

INTERIOR DESIGN[®]

OCTOBER
2023

hospitality's all aglow

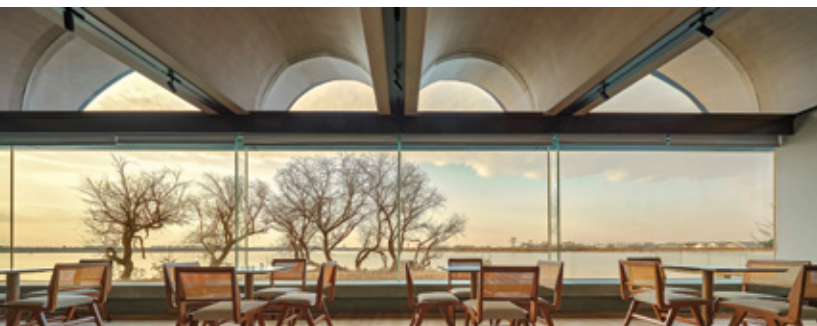


SHIP SHAPE

The iconic silhouette of traditional wupeng gondolas inspired the undulating roofline at the Boatyard Hotel in Suzhou, China, by GOA and WJ Studio

text: c.e. wallis
photography: zhang xi





For centuries, *wupeng* boats, traditional wood gondolas shaded by curved canvas or bamboo-mat awnings, have populated the rivers and canals of Jiangnan, a seaboard region in northeastern China famed for its picturesque water towns. Located on the outskirts of one of them—the ancient and culturally important city of Suzhou—the new Boatyard Hotel by GOA draws on the *wupeng*'s distinctive silhouette, which is echoed by the two-story building's showstopping roofline, an undulating sea of conical vaults that suggests a flotilla of the dark-canopied craft jostling for position at a wharf.

The hotel, on Zhongjiadang lake, and its slightly older but equally striking neighbor—the Restaurant of Metasequoia Grove, a cluster of pavilions, each crowned with a steeplelike

pyramid—are part of a rural revitalization scheme led by GOA, which stands for Group of Architects, centered on Shanwan village and its environs. “This development is about more than just architectural construction,” firm principal and lead architect on the project Binxin Chen notes. “Today, urbanization has led to the abandonment of rural areas as individuals migrate to cities, resulting in deserted villages with inadequate infrastructure and sluggish growth.” In fact, with their quaint cobblestone streets, well-preserved vernacular architecture, and pleasure craft-ready waterways, these ancient hamlets have become big tourist magnets, an economic lifeline Shanwan's ongoing revitalization plan seeks to tap.

The Boatyard's steel-frame roof vaults—19 total, in various sizes—are clad in aluminum paneling, blackened on the topside to resemble *wupeng* awnings but with a wood grain-film finish on the underside, so that the hotel's arched ceilings evoke rows of inverted boat shells. “The design magnifies, optimizes, and repeats the curves of the hull,” says Zhile Hu, founder and principal of WJ Studio, which conceived the 13,000-square-foot, 13-key boutique property's interiors. “Compared to a flat roof, the arches create a more generous and visually expanded space,” he explains, adding that by extending the wood-effect ceiling panels beyond the window line to the clad the deep eaves, the continuity between interior and exterior space is emphasized—a key theme of his conception that is further enhanced by a southern facade of floor-to-ceiling windows offering an up-close panorama of the lake. ➤



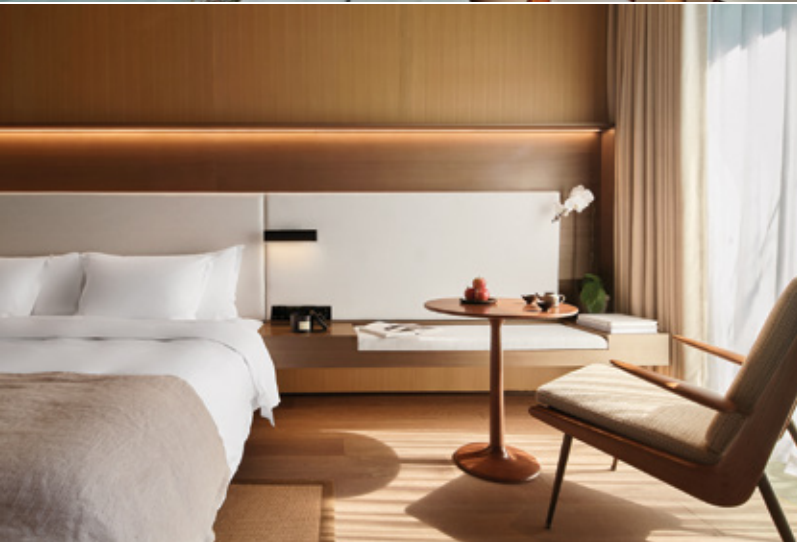
Previous spread: A roiling sea of cone vaults forms the roof of the Boatyard Hotel in Suzhou, China, a 13-key boutique property on Zhongjiadang lake by GOA and WJ Studio, stage two in a rural revitalization scheme that includes the multi-pyramid restaurant next door.

Opposite top: A café occupies the project's only multivault space, which faces the lake. **Opposite bottom:** The room is outfitted with custom mid century-style furniture and wooden surfaces, including the floor, built-ins, and ceiling; photography: Zhu Hai.

Top, from left: A wall of cubbyhole shelving, which separates the café from a hallway leading to guest rooms, allows daylight through. A traditional *wupeng* boat floats next to a concrete footbridge in the largest cone vault, which houses the reception area. **Bottom, from left:** A sculptural acrylic installation brings a pop of color to the reception desk, both custom; photography: Zhu Hai. The wood counter is screened by a boxy canopy, which partitions the entry from the lobby.



Top: In a guest room, custom wood-and-canvas screens join a stacked-stone feature wall and polished concrete flooring; photography: Zhu Hai. **Center:** The café is slightly sunken so that seated guests feel on a level with the lake. **Bottom:** Subdued colors, natural textures, and clean forms define a ground-floor guest room, where all furnishings are custom; photography: Zhu Hai. **Opposite:** The lobby culminates in an arched window wall and a custom stainless-steel trestle bench from which to contemplate the view of a tree-studded islet just off the lakeshore.



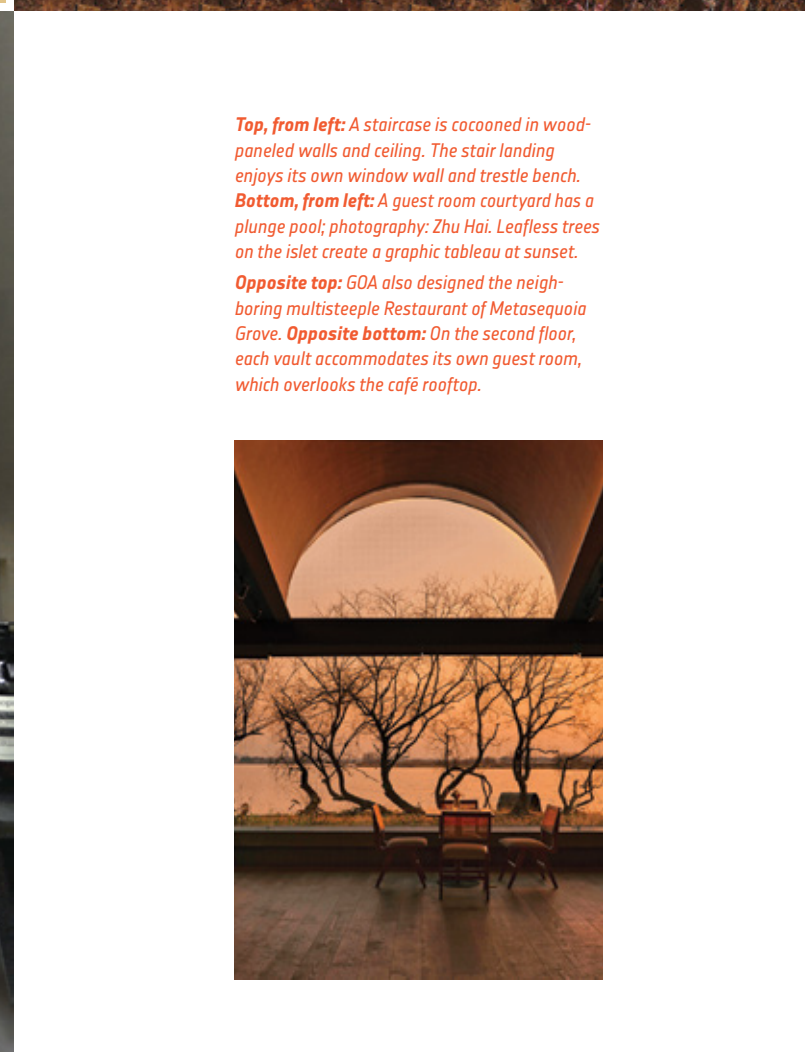
“The site is very typical of the Jiangnan region,” Hu notes, “uninterrupted stretches of water, untouched fields, misty villages, and the unique experiences they bring together.” He likes to quote Louis Sullivan’s precept that proper architecture grows naturally, logically, and poetically out of its environment, which was the program he and his team followed. “The locality itself sparked the whole design,” he continues. “The project connects the indoors and outdoors, combining them to the point where the surrounding scenery becomes a part of the hotel itself.”

What this means in practice is evident right from the Boatyard’s reception area. A continuous space housed under a single cone vault—the largest on the property, rising to a height of 18 feet and stretching from the front door all the way to the lakefront facade—it inaugurates a spatial and experiential sequence that evokes different physical and cultural aspects of the encompassing landscape. To reach reception, guests cross a low arched footbridge next to a narrow canal-like pool in which a real *wupeng* is moored. A large open skylight directly above the gondola not only floods the space with natural light but also allows rain to fall onto the tranquil tableau, introducing the sounds and rhythms of nature when droplets pitter-patter on the boat’s awning.

Framed by a hefty rectangular canopy, the reception desk acts as a low partition separating the entry and pool zone from the lobby, a serene spot next to a soaring arched window wall framing the view of a tiny tree-dotted islet just off the lakeshore. Offering a perch from which to contemplate the scene, a custom stainless-steel trestle bench etched with a water pattern appears to float above an inky rectangle of polished marble floor tile like a silver boat floating on a calm, dark sea. “The black mirror marble continues the water into the interior,” ➔

“The project connects indoors and outdoors to the point where the surrounding scenery becomes part of the hotel itself”





Top, from left: A staircase is cocooned in wood-paneled walls and ceiling. The stair landing enjoys its own window wall and trestle bench. **Bottom, from left:** A guest room courtyard has a plunge pool; photography: Zhu Hai. Leafless trees on the islet create a graphic tableau at sunset. **Opposite top:** GOA also designed the neighboring multisteeple Restaurant of Metasequoia Grove. **Opposite bottom:** On the second floor, each vault accommodates its own guest room, which overlooks the café rooftop.

Hu suggests, “enhancing the connection and integration with the natural landscape.”

Other materials in the Boatyard’s limited palette do similar service: Acres of glass create a sense of transparency, helping dissolve the physical and psychological barriers between the hotel’s interiors and the land; blond wood or wood-grain finishes for millwork, built-ins, walls, ceilings, and some floors bring the warmth and texture of the rural world with them, as do the stacked-stone walls featured in some areas; and a subdued color spectrum—blues, grays, creams, browns, and blacks—reflects the subtle organic hues of forest, field, and stream.

The lobby divides the hotel into two unequal portions: One side accommodates the café—a long, multivault space that’s slightly sunken to seem almost level with the lake—and eight guest rooms, four on the ground floor, four above; the other side houses the hotel office and another five guest rooms across two levels. Each of the upper-story rooms occupies its own cone vault, as does each of the three staircases leading to them. The stairwell ceilings and walls are paneled in wood, creating an enveloping cocoon that culminates in a spectacular landing with an arched window wall facing not the lake to the south but a grove of metasequoia trees to the north for which the neighboring restaurant is named. At the Boatyard, the natural and the manmade really do seem to be in eloquent communication. 🏡

PROJECT TEAM

LIJIE YE; TIANYU LIU; QI SHI: GOA. YANG XI; YANG LILIE; ZHOU SHUYI; YE ZI: WJ STUDIO. WSP: LIGHTING CONSULTANT. SHANGHAI ZHONGTIAN ENGINEERING CONSULTING CO.: CURTAIN WALLS, STRUCTURAL ENGINEER, MEP.

PROJECT SOURCES

FROM FRONT EASTCO LIGHTING DESIGN: TRACK LIGHTING, COVE LIGHTING (CAFÉ). THROUGHOUT HENAMEI ALUMINUM: ROOF PANELS. CSG: ARCHITECTURAL GLASS. GUO YANFANG STONE MATERIALS: STONE. UGAN CONCEPT: WOOD FLOORING. HYUNDAI L&G; LG HAUSYS: WOOD-GRAIN FILM.

