

Lust **in**



Translation

**Linehouse's modern architectural approach is making waves
amid the decorative mainstream spaces of Shanghai.**

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Photo Drew Bates

NERI & HU has repeatedly graced the pages of *Frame* since The Waterhouse Hotel caught our eye in 2010, but this is the first time we've printed the name Linehouse. The hands of the Shanghai-based duo behind it, however, have racked up incalculable (wo)man-hours on Neri&Hu projects. That is, until they struck out to tackle the heady haze of Shanghai on their own. New Zealander Briar Hickling and Alex Mok (who's half-Swedish, half-Chinese, and who studied and worked in the UK) have more than a decade of combined Neri&Hu experience behind them. Trained as an architect, Mok says she gained a whole new appreciation of interior space, particularly when it comes to how much work is involved. Hickling's focus was restaurants and hotels: 'I learned a *lot* about hospitality projects,' she says, adding that she and Mok appreciated Neri&Hu's 'holistic approach to design and the studio's collaboration with people from a wide range of disciplines. We took those things on board when we started our own thing.'

How do you find the approach to hospitality in Shanghai? BRIAR HICKLING: It's *really* fast. I've worked in the UK and in New Zealand, where there's so much red tape. Things move so much faster here.

ALEX MOK: It's much less saturated. So many concepts haven't reached Shanghai yet. Someone's dream restaurant can become a reality within a fairly small budget here. The Chinese have done things a certain way for ages – it's completely commercialized. We did a tiny 18-m² fish shop here called Little Catch. It's crazy how popular it is. There are *thousands* of little shops like it in London, but in Shanghai this is the only one. You can find completely untapped niches here.



While building All Sh, the designers uncovered ornate façade details: remnants of history that they integrated into their modern scheme.

If the pace of building is so fast, is there an equally high turnover of space? BH: Spaces are *constantly* changing. AM: Only the ones that are well designed *and* well operated stick around. Without both those ingredients, things can be pretty brutal. BH: That's why we want to work with good operators. The success of a space isn't just about the design; it's also about having a really good food or drink concept. We try to filter our clients to make sure they share our philosophy. We're not just out to design something cool.

Do you draw aspects from Shanghai itself? BH: Of course. Shanghai's a crazy place. It's also extremely performative. There's a constant blur between public and private. Domestic rituals such as bathing and cooking are often performed publicly, as part of the streetscape. We try to capture these moments and play on the residents' performative nature in our work through framing, reflection and screening. One example is All Sh, a shoe store we just finished. The site neighbours a narrow laneway in which locals gossip with old friends – often in their pyjamas in the middle of the afternoon – or prepare evening meals on terrazzo sinks outdoors. We used mirrors and reflection to bounce the surrounding context into the shop ↪



Photos Benoit Florencon



Photo Dirk Weiblen

Tribeca, a New York-style gastro-pub, features a white canopy that provides both illumination and a display surface.

‘Things move so much faster here’

interior. One mirror, positioned at a 30-degree angle, is next to a small window at the rear of the shop; it reflects activities taking place in the laneway.

There are so many layers to Shanghai. A lot of beautiful architecture is being torn down and being replaced by subpar buildings. Whenever we get a project, we try to peel back the layers of history and reference what these spaces once were in relation to their context.

AM: China is very young in some ways and is only starting to develop a modern architectural style and attitude. So many Chinese designers still treat space as something to be decorated. They install new surfaces that have no narrative or spatial story. By contrast, our projects stand out.

Do you have to be more sensitive to history than you would in another country? AM: Not yet, but that’s partly to do with the types of briefs we’ve had. We do have a Chinese medical clinic in the pipeline. It might be the first project that challenges our conceptions. That said, we’ve already seen a feng shui master completely change the branding for a wet-market project we’re working on. Luckily it didn’t affect us, but the branding team was pretty distraught. From the point of view of most Westerners, the impact of a philosophy like feng shui is completely incomprehensible.



Hickling (left) and Alex Mok play on the performative nature of Shanghai streetscapes in their work.

Any other learning curves you’ve faced?

AM: We’ve realized that a lot of communication is needed to get very little done. [Laughs.] I’ve worked in the UK, where everything’s very ordered. You have a meeting, and everyone’s got it. Here you spend four hours talking about one thing, and you’re absolutely no closer to resolving it. But that’s offset by the positives. In the UK you might talk about an idea for six months and nothing moves forward, while in China the project would be finished. It’s not all negative; you just have to be patient to get rewarded.

What’s in store for the future? Are you committed to staying in Shanghai? BH:

Definitely. There’s so much opportunity in China, especially for us as young women trying to do our own thing. We also hope to do projects outside China, though. We haven’t had too many architecture projects yet, but we’d like to branch out from interiors – the ones we’ve done have been quite small. We’d like to aim for bigger briefs, bigger ventures. So far we’ve had *really* small budgets, so we’ve had to be incredibly creative and hands-on, doing things like helping to source timber at the factory and heaving big logs into place on site.

AM: Hard work, yes, but as we move forward we don’t want to lose that hands-on quality. ✕

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