times, (I hope they continue to have this mindset) and we take advantage of it. It's interesting, the Boston Consulting group does a lot of pitches and proposals, and yet they use architects, and they pay architects a 10% fee. A lot of these consulting firms that a lot of people like to work for are very good with percentages. They put the number in, but a lot of that is fictitious, isn't it? I mean they're all speculation. If they can do it, why can't we? And yet the bulk of the things that are presented are things from architects, from us. I think clients are starting to figure that out as well. That's why it's changing. If you look at McKinsey, which is one of the most important consulting practices, they now have a practice in Milan that they just launched - a design practice. They realized that if they don't change, they'll be forgotten. People realize that the extra 90% of fat that's given to them can be given by people who are actually creating.
So the narrative became very important to us because we want to have a conceptual diagram of what we want to do. We then create a certain story around a project so that the team and then the client get excited about the project. It's interesting because a lot of this narrative starts from us, but by the time the project is over you'll see the client explaining the project the way we do, as if it's their idea. And I don't mind that, it's called mild brainstorming. I think that's important, and I think there needs to be a conviction. For instance, last semester we were teaching at Yale, and 2 years before that we were teaching at the University of Hong Kong. We used narrative as a way for people to start. It was very difficult for them. Even for brilliant students, it was difficult to find a way to use narrative to start a project."

VMA | Keeping on the track of narrative, but focusing it more on product design, I've noticed specifically with a lot of the light fixtures you've designed, they seemed like a reinterpretation or reimagination of how you marry the cultural aspects of everything. For example, the classic Chinese lanterns or things of that nature. Do you look at your projects as a way of reinventing or paying homage to cultural influences?

Hu | "I think it is both. Very early on we were really fascinated by the way

cultures are a big part of architecture, and design is representation. The same thing can be represented in different ways. The same culture can be represented in different ways. When we started working on product design 15 years ago, the world knew Chinese design as serpents and dragons."

Neri | "The Ming dynasty is kind of frozen in time."

Hu | "So we felt that the representation of that culture remained in a very narrow representation. We were conscious in wanting to represent something that others haven't seen. So taking cues from the Dutch movement, they really started to design with humor, so our yearly designs had a somewhat humorous aspect to them. Also architects working with forms that are interesting and abstract but not so literal, being able to have relevance in today's lifestyle. So we used purple, which no one had ever seen that material at that scale and also the simple lines, so these are what we were interested in."

Neri | "But we don't sit down and say, "Is this Chinese enough?" We don't do that. In the process of

"I think architecture itself is an inspiration for architectural production."

Design Republic | Shanghai, China
Architecture 2012

designing, who we are and where we're from comes through. Rosanna was born in Taiwan, I'm a Chinese born in the Philippines, but I went to Chinese school, and also our US schooling taught us rigor. In many ways we're very confused, but also all of this has helped us."

VMA | What is your perspective on style with education? Because a lot of schools have started to develop a style of teaching.

Neri | "What is the style you are referring to?"

VMA | A two fold dichotomy, one is turn away from people's relationships with architecture and focus on the object oriented nature, or the materialistic side of how people move through a space.

Hu | "Well, I think style definitely is a product of philosophy, and institutions usually have their own philosophical foundation. So naturally, we'd see traces of formal and stylistic beds, in the schools because of the foundations that they choose."

Neri | "I think they do need to understand, in order for the school to be strong, it's your job as a student to decide what school and program you want to be a part of. I think there's enough choices. Harvard and Yale are very different, for instance, and Columbia offers a different way of teaching. All of them have different results. Interestingly enough, I think the good ones that come from all these different schools might have different ways of expressing architecture, but I think everyone does that now, regardless of the way they were taught."

Hu | "But I also think the good ones are open-ended enough that they embrace different ways of thinking. Even with the very strong kind of philosophic and theoretical discourse, it should allow for a different multiplicity of positions, so that they don't yell the same style. I think one of the worst things is to go to a school and have all the work look the same. I think that would be a problem."

Neri | "What was interesting when I was in Harvard, we were at the period were Rafael Moneo was teaching and he was interesting because he brought in many different people who did different things. You have Cruz Ortiz, you have Alvaro Siza, you have Rem Koolhaas all in the same room, and yet during those three years I was there, in the year ahead of me to the year behind me, I would say there is about fifteen practicing architects today that came from that camp and we all did very different things, but they are quite significant in the world of architecture today. I think I give that to Rafael Moneo for his open mind, sort of the conceptual framework was clear. If you look at Nader Tehrani, he came from that studio; Jeanne Gang from Chicago was a year behind me. We had Alejandro Zaera-Polo, Monica Ponce De Leon (who is now the Dean at Princeton), Farshid Moussavi. We are actually in competition constantly with them. I mean Rossana it happened in those years when you were in Princeton, same group of people."

Hu | "We had a much smaller group - ten students train in my program. But I think this is where our education actually brings us to slightly different point of view. When it comes to this, I think Harvard was about building that open-endedness, where as, Princeton was questioning

The Watershed at South Bund | Shanghai, China
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"what is architecture?" in a very big way. I think even now, Princeton is still probably the school that is most deeply rooted in theory."

Neri | "And yet Rafael Moneo was lecturing two days ago in Princeton, and he was so well received, he was one of the most attended - all the faculty attended. And you can see, even with this one man, the paralogical mindset, and his notion of how people are talking, it is never about the style. You can have the craziest object. Rafael was interested in the idea if the idea was strong, and it is based in history. You can have a simple box, and you will think Rafael will love you, and you will have all the sections, and you can get ripped apart because you are not strong in the idea or how you express it. Rafael Moneo, before he was the head of Harvard, was the head of Princeton for many years because he was considered a "thinking architect." So there is a lot of theory, a lot of respect, but there is also a lot of fear. I was at the Venice Biennale three or four years ago, and I was presenting, and he walked in, and I froze. I was I like, "Maybe I said the wrong thing." Thank goodness it was at the end of the lecture."

VMA | Architecture has evolved rapidly over the last 20 years. Do you have any opinions on what you believe is an important aspect of the "future of architecture"?

Neri | "Yeah, I am - very concerned. Rossana and I went to Anebad two years ago, and for the first time came face-to-face with many of Le Corbusier's works. We saw Louis Kahn's works, and I left that place completely depressed because we, as architects, have not evolved from modernity and that period of time when they did really create a lot of things. We think we have. We camouflage with colour, camouflage with material, maybe manipulate the space a little bit more so it is not so Corbu-like, I can have light coming in, but we really haven't moved that far. And that is, what, sixty years ago, and that is what scares me. It depressed the heck out of us. We almost stop practicing, I believe three years ago. But at the same time, you leave that place and you see all the bad architecture, and you're like "Maybe we can change." The problem is that the speed which things are going is, architecture is going to be sidelined into just another facet of the building process or part of the development process; you see that in America now quite a bit. Architecture is really not that significant. In fact, you go in and architects are not paid very well in the US, and that is going to happen in China, as well, partly because they are not seeing it as important. So, how do we as architects constantly be part of that dialogue? I think if we want to make a difference, we need to be able to speak layman's language. I find, often times we are in this highfalutin world, and we think that we are a bunch of reincarnated Renaissance individuals, and we are very happy with our own ideology and sort of thinking that we know so much and we do. A lot of architects are trained very well, but we forget how to even speak the layman's language, and that is very important. I also think having an interdisciplinary practice forces us to deal with the everyday. In Milan the sort of questions we got from the media were very stupid, and we sit there and sigh. Rossana is so good at it, but I am not. It's easier for us to be in an academic setting like this because you guys do your research. Sometimes in the normal media they are more interested in the Kardashians than the architects. So it is kind of sad, but that is the reality, so I am worried."

Hu | "I am worried too, but not for those same reasons. I don't think it's because we are moving too fast. I think the problem is that architects today have not been able to engage in the problems full on, to offer solutions. And I think design is always about being able to offer solutions to the problems of the time, and to engage the spirit of the time. I feel like our generation of architects are probably relying on old ways of practicing and we haven't found a way that makes us as relevant as our forefathers. And until that day we will slowly lose our significance in society."

VMA| Not to end on a sad note, but thank you for coming!

Neri | "but don't give up, because architecture as craft is something that is relevant in society today..."

This interview with Lydon Neri and Rossana Hu was focused upon their Chinese heritage, and its infuences on their designs today. It was a collaborative effort among students of the Video, Media, and Architecture course at Kent State University Florence. Guest lecturers were brought in from all over Europe for a Spring lecture series and students were tasked to create an interview before each of these lectures. After analyzing numerous interviews with other architects, students researched and explored the work of the visiting lecturers. Questions were then devised by each student, and these questions were analyzed based upon their thematic similarity and their relevance to the work of each lecturer. The most appropriate questions were chosen for each interview, and the specific students who created these questions then were charged with interviewing our guests, using the chosen questions as a base and posing any other questions that flowed with the interview.