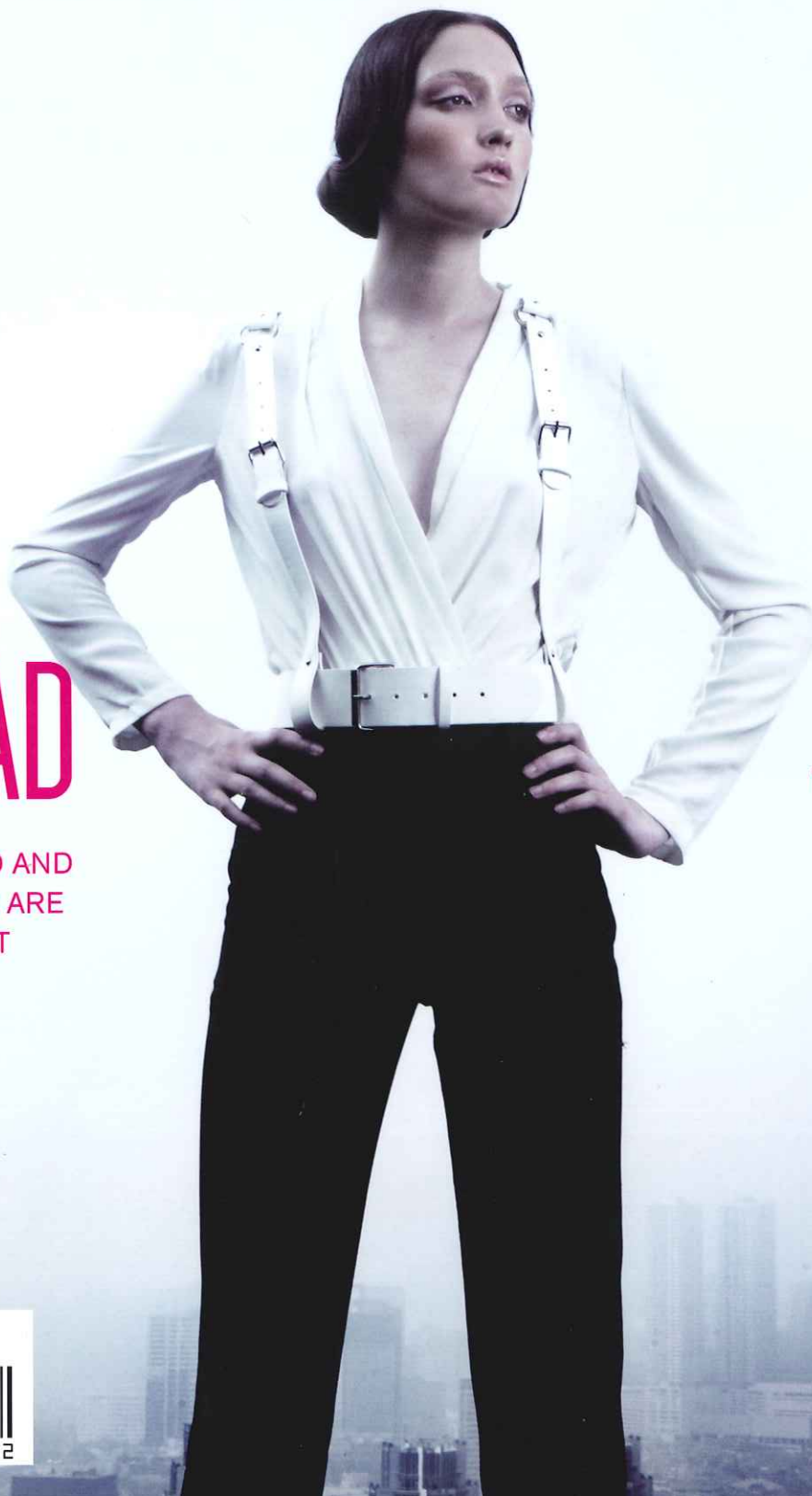


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DESIGN / FASHION / ARCHITECTURE / ART / CULTURE

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New Blossom

FRENCH DESIGNER THOMAS DARIEL LOOKS TO HISTORY AND HOME TO RESTORE A CENTURY-OLD COMPOUND IN A CHINESE CANAL TOWN.

WORDS ANDREA FENN

A French-designed boutique hotel in the historical centre of a Chinese canal town, Blossom Hill explores the relation between past and present, East and West, using chromatic experiments as its main form of expression.

The hotel is situated in touristy Zhouzhuang, near Shanghai, in a late-Qing Dynasty complex that previously consisted of a teahouse, a museum, a guesthouse and an abandoned section. According to the designer behind the project, Dariel Studio's 30-year-old founder Thomas Dariel, revamping the space required one year and numerous interventions.

"While respecting the heritage of the structure, we had to create a space where at least 20 to 40 people can live inside at the same time," he says. "[Everything] is made of wood and this brought limitations, especially in such a humid city where winters are fiercely cold and summers very wet and hot."

To modernise the structure, Dariel created a sewer while preserving the ancient stone ground tiles, removing them one by one before digging 80cm into the earth, arranging the pipes and laying them back. He also added soundproof panels inside the paper-thin walls and ceilings to enhance the privacy in the rooms. Finally, the outer structure was reinforced with cement columns and the ground level was evened out throughout the whole complex.

The result of this imposing renovation is a structure where heritage is conserved yet fused with contemporary elements, as ancient and modern references alternate seamlessly in the decor.

The concept combines Asian-style minimalism with bold use of colours, a recipe Dariel himself admits is borrowed from Hong Kong fashion house Shanghai Tang. Traditional Jingdezhen porcelain is contrasted against bright yellow backgrounds in herbalist cabinets, while a coat of fluorescent acrylic paint gives the Ming Dynasty-style chairs in the lounge an edgier flair.

Dariel enriched the design with a handful of personal cameos, like the lamps in the meeting room, which he designed using the thatched reeds of traditional cricket cages. Besides, the bar of the restaurant has a porcelain tile pattern directly inspired to his grandmother's Parisian kitchen.

Each room juxtaposes oak furniture with a specific tint, in what Dariel conceived as a journey across seasons and epochs. "We divided the buildings into four seasons, from wintery blue to summery orange, so that the guest's visit throughout the hotel is a circle that reflects the passing of time," he says. Colour then becomes the ideal way to blend tradition with nuances of modernity. darielstudio.com



