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The Ultimate Luxury




With Chinese cities exponentially growing in size and population, city dwellers seek out an antidote to city living, and find it in the spacious retreats of rural China.

Boatyard Hotel, China by GOA and WJ STUDIO
Words Gillian Serisier Photography Zhu Hai, Zhang Xi





The image shows a restaurant interior with a large, arched window. The window is made of sliding glass panels and offers a view of a lake and a distant city skyline. In the foreground, there are several wooden chairs with cane backs and a small table. The ceiling is dark, and the overall atmosphere is modern and sophisticated.

Private Bubble

The restaurant speaks to the ideal of space as a luxury with chairs spread out along the vast wall of sliding glass panels facing the lake.



“The images one captures in each moment are instantaneous landscapes – nature, fields, light and artificial design meet at the intersection of space and time”

Located a little over an hour west of Shanghai, Boatyard Hotel is idyllically placed amongst the river systems and lakes of Shanwan village to offer guests views, air, water and that all-important sense of pervading calm. Commissioned by Suzhou Blue City Cultural Tourism Co. as part of the prime pilot region for green and integrated ecological development in the Yangtze River Delta proposal, the hotel is key to a rural revitalisation scheme. In keeping with this ethos, the adjacent rural village is undergoing restoration to be preserved as part of the hotel precinct.

For Shanghainese people, whose city of 29 million has increased by three million in just three years, this rural luxury hotel precinct offers the ultimate getaway with all the luxuries of space.

Collaboratively conceived by GOA and WJ STUDIO, the group of high and low arched roofs form a colony. These are akin to “ships docked on the waterfront of the rising mountains,” according to Hu Zhile, WJ STUDIO principal designer. Quite correct in his appraisal, Boatyard Hotel boasts a uniquely elegant symmetry of form and nature. “A floating island with a few dead trees stretches as if to welcome and detail the passage of time. The hotel building is integrated with the surrounding natural landscape,” adds Zhile.

Arranged as a series of interwoven, outward-facing cones, the form is sinuous and fluid. Countering this is the long, stone-clad geometric volume and cluster of elongated pyramid forms with filigree cladding to give a birdcage-like transparency to the precinct’s public restaurant, balancing the private hotel. And while exemplary, it is the conical forms of the hotel proper that delight. Equating the architectural forms to calligraphy, Zhile set out to invest the space with rhyme and spatio-temporal experience: “The rippling black-roofed buildings are like the crow-top

boats gathered and docked on the shore, sometimes melodious, sometimes serene and moving, becoming the finishing touch to the ink painting on the shore. When people come to this place longing for the idyllic scenery of the water village, they do not know that they have already become a member of this scenery.” Giving the forms a precise and streamlined presence, the dull black metal cladding sharply defines the open ends while allowing the closed ends to remain naturally recessive.

This is echoed in the interior, where high curved ceilings give each room a voluminous sense of space while framing the view across the floating island and waterways of Zhongjiadang Lake beyond. Arranged as two layers, the ground level public spaces have the more intimate relationship with the island. From this aspect the island’s copse of trees gives the eye pause before the large expanse of water, and is the primary feature of the view, particularly at sunset when the western aspect plays orange and gold across the entire lake. “A three-dimensional space embraces things growing, evolving, and intersecting while time moves forward like a river. The images one captures in each moment are instantaneous landscapes – nature, fields, light and artificial design meet at the intersection of space and time,” says Zhile.

A wall of river stone raises the height of the lower floors of guest accommodation to better frame the view and instil the sense of space more potently. This is true of both water and forest facing accommodation and it should be noted that the views facing inland are sublimely beautiful, far reaching and deeply engaged with the region’s seasonality. The upper floor rooms look across the curved roof lines and, while more architecturally engaged with the building, are not as connected to the view as those below.

Page 176, 178-179: The restaurant, looking out across the lake. Page 177 and 183: The rippling black-roofed building is reminiscent of crow-top boats gathered and docked on the shore.

Opposite: In the guest rooms the bed is placed at the picture window for optimal view.

Page 182: To the side of reception, the architecture and landscaping cuts inwards so that a curved boat can enter seamlessly.





“If it rains, the water droplets keep falling on the canopy,
and the scenic rocks and Jiangnan’s unique sound and colour are revealed”

The guest rooms are for the most part long, high-ceilinged spaces below a single arch, with the bed placed at the picture window for optimal view. Alternatively, guests can select a configuration whereby a large sunken bath is located in the window room to give bathers the sense of being in a boat on the lake. When rooms are at the juncture of two arches, the central wall falls short of the nadir by a metre to allow for a long aperture over the stair void between.

Materiality is natural and refined with the arched ceilings lined in honey-toned timber over pale cream walls. Rattan screens, jute rugs, timber detailing and a mix of timber and sand coloured stone floors are broken by bespoke furniture of the mid-century ilk in a slightly darker timber with caramel-toned upholstery and textiles.

Interior detailing for the public spaces is materially minimal with subtle shifts in stone textures realised as nuanced geometric repetitions across the walls, while floors offer a clear expanse of pale stone. The same honey tones are revisited for the interior of the much larger arch of the reception area and smaller rhythmic arrangement of the hotel’s restaurant. The restaurant speaks again to the ideal of space as a luxury with relaxed timber and woven

cane chairs spread out along the vast wall of sliding glass panels which face the lake.

To the side of reception, the form of the architecture and landscaping is cut inwards so that the lake, and an arch-roofed boat, enters the building. A glass walled walkway and bridge allow guests to enjoy this space, particularly when it rains and the colours of the natural local stone are revealed. “If it rains, the water droplets keep falling on the canopy, and the scenic rocks and Jiangnan’s unique sound and colour are revealed in this area alone,” says Zhile.

It is this attention to visitor experience that makes Boatyard Hotel the antidote to city living. As Zhile explains, spaces have been created to exclude the chaos of life and work, where in its stead a calm and poignant moment of reflection can bloom – similar to “sitting in a boat and looking out, empty of all things, free of distractions and temporarily insulated from the world’s affairs.” Bliss.

goa.com.cn, wjstudio.cn