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PUTTING THE WHIM TO WHIMSY

With a concept that transcends Chinese culture, the whimsy of the Vue Hotel Beijing complements the charmingly contemporary interplay of colours, edgy design elements and detailed tectonics.

WORDS MARTIN TEO /

PHOTOGRAPHY EDWARD HENDRICKS (CIBA PHOTOGRAPHY) COURTESY OF MINISTRY OF DESIGN







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- 1. Supporting steel bars painted in gold add a nice touch to the otherwise dull staircase profile**
- 2. The idiosyncrasy of two Chinese chairs in contrasting hues breaks the monotony of the outdoors**
- 3. Rabbit figurines in pop colours come alive in the hotel**
- 4. A pair of pink rabbits kissing atop the Pink Rabbit Restaurant**

With many of his works, Colin Seah is a man of surprises. In the latest Vue Hotel Beijing, the Design Director of Ministry of Design (MOD) describes the hotel as what a new luxury can be – whimsical, well-detailed and unapologetically forward-looking – with a cultural twist.

The Vue Hotel brand exemplifies the global cultural phenomenon now in China. The growing market is constantly hungry for new hospitality experiences inwove in local context and cultural nuances.

“Vue” in French means “view” or “a way to see”; and Vue hotels aspire to present a fresh way of “seeing” hospitality design and experiences. The brand’s DNA challenges the conventional Chinese sensibility in the context of hospitality and is defined by four core pillars; encourages socialising, transcendence of culture, delightful and whimsical, and lastly, relaxed and inviting.

Located in the Hutong district of Houhai, Vue Hotel, which is a member of Design Hotels™ sits on the edge of the picturesque

Houhai lake, and surrounded by a lush public park, as well as historic Hutong houses which are still used by locals today. The narrative for the Vue is drawn from the lake and nature.

“In our imaginings, the presence of Vue in the Houhai neighbourhood has a magical and whimsical transformative effect on the animal inhabitants. These friendly animals like foxes, rabbits and deer are transformed anthropomorphically from mere animals to become more human-like, in the same way animals in cartoons often adopt human personas,” explains Seah.

The whimsical mascots can be seen dotting around the compound of the hotel. At the entrance, a bright fluorescent pink fox stands in an angle to welcome visitors to the premise. Set against a utilitarian contemporary look of glass and concrete, the pop of pink injects vigour to the traditional setting of the flying eaves and lattice window arches.

“The mascots can be seen taking selfies, wheeling around luggage, consulting a map like a guest would, and even kissing!





These are expressed as sculptures in the exterior and interiors, as well as digital paintings in the rooms. The pop colours seen on sculptures and also key furniture and accessories are meant to underscore the whimsicality of the Vue brand,” shares the 45-year-old designer.

Immediately behind the entrance is a solid, screen wall that denies direct access to the interior space. In Feng Shui terms, it keeps the ‘evil spirits’ out but in modern day context, the elaborated entrance lobby simply piques the curiosity of passersby with its deconstructed two-tone pillars and glimmering bulbous lighting at night.

INFORMING THE NEW

The transcendence of Chinese culture can be found repeatedly through the architecture of the building. Its vernacular Chinese designs are, however, a mix of various elements. The historic buildings, which are built in the 50s, are relatively ‘young’. Elements such as highly decorative roof eaves, gargoyle figurines, sculptured balconies and latticed window frames are paired with pared-back jack roofs and plain brick work wall finishes.

“These buildings are not older than 50 or 60 years; so they are ‘young’ for the neighbourhood. But the interesting traditional details have heritage value. From the get go, we wanted to utilise 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,” explains Seah some more.

In his pursuit to bring out the beauty of these traditional architectural details in a sophisticated way, these elements have been highlighted in a contemporary gold patina. Shimmering against the dark backdrop, their prominence suggests an informal cataloguing of key architectural details. Subsequently, it brings into focus the distinction between the historical versus the contemporary; a subtle juxtaposition, which emphasises the rich tension arising from any adaptive reuse design.

Seah confides: “VUE is a rare example of adaptive reuse. Typically in China, really old traditional heritage spaces are either torn down to make way for something completely new and foreign to the site, or they are simply restored and preserved as frozen artifacts in time. It is very binary!



**Colin Seah, Design Director,
Ministry of Design**

“VUE is a rare example of adaptive reuse. Typically in China, really old traditional heritage spaces are either torn down to make way for something completely new and foreign to the site, or they are simply restored and preserved as frozen artifacts in time. Its very binary!”

5. Details in the interior dining space reflect the architectural intervention of the property

6. Spot the voyaging rabbits on the front desk

However, we decided to explore a new possibility and draw from the old but radically update it by redesigning it in a new light. The way we’ve designed the black buildings with the gold trim is completely radical in China, especially in Beijing. It is something fresh and captivating. And I think it also furthers the conversation on the perception of heritage and whether its more of a continuum versus a mere moment in time.”

INNER EXPLORATION

Upon arrival, the reception opens up to the Vue Hotel’s social hubs: the FAB café and bakery. This casual and vibrant venue fronts the buzzy Hutong main road where scenes of daily local life and culture can be witnessed. The interior design approach draws from characteristics of the street front in its use of materials and colour accents.

Walking into the concierge point, the intimate and personal vibe is immersive. Here, the property’s first feature installation artwork showcases how the hotel’s signature colour scheme and dramatic spatial design themes are manifested.



VUE HOTEL BEIJING

LOCATION / BEIJING, CHINA
SITE AREA / 7,500 M²
GROSS FLOOR AREA (GFA) / 10,000 M²
COMPLETION / NOVEMBER 2017
INTERIOR DESIGN / MINISTRY OF DESIGN
LEAD DESIGNER / COLIN SEAH
DESIGN TEAM / KEVIN LEONG, JOYCE LOW, RUTH CHONG, SARAH CONCELCAO, RICHARD HERMAN, TASMINAH ALI, SYAZWANI WAGIMAN, RAIS RAHMAN, PATRICIA SEGADO, ANGIE NG, JASCHA OAKES, TIANG YUPING, NORBERTO OLEGARIO, MIOR HASAN, DON CASTENADA, ARNEL ANONUEVO, DANIELLE LIU, SANDRA GOH
PROJECT TEAM / FANG WEN, HE TING
M&E; SUBMISSIONS ARCHITECT / BEIJING ZHONGDIHENGCHENG ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN CO. LTD
CONTRACTOR / CHANGZHOU JINTAN CONSTRUCTION COMPANY CO. LTD



The deconstructed asymmetry is consistent throughout the public spaces as well as the guest rooms. The unconventional juxtaposition is something fresh yet quirky at the same time. Inspired by the projected lines from the view of light entering into each room through the latticed window, Seah explains that the diagonal strokes at the urban design level and interior level are described as the ‘cracked ice ray lattice’ pattern that are commonly used as door or window screens in traditional Chinese design.

“We wanted to apply it in a three dimensional way and at a much larger scale. Spaces are unexpectedly divided by the use of colours, tones and materials,” he shares.

When conceptualising the essence of the hotel rooms, there is a desire to balance an unapologetically contemporary design approach with locally inspired culture and imagery. The resulting rooms are whimsically surprising but yet familiar. Dramatic bath spaces complement restful sleeping spaces. And beyond the standard rooms, suites and garden rooms, the entire scenography extends the guest experience with generous living and communal spaces that complement the overarching narrative of the hotel.

There are plenty to explore in the Vue Hotel. Most of its design elements are directly and indirectly translated from the existing space itself. Known for his flamboyant and nonconforming interpretations on interior design, Seah mentions that there are a couple of ‘must-see’ elements that have to be checked out when visiting this hotel.

The cracked ice ray pattern in the courtyard and how it connects all the buildings into a single seamless experience is one. The designer also recommends the lattice feature in the warehouse, which he reckons is quite jaw-dropping, especially when lit at night. The design is derived from extruding the existing structural trusses that hold up the roof.

Also, Seah says that the one must-not-missed feature is the array of sculptural pieces dotting around the entire property; especially the kissing rabbits on the roof of the Pink Rabbit Restaurant. It is something that cannot be missed, especially from Seah himself who is always surprising the design fraternity with his cracking aesthetics.



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- 7. Rhombic design elements are reflective of the way the surroundings are landscaped
- 8. Dominant marble finishes are accented with pop of electric blue and magenta for a contemporary touch
- 9. Guestrooms are fun, quirky and full of energy

