

# PORTFOLIO



## THE GIFT CALLED GIVING

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**W**hen the final touches were completed, what was once a rundown and Spartan budget hotel that catered to the R&R of government employees has been transformed into a smart upscale establishment. Design is among the new property's highlights, but it is not confined to the immediately visible aspects: while the spirit of the *hutong* and the essence of traditional Chinese architecture have been preserved, albeit modernized, the resulting Vue Houhai is revitalized to its very foundation. The rooms have been enlarged, F&B establishments set up, and art and landscape installed.

The transformation of the commercial accommodation in Houhai, an old neighborhood in the Xicheng District in Central Beijing, was intended to launch a new-to-market 4.5-star hotel, and position it as a flagship property that would inspire a new chain. To meet these objectives, Vue Hotel was to have over 80 guest rooms, a gym, and three F&B establishments. Over and beyond this, a new branding had to be woven into the design, and communicated in all private, public and service areas.

### A Chain Launcher

The client owns the Crystal Orange and Orange Hotel, an established chain in the two- to three-star category, and the new flagship property is intended to broaden their offering, and redefine Chinese high-end luxury hospitality. They commissioned Singapore-based Ministry of Design (MOD) to undertake the design and branding of the new establishment.

MOD incorporated all the original buildings into the new hotel, adding some minor structures only as necessary. "The buildings were not gazetted, but the landlord required us to keep them all as part of the rental agreement," explains Mr. Colin Seah, MOD founder and head of the project design team. Although the buildings were not

older than 50 to 60 years – young in the context of the neighborhood – they were interesting and somewhat valuable in the interest of historicity. "They (the builders) appropriated interesting traditional details from a much older period, such as roof eaves, balconies, etc, which have heritage value," Mr. Seah explains.

### Waste Not, Want Not

"From the get go, we wanted to utilize these 'pseudo heritage' details as a means of cataloguing Chinese architectural heritage, but at the same time, we did not want to pass them off as genuinely old relics. We achieved this by treating the buildings as darker masses and backdrops, whilst highlighting some key details in gold to call them out."

"Vue Houhai is quite an unusual Beijing experience, and I hope it casts Beijing and Chinese design in a fresh and contemporary light," Mr. Seah says. "But deeper than that, I hope it shakes up the guest's perception of what new luxury could mean! Out with the chandeliers and triple height atrium lobbies."

### Spirited Collaboration

Mr. Seah emphasizes that "all successful projects require a shared collective vision between owner/operator and designer", and VUE was no exception. The two key clients, Mr. Wu Hai and Ms. Amy Liao, were supportive and willing to test unprecedented ideas either in the design or the 'business of hospitality', Mr. Seah adds.

The owner/operator and designer worked closely to shape the program and provision at the hotel. The result is a seamless coordination of form and function, articulation and definition. What may have been at risk of being considered an artifice becomes a legitimate artifact within the context of the environment. "This is quite unique for mainstream hospitality design, but more commonplace when it comes to boutique based hotels," Mr. Seah points out.





### Business and Design

If the client's financial objectives are reasonable, the design vision will not be in danger of being compromised, reasons Mr. Seah. "A savvy designer understands more than just form and function, but also the human psyche and the need to have the finances in equilibrium. I personally find it more satisfying to be able to create a memorable experience that's also profit generating; I feel this is a critical aspect of creating design that is sustainable and meaningful. Vanity projects are a bit vulgar to me."

The design team found the brief to make sense as it clearly outlined broad objectives without being overly prescriptive. "That, for us, is the best type of brief," Mr. Seah enthuses. Our inspiration came from two sources: The first was the broader context of hospitality, and how we were keen to question what the essence of value of contemporary luxury could be. The second was from the site and existing conditions, the nature of the hutong, being beside the lake, and the architecture."

### Naming Rights

The establishment's name, Vue, which means 'to see' in French, also served as a starting point for exploring and articulating the design strategy; on the one hand "the property presents a new way to see its neighborhood by transforming it somehow", and on the other it offers "a new way to see hospitality as a whole by redefining luxury etc."

The brand shares four core values, one of which is to draw from and transcend Chinese culture. The others are to encourage socializing, to be whimsical and not to take itself too seriously, and to be relaxed and not formal or stiff. And design clearly helps advance these values.

The diagonal lines at the urban design level and interior level come from the 'cracked ice ray lattice', a traditional pattern for Chinese door or window screens. "We wanted to apply it three-dimensionally and at a much larger scale, and in doing so, draw from but transcend Chinese tradition."

### Not A Template

The flagship Houhai property explores new ways to 'see' its neighborhood. The teeming wildlife in the surrounding lake area is magically transformed into mascots that are found throughout the property—taking selfies, wheeling luggage around, consulting a map, and even kissing—in the form of sculptures in and digital paintings.

The Pop colors of the sculptures, key furniture pieces, and accessories are meant to underscore the whimsicality of the brand.

Mr. Seah foresees each new VUE property to have a different take on whimsicality means and a unique way of seeing its neighborhood, and in this way, Vue Hotel serves as a concept, not a template. P