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Luk Studio, Shanghai

interview

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Christina Luk, Founder and Director of Shanghai-based practice, Luk Studio: '... I like the idea of discovery and surprise, so I do try to create these moments to enhance a spatial experience. Lighting is the soul of a space and I spend a lot of time trying to make sure we get that right.'

# 'EACH PROJECT IS AN EXPERIMENT'

BY REBECCA LO | IMAGES AND PROJECT DESCRIPTIONS COURTESY LUK STUDIO

A citizen of the world, Christina Luk grew up in Hong Kong and was educated in London and Toronto. The University of Toronto-trained architect got her feet wet working for B+H, one of Canada's busiest multidisciplinary firms, before relocating to one of its branch offices in Shanghai. She moved onto Neri & Hu Design and Research Office as a senior project manager working on hospitality jobs all over the country for several years before establishing Luk Studio in 2011 in Shanghai. The boutique firm has a portfolio that includes urban planning, heritage conservation, mix-use architectural complexes, institutional and hospitality interiors, and gallery exhibits. She talks to REBECCA LO about the path that led her to running a practise in mainland China's most international city, and how she remains grounded and true to herself.

## Growing up in Hong Kong, what sparked your interest in architecture?

Having discovered my love for drawing and doodling, my mother enrolled me into drawing classes when I was probably around four years old. It was not a fancy place, and there were kids from all ages packed into a small studio. Sometimes we would even get to make porcelain dolls or paper sculptures. These few fun hours of my weekend were invaluable to my aesthetic development. I was fascinated by the idea of creating, and that led me to appreciate the beautiful designs around me.

## Why did you study in the UK? What were some of the important lessons that you learned when you lived there?

To study abroad was a bit of a trend back then; maybe it still is. As a slightly rebellious teenager, I had always dreamt of seeing the rest of the world – or, more accurately at that point, the Western world. My dad was working in a company run by the Brits and naturally he was convinced that the British education system was the right choice. In the end, I picked and got into a boarding school with an impressive art department. Little did I know that this beautiful posh school was located in a small town with a predominantly senior population! You can imagine the shock I experienced as a teenager coming from a metropolis like Hong Kong. I was so much happier when I moved closer to London

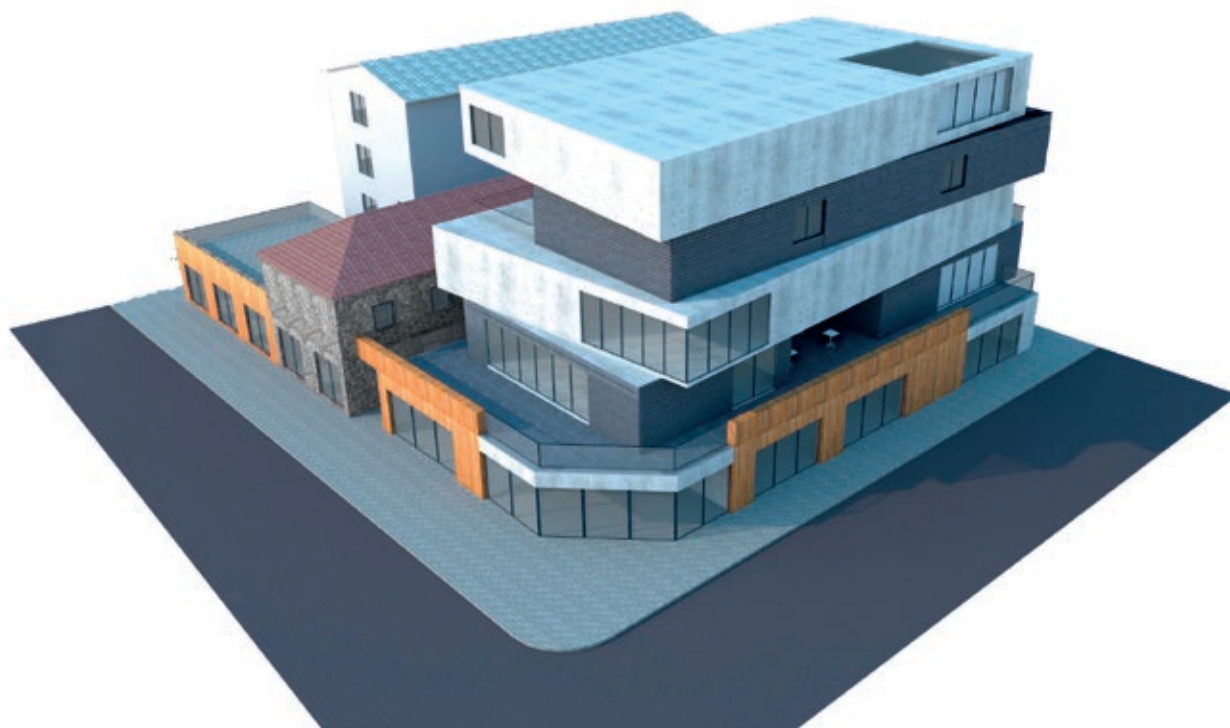
for my art foundation study year. I suppose one important realisation was how much I loved being in cities. Though nowadays I do occasionally get away from the hustle and bustle, I am an urban-dweller by nature.

## What was the environment like at University of Toronto's architecture programme? What were some of the challenges and rewards of living in Toronto?

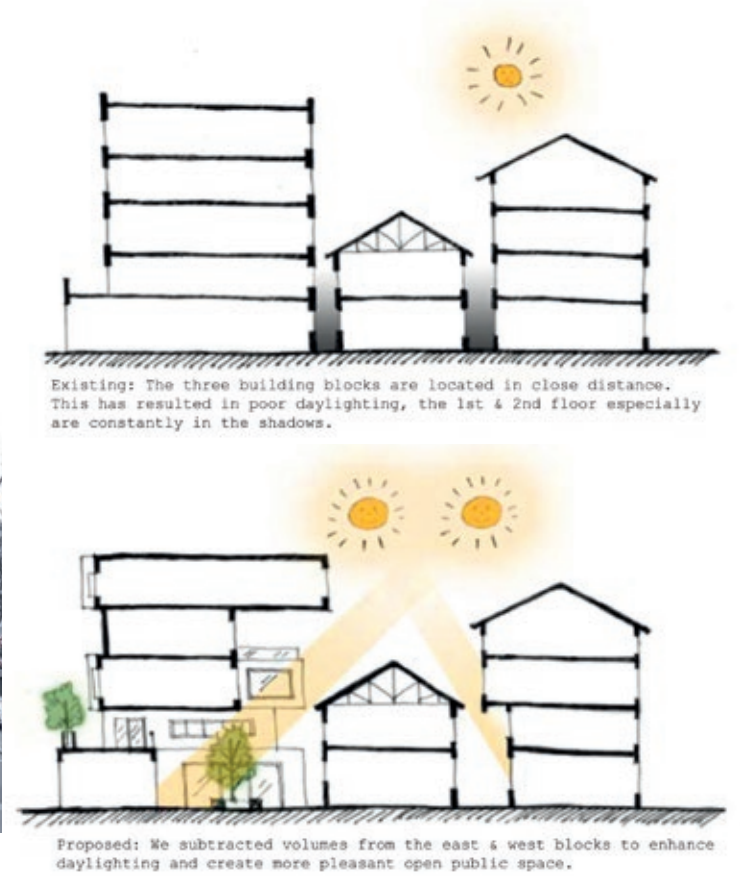
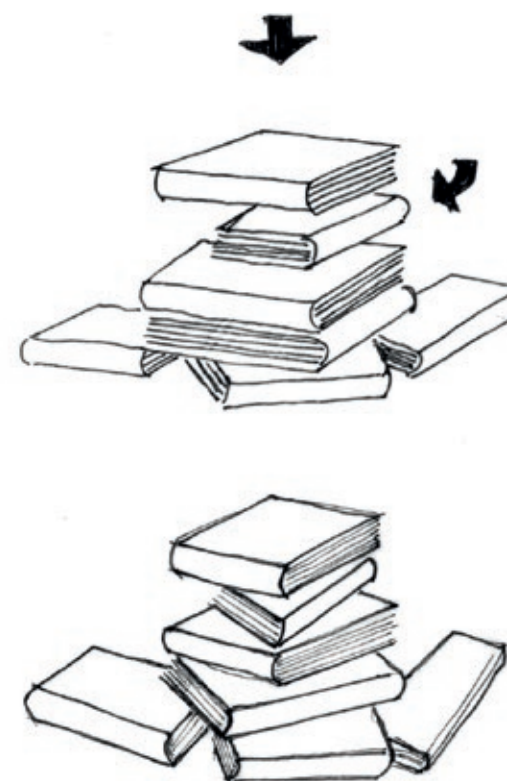
Jumping from an art college in London to U of T was another cultural shock for me. It was quite a competitive environment; I remember feeling inadequate during most of my university years. We would devote all our energies

to studio projects and pulling an all-nighter was a common thing to brag about among peers. Thinking back now, I am grateful for the rigorous and comprehensive curriculum at university. Our professors taught us to appreciate context, tectonics, details, and question ideas out loud. It was also the time when we would draft with ink on mylar, build contour models out of millboard or basswood, and present a project in sections and models rather than renderings.

Living in Toronto, a multi-cultural city, allowed me to learn more about other ethnicities while embracing my own. Sunny summers in Ontario were glorious; I do miss outdoor sports and camping a lot. However, the long



Yan Ling Lane Creative Hub 'is a renovation project to rehabilitate two mid-rise towers and one heritage building in Nanjing. Culture & Creativity are accumulated through time. If we were to visualize this process, perhaps it would take shape as stacked written records. With this massing in mind, we then subtract volumes from the existing, closely packed building blocks. The method not only improves daylighting and privacy between tenants, but also creates a welcoming open public area on the ground level.'



Existing: The three building blocks are located in close distance. This has resulted in poor daylighting, the 1st & 2nd floor especially are constantly in the shadows.

Proposed: We subtracted volumes from the east & west blocks to enhance daylighting and create more pleasant open public space.



and frigid winters can be challenging. Fortunately, I enjoy skiing, so at least there was always something to look forward to.

## How did you end up working at B+H and its Shanghai office? What did working at B+H and Neri & Hu teach you about the business?

I think in my heart, I knew that I wanted to eventually work in Asia. However, I was not ready to leave Toronto yet right after graduation. When I knew that B+H was hiring, I was attracted by the fact that they have an established office in Shanghai. I thought that maybe one day I could work there. I was very lucky that this idea actually became reality.

As for design and architecture, we will forever be driven by deadlines. I think the difference between business models is in what the company heads choose

as priorities. Having worked at different offices and now that I am running my own studio, I've come to realise that there are simply no rules in this organic business because everything changes all the times. The truth is that those who are passionate about what they do will strive to make things work. And when there are a few people working together who love what they do, they can make magic.

## What was Shanghai like when you first moved there compared to how the city is today, from a design perspective?

To be honest, there is still so much I don't know about this city. The busy core has been expanding. Every now and then, I would pass by an area or a building that I have never seen before. When I first arrived here, I was fascinated about how diverse this city was, from intact-



looking historic li-long (laneway neighbourhood) and 1930s Art Deco buildings to record-breaking skyscrapers. I also loved its urban scale that makes walking and biking such pleasant activities.

I suppose one obvious and unfortunate change has been the sprawl of shopping malls all over the city, as most of them happen at the expense of the older urban fabric. Although in some way we benefit from Shanghai's development because more design opportunities arise, I do hope this gentrification would slow down, better integrate the past and provide more public and cultural programmes. A vibrant city needs much more than shiny giant venues for mass consumption. We do have new art galleries like Power Station of Art and a few others along the West Bund, I just wish they could be more central.

**Why did you make Shanghai your base, instead of returning to Canada or Hong Kong?**

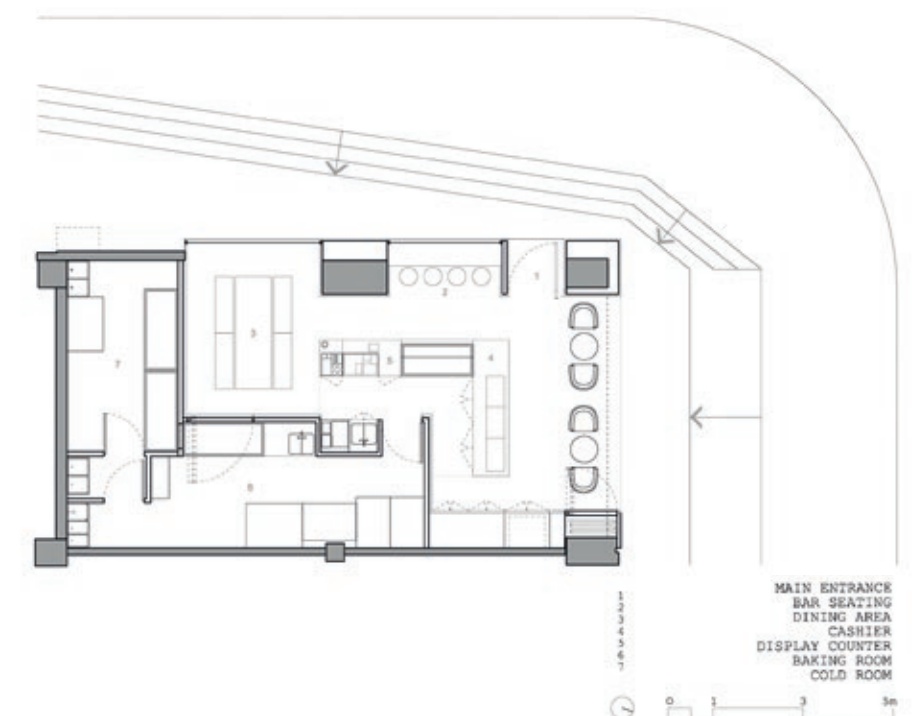
Life happens. I met my husband; we renovated an old apartment and called it our home. Then I managed to



Apt 7: 'The apartment is located on the top floor of an old four-storey midrise in central Shanghai that was originally constructed for and occupied by one family in the 1930s. While the rest of the street has been developed into residential compounds and offices, this little remnant of the past has retained the charm of old Shanghai, while enjoying all the conveniences of a quickly developing neighbourhood. Apartment 7 brings a freshness to the street façade by nestling a glass box into the existing structure. Through some clever space planning, the 85m<sup>2</sup> apartment has been completely transformed into two main areas, a public and a private zone. The living, dining and kitchen area is a generous and open social space for the owners who love to entertain. The private area consisting of a small study and two bedrooms is tucked away behind...'



The Platform, 'a design for Baker One, is located in downtown Shanghai near the busy Nanjing Pedestrian Zone. The previous multi-coloured storefront was lost amongst the chaotic signage of an intersection corner where vehicle and pedestrian traffic levels are immense. To filter the visual chaos, the facelift begins by introducing grey cement cladding as a buffer zone. Interior views are then framed by large openings along the façade. While the hustle and bustle of the streetscape takes form as a series of screenplays in the relaxed interior, the hearty display of baked goods welcomes passers-by to flow through the store and grab a bite. The display counter is a continuation of a wooden datum that connects interior to exterior. This platform of reclaimed wooden planks marks the corner and stages all in- and out-fluxes. In contrast to the grounded platform, floating baking pans of various molding patterns compose a feature ceiling throughout the bakery. Whisks are modified into pendant fixtures and rolling pins are celebrated as door handles. All elements amalgamate in a visual identity that complements the smell of the artisanal bakery.'





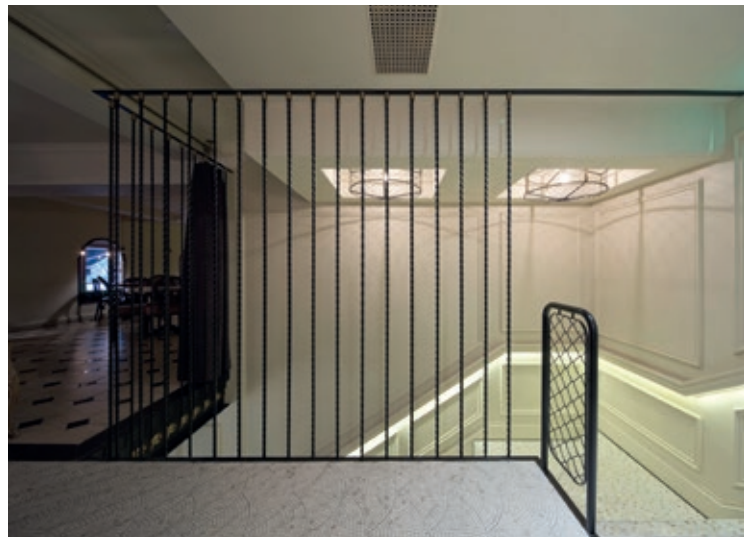
Coquille Seafood Bistro: 'Located among franchise restaurants and cafés on Mengzi Road in Shanghai's Huangpu district, Coquille aims to bring a different dining experience to the surrounding middle-class community. The restaurant takes up two bays of a commercial strip, the mundane brick and glazing envelope of which could not be significantly altered. To introduce a French seafood bistro into this context, we decided to create our own site. We extend the street level into the original sunken restaurant and create a picturesque new façade inspired by French bistro storefronts with shuttered openings. Double-glazed doors allow the original façade to open up completely and patio seating to spread outside during the warmer season. This blurred boundary between inside and out not only softens the transition from the banal street to the lush interior, but also sets the mood of the restaurant...'



gather other designers and we have enough work to stay busy. I think it's more like Shanghai has chosen me. Maybe life will move me again in the future, but right now this city is an exciting hub bringing in the rest of the world.

**How would you describe your creative style? Do you have a signature 'look'?**

This is really a question for others; I would not be the best person to answer it. My intention is to treat each project as a unique challenge, so I don't think that I have a particular style. I suppose I have developed a certain routine when I approach a project. For example, I like the idea of discovery and surprise, so I do try to create these moments to enhance a spatial experience. Lighting is the

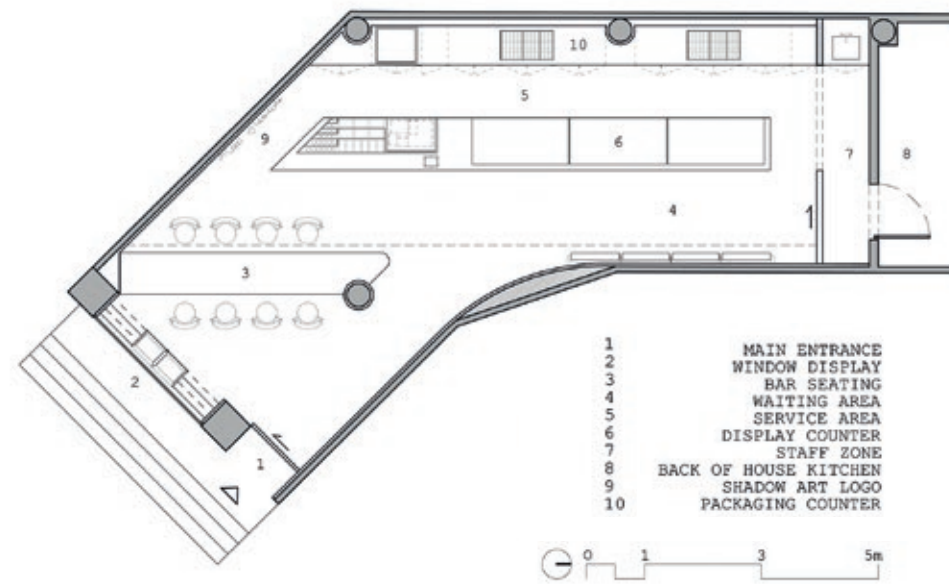


A Gift Box: 'Aimé Pâtisserie, a new brand entering the Shanghai market, has positioned its flagship store in an elevated retail strip on Huai Hai Road. The chosen site is flanked by familiar coffee and donut franchises, and fronted by a city bus-stop. Across the street is the recently opened shopping mall flaunting an array of luxury brands. The design challenge of the store is to stand out from its immediate chaos and appeal to the clientele from the close-by gentrified neighbourhood. Our strategy is to dress this newcomer up as a white present. The unwrapping experience of the Aimé gift box is translated into the physical store. The idea of layering appears when we lift one semicircular translucent paper after another to discover the colourful macaroons within. This opening sequence gives form to the overhead storefront design, while the window display made of four translucent layers attracts passers-by to explore inside the store.

Beyond the 4.5m retail storefront lies a turning L-shape layout divided into two zones: the foyer with bar seating and the display counter at the back. With a lower ceiling, the former compresses views of the latter, yet frames the illuminated feature wall to capture the curious minds. Every step forward heightens the discovery of the playful interior where the 9m long counter showcasing macaroons and other goodies in perfect order.

The illuminated feature wall composed of stacked gift boxes at various states of opening draws one's eyes up to the ceiling where the whimsical pattern continues. The versatile modular system allows for necessary wall display shelves, and ceiling openings for spotlights, speakers, and security devices.

In light of the neutral palette evoking a gallery ambience, the branding wall is created with an artistic approach where aluminium bands are twirled and bent to cast calligraphic shadow. A visit to this white gift box should be a delight to the eyes as much as to the sweet tooth.'



*Lab Whisky & Cocktail Bar in Jing An District, Shanghai: 'The idea is to create a bar that celebrates the essence of drinking: the people, the bottles and their stories. When one asks what makes the best memory in a bar, the answers surround three inter-related ingredients: the companionship, the ambience and definitely the drinks. While we rely on our client on the third element, we aim to create a cosy atmosphere where strangers become friends, friends become soulmates, and soulmates become lovers.'*

*We think of the many scenarios while we shape the spaces of different intimacy: whisky connoisseurs exchange notes with the bartender and his neighbours at the feature bar, strangers' eyes meet and start chit-chat on either sides of the wooden wall; friends share secrets on the mezzanine; loner enjoys her solitude yet flaunts herself along the catwalk bar. While the elevated floor design subtly marks the various areas, the blur between the public and the private brings out the playful and voyeuristic minds. Every visit to LAB should be a uniquely social experiment...'*



from massing to details. With this underlying story, all the decisions can be solved easily with a basis. For example, when it came to selecting a material and colour palette for our office around a tree, we instantaneously picked white walls and light grey concrete flooring. Not so much because it provides better natural lighting, but more about increasing the chances of foliage shadows captured within the interiors.

#### **What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of working in Shanghai?**

Pros and cons are usually two sides of the same ball. Everything can be custom made, but sometimes when you want to pick something from a standard catalog, there might not be one. The experience and capability of contractors and consultants vary, and they don't necessarily follow any standard procedures. Therefore, the resulting work has more to do with how much the designers push and how much time the client allows for the project. The whole design community in Shanghai is relatively young, so when they get to be involved

in a project from the beginning until the end, within a short time frame, everyone gets excited and works very hard to finish within these unreasonable fast deadlines. Sometimes I do miss having someone senior and experienced in the office such as a specifications writer, who I can ask about any precautions on some details or the quality of a specific insulation product. In that sense, each project is an experiment. We are accumulating knowledge through our mistakes and trying not to make them again.

#### **What are your goals for Luk Studio?**

Currently, our studio is run like a family business and everyone is helping out where they can. I hope that as we keep growing, we can form a more mature office and team structure, yet maintain our simple and cosy working atmosphere. I do hope that we get to work on public or cultural projects as well as commercial ones. It would be my dream if we get to work on architectural projects such as schools, kindergartens, galleries, theatres or maybe public housing.



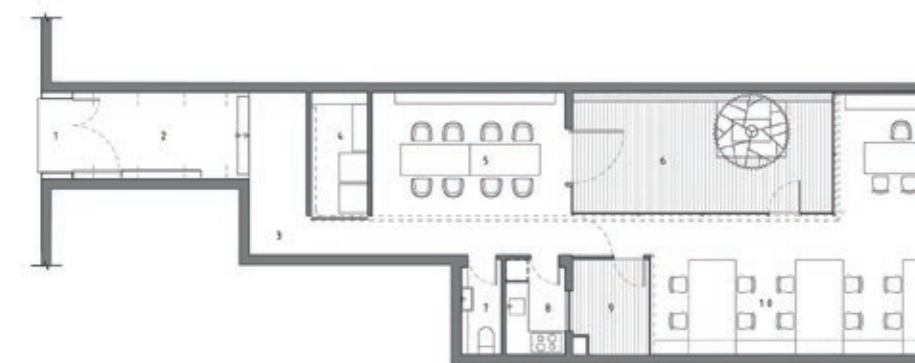
*Luke Studio, an 'Office Around a Tree': 'Valued moments in architecture are manifested through the synthesis of the exterior with the interior. In an urban context, these moments are often public and ephemeral, noticed only through the interplay of dappling sunrays, shifting shadows and passing breeze as one strolls down the street. However, sometimes, our encounter of nature can be more intimate and permanent. In this project of our design studio, that moment of permanence came rooted in a forgotten courtyard. It is an old tree, the chimonanthus tree, known also as "wintersweet". We were immediately charmed and so naturally, our design efforts became focused on restoring the dignity of this abandoned tree.'*

*The site is located in a li long – a typical late 19th century Shanghai neighbourhood characterized by the laneways that connect the history, buildings, inhabitants and gossips within. Over the years, this Wintersweet witnessed the passage of time while surviving numerous abuses and a lack of maintenance. We want it to be our secret, but more importantly, we want to protect it. Thus, we create a buffer to the laneways, starting with a large glazed door framed in a stainless steel lined porch, followed by a series of spaces that includes a foyer gallery, utility rooms and pantry.'*

*We then surround our tree with the spaces we would spend most of our time in, namely the conference room and our working area. A floor-to-ceiling double-glazing enclosure allows our tree to be omnipresent. Additionally, we devised a way to physically bring the tree inside by capturing its shadows. A light colour palette was decided for all interior surfaces, including fixtures and furniture, transforming the interiors into a projection screen and presenting a shadow show composed by the tree, its foliage and sunlight. Thus, this tree is always in sight, always a part of the interiors.'*

*Contrasting with the rooted nature of our Wintersweet, desks in the main working area cantilever off the wall. The unobstructed legroom, most appreciated by our playful dogs, is ensured by a wall storage unit for all computer stations and a multi-functional cable tray system composed of stackable stationery holders. In line with the airy approach, walls are clad with white pegboard where different items can be hung: a flexible system providing more functional surface area for creative use.'*

*To witness how this abandoned lane house transformed into our studio space has been a fruitful learning experience. The Wintersweet now regains its purpose to integrate nature with man-made interiors and we enjoy it as a moment of architecture in our everyday.'*



- 1 MAIN ENTRANCE
- 2 FOYER
- 3 CORRIDOR
- 4 STORAGE ROOM
- 5 CONFERENCE ROOM
- 6 COURTYARD
- 7 WASHROOM
- 8 KITCHEN
- 9 EXTERIOR STORAGE
- 10 WORKSPACE



#### **What do you do to recharge and re-inspire yourself?**

On a daily basis, I relax when I spend time with my two dogs and hang out with my husband. On a weekly basis, I meet up with good friends over a great meal. And every year, I travel and explore new destinations. Recently, I have discovered Vipassana meditation and I am fascinated by its power in balancing the mind and the body. I do hope I can keep up practicing this technique and continue the path of Dhamma in my life. +



*The Luk Studio team (Christina Luk, seated at front row centre)*