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GRACE LA: From Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, this is *Talking Practice*, a series asking renowned designers to provide an inside glimpse into what they do, why, and how they do it, exposing the ways in which their design imagination is articulated through practice. I'm Grace La, professor of architecture and chair of the Practice Platform. Thank you for listening.

We are delighted to have with us today architects Lyndon Neri and Rossana Hu, partners and co-founders of the Shanghai-based Neri&Hu Design and Research Office. Lyndon and Rossana's projects span typology and scale from architecture to product design.

Recent projects include the Aranya Art Center in China, the Suzhou Chapel, the Unfolding Village Installation for the Stockholm Furniture Fair, and the Tsingpu Yangzhou Retreat in China. Named the 2014 Designers of the Year by *Wallpaper Magazine*, Neri and Hu are winners of the ELLE DECOR International Design Awards and have been inducted into the US interior design Hall of Fame.

They are also the creative directors of Stellar Works, a furniture company, and have designed a range of products for companies such as Artemide, De La Espada, Fritz Hansen, Poltrona Frau, among others. In 2004, they founded Design Republic, a concept store and online platform that showcases the work of internationally-renowned designers.

They have also actively organized Shanghai's annual festival of design for several years. Lyndon and Rossana are teaching a studio at the GSD this semester entitled, reflective nostalgia, alternative futures for Shanghai's Shikumen heritage. Welcome, Lyndon and Rossana.

LYNDON NERI: Thank you, Grace, for having us.

ROSSANA HU: Hi, Grace.

GRACE LA: We're so delighted to host you all the way from China. And you coming to the GSD is such a treat for us. I always to begin our conversations just asking you to tell us how you got your start together. Give us a little bit of your personal story.

LYNDON NERI: Well, Rossana and I were friends, and we dated initially at Berkeley before we actually started our practice. So in many ways, personal relationship came first, and the idea of working together came next. But we never really planned to work together.

ROSSANA HU: Yeah. But actually, I would say that our initial encounter, even though we've known each other for many, many years in a church setting in the Bay Area, we've never really talked to each other or gotten to know each other. And it was really through architecture that we initiated the first conversation.

And I was seeking Lyndon's advice when I was applying to college. And I was thinking about architecture seriously. And then my sister said, oh, there's this guy at church who goes to Berkeley. He's a rising senior at Berkeley. And I was a senior in high school deciding what major to take.

And she said, why don't you talk to Lyndon? And that's really how we started talking, because for years we've known each other. We've seen each other. But I've never really talked to him.

GRACE LA: So then it was Berkeley, that connection, because you were starting, and then you were, of course, graduating. I'm assuming that during that time period, you then went off to the GSD directly or--

LYNDON NERI: No. In fact not. I worked in San Francisco for two years, but obviously when her sister asked me to advise, I had an ulterior motive because Rossana was choosing between many different other schools. And I don't believe Berkeley was really her top choice.

But then I figured that this would be a perfect avenue for me to have this personal relationship. So I brought all my drawings. And if you look at my drawings as an undergraduate, they were extremely artistic because I was an art major initially at Berkeley.

And of course, she was mesmerized, I think, initially by the work, by the drawing.

ROSSANA HU: Absolutely. With his drawings.

LYNDON NERI: And Rossana, in fact, asked me this question, which was kind of interesting to think back now. She said, Lyndon, I heard that architecture is a very hard profession. You hardly make money out of it. And I remember saying, well, you make something out of architecture, and you don't wait for architecture to do something for you.

GRACE LA: Fast forward, you both ended up doing graduate work in different places. And Lyndon, you at the GSD, and Rossana, you at Princeton, when did you decide then that Shanghai would be your base?

LYNDON NERI: That's a very good question, because we never really thought of Shanghai as our base. I was at the GSD, and I went to work for Michael Graves for 10 years, not really knowing that we would even want a practice. And Rossana eventually joined Michael's office, and it was a project that took me to Shanghai.

And both of us always had wanted our kids to grow up in a Chinese-speaking setting, because we thought it would be important for them to speak Chinese growing up, but we didn't really know how. So if you think back 15 years ago, you would think Hong Kong or Singapore. Ideally those would be safe places, or Taiwan.

But then initially it was me who was sent to Shanghai, and I told Michael's office at that time that if you were to bring me over, you need to bring my whole family. It was supposed to be just six weeks. And we were there for a project specifically.

And SARS came. That was 2003. And we couldn't leave the country. And that six weeks became three months. And the client got so used to us being there monitoring the project. And the project moved so fast that they realized maybe it was because of this decision that made it happen.

So that initial six weeks assignment turned into a year. And by that time it was over, Rossana and I decided that perhaps Shanghai would be a good place for us to experiment and to start our practice. And so we came back, sold our house. One of the most difficult part of my professional life was going to Michael and telling him that I was going to resign.

GRACE LA: I can imagine after being so long with a practice and then, of course, all of the risk that is inherent in starting your own practice and then again in another country, this is a big move for both of you. So then, Rossana, tell me, as you land now in Shanghai after this year that now becomes many years, describe, how have you been practicing now together as a partnership?

ROSSANA HU: I think like Lyndon said, Shanghai was never in the planning. It was never strategic Shanghai at the time. When we first went for Three on the Bund, the project that brought us there was not the place it is today. In fact, a lot of our neighbors in Princeton, I remember because we had three very young kids.

The third was only four months old when we went to Shanghai. A lot of our neighbors were asking us, what? You're taking the kids to Shanghai? How can you survive? And I remember saying to them, I think they have kids there, too.

During the first year, I think one of the deciding factor for us to decide to stay was one day we heard our kids speaking to each other in Chinese. And I said to Lyndon, we have to stay here for them to have that identity and that experience. So the practice for me, I think, it's extremely personal because my father is from Shanghai.

And so on the personal level, the first few years living and working in Shanghai, I felt like for the first time in my life, I understood my father because growing up, there were so many idiosyncrasies and strange things in him that I could never really fully understand and identify with.

And immediately, I think living and encountering and interacting with the Shanghainese, I felt like I saw a little bit of my father in everyone. And that was just very strange for me but deeply significant and meaningful. And then on top of it, I think working architecturally on a lot of the obsessions we've had over the years and issues that we're interested in with regard to identity and culture and how that is produced and signified by build work, it all came to fruition when we were working in China.

GRACE LA: So just to get a sense of the context of your firm, how many employees do you have now?

LYNDON NERI: Including all different satellite offices, I think we are at 110.

GRACE LA: 110.

LYNDON NERI: But that includes product designers, interior designers, graphic designers.

GRACE LA: Administrators.

LYNDON NERI: Administration. In China, you need a lot of administration, because a lot of them you have to do a lot of paperwork and also a lot of these convincing.

GRACE LA: And Design Republic separate from that.

ROSSANA HU: Separate. It's another 60.

GRACE LA: That's very helpful. One of the things that I think is very distinctive about the work, of course, actually there's already a lot of knowledge about this when one looks at your work. There's obviously interests in adaptive reuse, in the historic preservation aspect, with a very distinctive character, I think that both of you, in part.

What are the mechanics of the office? If you could tell us a little bit about how the office is structured and how you support each other.

LYNDON NERI: When we started the practice, it was naturally very difficult. People always think of China, and specifically Shanghai, as all these gleaming towers. And so naturally, when you said you're an architect in Shanghai, they go, of course, that makes a lot of sense.

But you have to remember, first, we both work for Michael Graves, and Michael Graves didn't really have that many towers. And Michael's pedagogy or aesthetic sensibility does not necessarily lend itself quite comfortably with the developers in China at that time.

So when we went in there, our experience didn't really help us. But what helped us was the notion of an interdisciplinary practice. So at Michael's office, we were taught to not just design architecture, but also interiors and product design and to a certain extent, graphics, and that was a total package.

So when we went to Shanghai, we didn't really have projects. So it was a perfect opportunity for us to just scramble and do whatever that was there. We did logos. We did menus for restaurants. We designed forks, spoons, chairs, whatever is needed. And the idea of having this idealized practice was thrown away.

I remember having an office, and Rossana said, Lyndon, this is great. It's nice, but we have three kids to feed. And so when reality sets in, I start scrambling because at Michael Graves, you have amazing projects, amazing clients, and you think it's easy. And no, it's not. You're put in a setting. And it's not even a place we know.

I mean, we both speak Chinese. So that's not a problem. We know Asia, but this is a different Asia, a different city that we're used to. And it was raw. People didn't really understand the Western sort of structure of how things were built, let alone the building process.

So if they pay you 20% of the fee that you had proposed, you should be happy. And so we started doing all these different things. And we have forgone the notion of the idealized practice. And so structurally, we start hiring people that have interdisciplinary background.

If you're good with furniture, we would hire you, and we would then make sure that you understand architecture when you come to our studio. If you're good with interiors, you better understand who designed this piece of furniture and also the architect that designed the building that you're designing within. And of course, the architect with a big A, we would tell them, look, this is not how it works, otherwise we won't survive.

GRACE LA: So in those early days, did you separate, for example, Lyndon will handle this kind of client and Rossana will handle that kind of client? How were you dividing the work?

ROSSANA HU: I think a lot of things in the practice, from the very beginning, was disorganized and still is today, to the point that we've never really sat down and written our job description, or the organizational chart never really includes us, because, of course, we're at the top because this is our firm.

But we have never sat down and defined our roles. Never. And we get this question a lot, but it's really quite fluid. And I think it only works because we are a couple, and that we fully trust each other.

LYNDON NERI: But obviously, there are natural instincts between the two of us. I tend to draw a lot. Rossana tend to think. So Rossana used the thinking process to distill ideas, and I would just keep drawing and drawing because I would use the intuitive understanding of architecture to express my ideas.

So naturally, during schematic, I would draw, draw, draw, draw. And then Rossana would like by that time design development processes over, I'm like, what happened, Rossana? Most of the things are gone. And then I would jump in again during construction document and try to manipulate the whole process and bring in some of the details that I want.

But there's always that constant dialogue. She's also very logical. Rossana is also extremely systematic. When she sets up meetings, she's always there on time. If I show up in office, the people would be very happy. I don't like to have set time. So I would just go into the office and I'm like, I'm feeling this.

So Team A, come now. See me. Team B, I can't see you until two days later. So we work well that way because when I can't meet them, Rossana is like, Lyndon, you can't have people waiting in line for you. You're sounding like a Prima Donna. I was like, I'm not. I just don't have an idea, otherwise, I'll be a waste of my time.

And then Rossana would actually sit there with them and distill the ideas that's being presented. And so it's a great combination. There's a difference between public relation, and we never really hire a public relation practice. People always ask us, do you have a strong PR firm. We're like, not really. And we just got lucky, I think with the place we were in and the platform that was given to us.

I'm naturally a survivor. So I panic when we don't have projects. I scramble a lot and try to make sure that we have enough projects and that the cash flow is good for at least a year. Rossana is just very consistent in terms of how the practice is perceived, both locally and globally.

GRACE LA: So because we have both of you here, Rossana, do you agree with this characterization?

ROSSANA HU: Yeah, I do agree, but I do want to add a few of my own insight to this. I think like I said, professionally, we've never really defined our roles, but the kind of personal characteristics and our personalities naturally come through when there are so many things that needs to be taken care of.

And in the office, we're always fighting fires. And whoever is good at the thing that needs to be done goes and do it. And I would say, in the design process, like Lyndon said, I think he's very strong schematically, and he's always coming up with ideas.

Even during construction, he's wanting to change things. So he's the additive one, and I'm the one that comes in and edits. I'm always telling him, yeah, stop now. We have more ideas than we can handle. And I think I'm pretty good at editing and selecting what is important and what is appropriate.

GRACE LA: That sounds a very complimentary relationship in many regards and an absolutely functional one. Let's turn to the question of Shanghai. Let's say a couple of years in and you're finding yourself doing all these multidisciplinary things and you have the model of Michael Graves office, to some degree, recognizing other modes of design practice.

When is it that you decided that the furniture and product design and lighting would become a bigger component?

ROSSANA HU: Again, that wasn't decided by us. It wasn't like we woke up one day and said, OK, we're going to start a product design department, and we're going to go out there and seek commissions from brands. It all just happened.

It started, I would say, happening immediately with Three on the Bund, which we worked on for Michael Graves, and then our first few projects. So they were interior projects. We needed to specify furniture. The imported furniture brands were not yet on sale in China.

So either we wait six, seven months, or we design something, go to a nearby factory, get them done, and then put it in our projects. And so with that, we came up with, I think, a really thick portfolio, I think within a few years of collections of lights and accessories and tables and chairs.

And so when we started, I think initially-- because we have this other company called Design Republic, and that company works with a lot of imported furniture brands. That relationship, they come to our office, and they see what we've designed for a lot of our projects, our portfolio of products. They became really interested, and different brands wanted to take different pieces, and we just allowed them.

And this is after having worked with factories in China for several years and always not satisfied with their production. And I remember immediately working with either an Italian brand or De La Espada, their factory was in Portugal. Seeing their production ability and the quality that came out of those factories, we were immediately, I think, mesmerized and felt like, OK, even though we have this great laboratory in China that can help us produce many things, but we need it for our furnitures and lighting, our product design to first be manufactured outside so that people see the highest quality that can come out of these factories.

LYNDON NERI: But it was also a way to control the design process, because when we started the practice, we realized all the reputation of China and its bad construction abilities were true. And you realize very quickly that there's no way you can control the process.

And how do you do this? You help specify, but if the furniture is specifying are too expensive and they're not on sale or it will take you seven or eight months to even come, we realized, well, why don't we just custom made furniture and consultants? That term was a very foreign thing in China at that time, or at least 15 years ago.

And so you can't really find graphic designers. You can't find acoustical engineers. Yes, you can find structural engineers because of all the high rises that were being built. But product design, all these were relatively new, or there were people would be doing product design. They'd be doing phones or car design.

And so we took that opportunity and said to ourselves, well, if we start designing all these, it will help our interior. It will help all our architecture. We should just design the door handle. We should just design the door. We should design the window, very similar to leverage, actually now when I think about it.

And to a point where when we start designing all these things, and people often say, well, Lyndon and Rossana, you guys are very influenced by Carlo Scarpa and all that, but it was out of necessity. And it created, at least for our interior project, a certain language.

And people realized, wow, there's a certain tactility to it. There's a certain materiality to a lot of the things you're doing. But when people can't afford new projects or new buildings, new building materials, we start saying, why don't we just use recycled wood, recycled brick, because they're relatively free, and people were throwing them away for free?

And obviously when you suggest that to the clients, they're like, wow, this is perfect. All you need to do is get a truck, load of bricks, and truck load of recycled wood. And in many ways, that kind of became our aesthetic. But I think it's precisely because of the lay of the land where we are.

And we decided, you know what? Why don't we just celebrate this roughness? Because as a Japanese contractor, we're doing a number of projects in Japan right now. And trust me, when you ask Japanese contractors to do rough bricks, they're like, you can't do this. They'll clean it up, or they'll paint over it.

It's actually difficult because they're just not used to it. To them, that's just not quality. It's similar to a Chinese contractor that's changing now, but to ask them to do this really refined detail is almost impossible. So obviously we have a lot of obsessions and ideology, but I think naturally the context where we practice kind of molded how the practice became.

ROSSANA HU: And the time, I just want to add that 13, 14 years ago in Shanghai, customization was still very easily accessible. I think before Shanghai, we were working in the US, and customization was expensive and regarded as only for the rich.

I remember when I first went to Shanghai, and people were getting dresses made because tailors were quite inexpensive. So it's accessible. But then I remember wanting to buy a sweater in a store. And I had a domestic help who was with me. And I remember she telling me, oh, why are you buying this in a store when you can have it made?

You can have someone knit it for you to the style and the exact material that you want for a fraction of the cost. And I was thinking what? Customization was regarded as cheaper than the ready made, which was shocking to us. And it was the same on construction site.

If we want to handle, it was cheaper for them to make it than for us to get it from catalog. And that was unthinkable. And it's just amazing for us, and we love that.

GRACE LA: I think that's fascinating, and I think that it's the ability to see and leverage that kind of context, which again, is highly unusual because you are absolutely right. In the States or in London, let's say you have to specify these products. And every time you hear the word "custom", it usually means double, triple, quadruple the price.

But it sounds to me like you are finding the sweet spot between having those things made directly for the projects. But then you've leveraged that into Design Republic, which follows along the lines of what Aalto has done in the past, or Ben Thompson's office with Design Research Brand or Terence Conran.

There are lots of folks that have, let's say, made this trajectory. Now, some of them don't last. They die out. So how are you structuring that? Because I do think that's a very interesting component. And you're absolutely right that you see the quality of those things that you're thinking about, the tactility of them in the spaces. And so I do think it's important to keep it alive. So how will you manage that in the practice?

LYNDON NERI: Well, when you talk about Design Republic, it's a completely different company, different business. We have a different group of people. Aside from Rossana and I, we're the only consistent people for both practice. Design Republic is really not a practice. It's really a retail platform, a retail store.

Design Republic is a lot of other projects like extending into hotels and other means. But the idea of making I think is actually interesting to us, because now we're getting a lot of projects in Europe and recently in the US. And all of them wants this same aesthetic or the same sort of customization, and we're learning it the hard way.

Our London office, for instance, is struggling because obviously it's expensive. So many of our clients are saying, can we ship all these details from China? And I'm not so sure if it's sustainable. We're still kind of figuring it out.

GRACE LA: Are you doing that then? Are you shipping things from China?

LYNDON NERI: We have.

ROSSANA HU: Not only that, we've made an entire mockup for our hotel. We did an--

GRACE LA: Entire room.

ROSSANA HU: --in China.

GRACE LA: And you move it over there.

ROSSANA HU: No, no, no. We just had to bring the client to China to look at the project. So the mockup was actually done for our hotel in London in Shanghai.

LYNDON NERI: Yeah. So for instance, in London, it would cost you a half a million pound to do a mock up room. And in China, that same detailed specification, everything was done for \$80,000. So it's pretty crazy.

GRACE LA: And client can fly first class to see it.

ROSSANA HU: Exactly.

LYNDON NERI: The client came, and they had a vacation. And they stayed for three nights, and they were completely blown away because they were saying, wow, this is amazing. So they decided that all the hotel room units will be then specified or made in China and shipped to London. Obviously the difficulty is the tax. And with Brexit coming, that's a whole different story.

GRACE LA: Does this lend itself to certain kinds of modular thinking? With the understanding of patterns and repetitive units that would be shipped, how is it affecting the practice in your thinking?

ROSSANA HU: We have offered this solution to a lot of our clients outside of China-- the ability to not only design but produce. And that's something I think a lot of architects in the West don't enjoy. We actually have a pretty big team that can go out and source any object you want to be made in China.

And we've now even been able to produce products for brands that are in Europe. But when it comes to architecture, I think not yet on a large scale for projects outside of China, but what we have done is for example, for Stellar Works, it's a furniture brand that we are the creative director of.

And they go to a lot of fairs and design shows. And for most of the ones that we have designed the installation for, they were made in China and then shipped to different locations that they're in. And then we had a different experience with Stockholm, where an installation design was designed with the same kind of care for detail and materiality. And then the Swedish made it there. And we walked into this show in Stockholm, and London was really upset.

GRACE LA: I read about this. And I hear this. So the word on the street is that you said, Lyndon, we came from China and thought it would be better built in Scandinavia. But then we realized that when you only get four or five days to construct a building, you have also created a Chinese production condition.

ROSSANA HU: It was worse.

GRACE LA: Tell me about that because I thought that that was a remarkable moment when you realized that, OK, things are not as they might be, but tell us.

LYNDON NERI: I also have a very bad temper compared to Rossana. That's also the one thing that complements the practice. Rossana is really calm, and I'm just this crazy emotional individual. We were shocked. We had an associate initially fly to Stockholm, and we had-- and for those that have just read in this zine many people go over.

They're just a bunch of Prima Donna. They probably don't have drawings. They're probably not very clear. They probably think they could just wing it. We have a set of drawings that was about 50-page thick, just for this installation. That's how much we cared about quality control.

And we sent someone over a week before, and she would constantly write me. She goes, Lyndon, we're in trouble. They really don't understand, and they don't really care because to them, it's just an installation, and things were not aligned. Wooden stud had stickers of the brand of the wood, and they didn't even remove it, and they just stained over it.

So naturally when you remove the sticker, there would be polka dot moment in this whole installation. So we panicked. Nails would be coming. I mean, it was seriously bad. I think it has to do with the fact that they were given limited time, and if they were allowed to build outside, probably it would be easier.

So we were shocked. And so I probably made some comments that I shouldn't because it was all over the press. And I felt really bad about it. And so I think that's the challenge we deal with right now. There's a lot of requests for us to do projects in Europe. In fact, we are working on close to eight, nine projects in Europe right now. And that's the challenge. We're trying to deal with, how do you make buildings in those contexts?

GRACE LA: Especially when your own context of Shanghai and where you got your start, the method by which has been very close one, where you're watching things directly. So now that things are from afar, how do you envision structuring that? Are you sending associates from your office to those places to watch over them?

LYNDON NERI: We actually now call them satellite offices because initially, when we won a competition in London about eight years ago, we were required to open an office to make sure that that project goes through. So we opened an office, and that office grew to about eight people.

But we realized that that was really not working because people would be flying in and out. So we've decided that the idea of having a satellite office might work. So we have one person now in Paris, two in London, one in Milan, and the possibility of another one in Stockholm.

ROSSANA HU: One in Brussels.

LYNDON NERI: Yeah, one in Brussels. And there's that possibility of now sending someone to LA and one in New York.

GRACE LA: OK. So this is fascinating because rather than set up, let's say, an office with all of the infrastructure that's required, you're sending single people out, like Sputnik, into different cities where you might be working. And then they are always considering still Shanghai their base. Am I understanding correctly?

ROSSANA HU: Absolutely. Their team is in--

GRACE LA: Shanghai. And it's a single person.

ROSSANA HU: And it's not always us sending them out. Again, it's very fluid. We have a lot of foreigners who are attracted to Shanghai who are attracted to our office. They leave their hometown. They move from Milan to Shanghai. They stay there for sometimes close to 10 years. They learn the language, and then they decide, I've had enough.

I need to go home. So it's either Paris. So we have someone from Paris who decided that they need to go back to Paris. We have someone who decided that they need to go back to Milan. But they're very-- first of all, they're very senior. They're an integral part of their practice. They have a big team who they work very well with, and they don't want to leave their projects, but they want to go home.

And I said to Lyndon, in this day and age, why should locality control where you work and who can work for you? And why not we just let them go home and live in Milan but they continue to act as if they're in Shanghai? And it's actually worked out really well.

LYNDON NERI: So when we have our London outpost, it's been what now, eight years? And it was built like a traditional practice, an extension of the Shanghai office. But they started having their own finance, their own HR, and all that, but that didn't really quite work because the client wants to see me or Rossana.

And so no matter how senior an individual is within that practice, it became very hard. And they have to start marketing. They have to start addressing PR issues and HR issues. And we decided that was so-- last year actually, we decided, why don't we just break that team? You go back to your respective home.

Obviously, Brexit kind of expedited that whole process. And it's actually working. And we would just say, look, if you can come back to the home base once every four months or once every six months, that would be ideal because we have new projects.

And also at the same time, you will be seeing fresh things, and you can inject newness because we're really interested in not be stuck with what we're doing and constantly pushing the boundary of architecture. So maybe by sending people out, they will see other things, and they will also start challenging me and Rossana, and that's happening.

And we were just observing that even in the US, we have about 40 odd people that have left and worked for many different practices. So retaining talents, now that we're older, we're starting to realize maybe that should be a priority because for the longest time, we're so ideal.

And we're like, look, you come here for three years, five years. You learn something. It's fine. You do whatever you want to do. We have many practices in Shanghai now. If you go to Shanghai, there's a lot of former Neri&Hu, and a lot of them are doing very well.

And we start saying, some of these people that have worked with us for a long time, they know us. They worked with us. We should be able to give them a life. If they don't want to start their own practice, we should give them a particular path or a plan that they can also work within that system. And it's actually kind of working out well.

ROSSANA HU: And that becomes a business decision and strategy and problem. If it's a design practice like ours, at which point do you start to embrace partners and associates? And because we're not going to be here forever. And then what happens to that business when you're no longer able to work like you're used to?

We actually had this conversation very recently about what happens in 20 years and 30 years, because it's based on this atelier and very personal studio kind of model. It's not sustainable, frankly. So unless you want to go corporate, which we also don't want to do, so what happens to your future?

LYNDON NERI: We're always experimenting not just with our architecture but the business model. So even this idea of having a satellite office is an experiment on our end. And I think we as architects underestimate-- or at least for me, we always think, as long as I'm a good designer, they'll come after me. They'll do whatever it takes to make it work.

I think that's delusional on our end, and I'm realizing to the fact that there are a lot of practical issues that we have to resolve.

GRACE LA: So it seems like being creative with the logistics of the project, which essentially underpin and support the work that you want to do. We've seen a lot of practices at a certain size and a certain kind of scale of work that they do very successfully. Then the minute they bump up things like an octopus start to get a little bit out of control. And you see quality becoming very volatile.

So now with let's say, locations, and different people and a lot more managerial complexity, how do you keep the quality high?

LYNDON NERI: I have to say we have-- and I have to give him credit for this. We hired Jerry Del Fierro, who's our managing director, and I'm going to make this very clear. He's very good at making sure all these logistics work. I think for Rosanne and I to be able to teach, to be able to travel in different places, we have someone who we trust and who we worked with for many years.

He's been with us for over 10 years now. In many ways, he cultivated this culture within the practice that for every Prima Donna designer that you hire, Lyndon, which I you're fascinated with their mind and their way of thinking, I need a project manager to go with it.

And initially I sort of balked at that idea. And I'm like, you're crazy. This is corporate. But he's saying, no, this can work. But we need that balance. We need someone to make sure that the project goes in time. We want to make sure that both Rosanne and your idea actually gets built, that we don't get sued and all this.

So I think-- and with the advent of technology we call WeChat in China. Actually, it's an amazing way. We just don't sleep. That's a problem. Last night, for instance, just when I was about to sleep, obviously Paris and Milan is much later. And so they are writing us and sending us images.

And by the time we're waking up, Shanghai is about to sleep. So it's good because it's 24 hours constant production. But at the same time, I think the people and the mindset and the structure, we're still experimenting, Grace. So I'm not even sure if this is going to work. We'll see.

ROSSANA HU: With these different kind of satellite personnels who are in different parts of the world with the time zone problem, we're able to actually be much more efficient. They can meet the client in the morning or at night, and then they can tell the Shanghai office what they want.

And by the time they wake up in Paris, they can bring a full set of drawings to the client. And they're like, wow, you've turned this overnight. The production of that creativity is becoming very efficient.

GRACE LA: That's fascinating. The time zones would actually facilitate efficiency. I think that's very fascinating. Let's turn now to a question about the adaptive reuse projects that you've become so well known for and the really rich interior spaces. And in many ways, at the early start, of course, it was a good deal of interior design work before the building projects.

I would say that in terms of the overall discipline, we are finding that interiors are actually the part that are least considered, strangely, even though as architects and designers, we appreciate them so much. Somehow in the trajectory of the fast pace of building and construction, the interior often is neglected.

So I'd love for you to talk about this because I've also understood this interior work somehow resists diagrammatic sensibilities, which I believe you've talked about in some of your lectures. And I think that that's an interesting conversation to have.

LYNDON NERI: It's interesting you should phrase it or put it within that light, because I think we always like to have architects designing our interiors and have interior design architecture. And what was always difficult for interior designers that we have hired is the understanding of a diagram.

First and foremost, we're architects. So I think a lot of our interiors, even though from an architectural point of view, it's considered rich, from an interior point of view, we're considered cold. A lot of our hotels are actually considered just not warm enough. In fact, we've lost so many projects.

When we opened Water House, we lost three projects because the clients were just shocked or not so much the client, but many of the people that walked in, a lot of architects love it because diagrammatically, it was very strong. So we're known as interior designers with an architectural understanding.

There's always a space component to what we're trying to do, and we don't want to lose that. We want to make sure that that balance continues. But if you ask us, what would your focus be more, obviously the diagram is far more important than the tactility. So we would compromise more on the sensibility and the touchy feely, especially if the diagram is not clear.

ROSSANA HU: The idea of interiority is very important for us. Theorizing and working with concepts that we use the architectural idea into the experience of movement and flow, all that for us is the meaning of architecture. It's definitely not just the object.

LYNDON NERI: So if you look at Alvar Aalto Sanitarium, for instance, wherein all the objects are designed and even the composition of beds, how it looks out, or even Eileen Gray's 1027, which I managed to see in Nice. The notion of interiority is very much an architectural strategy.

GRACE LA: I think that one of the struggles of the newer generation, because everyone has been moving to their corners of these sub-disciplines, it will be interesting to see if those who are actually interested in all these corners can find ways to synthesize and integrate.

And so I think that's one of the things that's amazing about the work that you are producing is that it spans this spectrum. But I think this is an interesting thing, and I think that one shouldn't assume that all of our students that we're training nowadays actually have that interest, because I think now many students are thinking at such large scales that the interior is actually the one realm that is now neglected more than anything.

LYNDON NERI: So true.

GRACE LA: Which is strange because of course, appreciate the interior.

LYNDON NERI: Yeah. I had a conversation with David Chipperfield once, and David said something which was very interesting, David, because Lyndon, don't give up your interior practice. People don't really pay for architecture. People pay for interiors.

And it was an epiphany for me when he said that. And it's to a certain extent true. You go to a building, only architects look and goes, wow, that's an amazing facade. But when you go in, that's when you're like, OK, this is really worth it. That's marble, that thick carpet. That's how people appreciate value.

GRACE LA: It's amazing always to see what they'll spend on a couch, but they'll fight you on the fee, but they'll spend a lot of money on the couch.

LYNDON NERI: But for instance, Kengo Kuma, people like John Pawson, people like Studio Mumbai, they're very conscious about their interiors, very specific.

GRACE LA: I'd like to turn attention to the question of the villages within which you've worked. And I am struck by your comments about the rapid urbanization that is occurring all over China and the de-population of some of the more rural areas, and the way that you are finding modes to work in some of these remote places but also thinking about their most prosaic needs.

For example, how do you finance this? What is the program? And this is a very unusual way of working where the architect is actually coming up with solutions or ideas to manage the whole of the process, not just the design work. Tell us a little bit about that aspect of the work that you've been doing.

LYNDON NERI: For many years now, there are many people or many potential clients that have come up to us and says, would you be interested in working outside of the city? Partially because we were so busy, we never really took on those projects up until maybe five years ago.

We started to make a conscious effort because we realized that 80% of China's cultural relics are actually outside of the city, and yet 80% of the people are flocking into major cities in China, obviously, for work, and they're leaving their children with their grandparents to take care of.

And they probably go back to the village once a month or once a year during Chinese New Year. So this is creating a highly dysfunctional, not just family structure, but societal problem. And so Rossana and I decided, well, as an architect, it's not just about fees. It's not just about being able to do the most glamorous project.

We started to think to ourselves, how can we actually be part or be a catalyst of this whole movement, because everyone realized the need to revitalize rural villages? Obviously, it's a lot harder because most of the time you're given relics, or you're given places that are nice and exquisite, but you don't really have the craftsmen because a lot of them have left and gone to the city.

Bricklayers have become garbage collectors or drivers because in the city they make more money, and yet they're really not happy because they're not good at what they do. And so to attract some of these guys to come back one and to work with government or private developers and giving them program because they don't really know what to do with it.

Is it a hotel? Is it a community center? So as architects, we have to then become part of that process, and it takes time. But Rossana and I have been quite lucky in the past, I'd say five years, to be able to have a receptive local government institution and private developers that are actually quite farsighted in understanding the need for bringing this rural villages back to life.

GRACE LA: And so when you do partner with a developer, can you tell us about that structure?

LYNDON NERI: They would come to us. And sometimes they don't really know what to do. They have the land. They're usually from that village. And they're attracted with our adaptive reuse projects like Water House, Design Republic. And the first thing they think of is, it's cheaper. It's not because they like it or they believe in it.

There's no such thing as social conviction that we have to save old buildings. No. They just think that we should hire Neri and Hu because they know how to reuse buildings and build cheap materials, and it's definitely cheaper. And so that educational process is actually a very difficult one.

And obviously we're saying, by maintaining this old building, it might not necessarily be cheaper initially, but it will in the long run, and that it's also a sustainable approach. And this is a responsibility that you also have to take. And that takes a while. But that journey oftentimes takes about three to four months. Sometimes we give them readings.

We would dine with them and make sure they come and educated, and partially because of their excitement with what we're doing, with our attitude, eventually and obviously with the government it made a lot of sense. I mean, I think the government is making a conscious effort to eradicate this whole idea that China doesn't care about the environment.

With that, we would then go to the government and make sure-- we've actually hired two people specifically just to navigate this sort of complexity. So they would tell the government, look, maybe you want to grant the private developer a bigger FAR, for instance, or the possibility of granting them some funds to build a communal space for the community.

And so it's a win-win situation for everyone. Initially, it might be a shock to these developers that actually what we're proposing will be more expensive than what they had conceived. But by making the government be more responsible, by helping developers, the developers then feel like they're more comfortable with the program we're proposing.

GRACE LA: So, Rossana, when I think of this structure that Lyndon is describing, I'm curious about your thoughts on how the office can manage this satellite of those kinds of issues. Again, they're much more complex and layered because it sounds like you have to do an education process, and I'm guessing that the readings are coming from Rossana.

[LAUGHTER]

Am I right? I mean, I sense that you have a very strong literary sensibility, and I don't think it's many websites that you attend to these days that are quoting from wonderful writers and philosophers. And just having had a chance to get to know you, it seems like this is coming from you. Am I right?

ROSSANA HU: Well I think the desire to educate our clients, I mean, that came from the beginning because we realized a lot of clients that come to us, first of all, they come from misguided expectations that maybe they've heard a talk, or they've seen some images, and then they come to us and not knowing architecture too much, and they have their idea of their French chateau that they want to build.

And they think, oh, you guys are famous. Why don't you build my French chateau? But it's actually, I have to give Lyndon credit. He's the one that wants to change our client. He's the one that actually, when someone comes to him wanting us to build and design their French Chateau, he's the one that sits down with them and tries to tell them that what you really want is not a French chateau. What you really want is a concrete box.

GRACE LA: That's a good trick.

ROSSANA HU: And he's the one that explains to them that a concrete box is actually the French chateau. And I'm the one who I've always told Lyndon-- and it's also my management style. And I tell Lyndon, you can't really change people. If people want something, if that something isn't what we can offer, I think they should go somewhere else.

But I think Lyndon is the one that made me think and now believe that we actually can persuade people. He's very persuasive, and I'm not.

LYNDON NERI: We have to give credit to a lot of our associate, what we call associate directors and senior associate. I think the last 14 years we've cultivated maybe about 20 individuals that are quite strong. Obviously, they understand the culture of what the practice is all about. Many of them have gone to different places as part of that satellite experimentation. And I think they're quite persuasive themselves.

GRACE LA: Rossana, Lyndon, thank you so much for, first of all, traveling all the way to teach with us and for spending the morning with us.

LYNDON NERI: Thank you, Grace.

ROSSANA HU: Thank you. It was really enjoyable.

[BRIGHT MUSIC]

GRACE LA:

I'm Grace La, and you've been listening to *Talking Practice* from the practice platform of Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. Today's episode was produced by Ronee Saroff and edited by Maggie Janik. Platform research and support was provided by Jehanne Rowe and sound engineering by Jeffrey Vilade of Harvard University's Media Production Center.

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