

design anthology

DESIGN

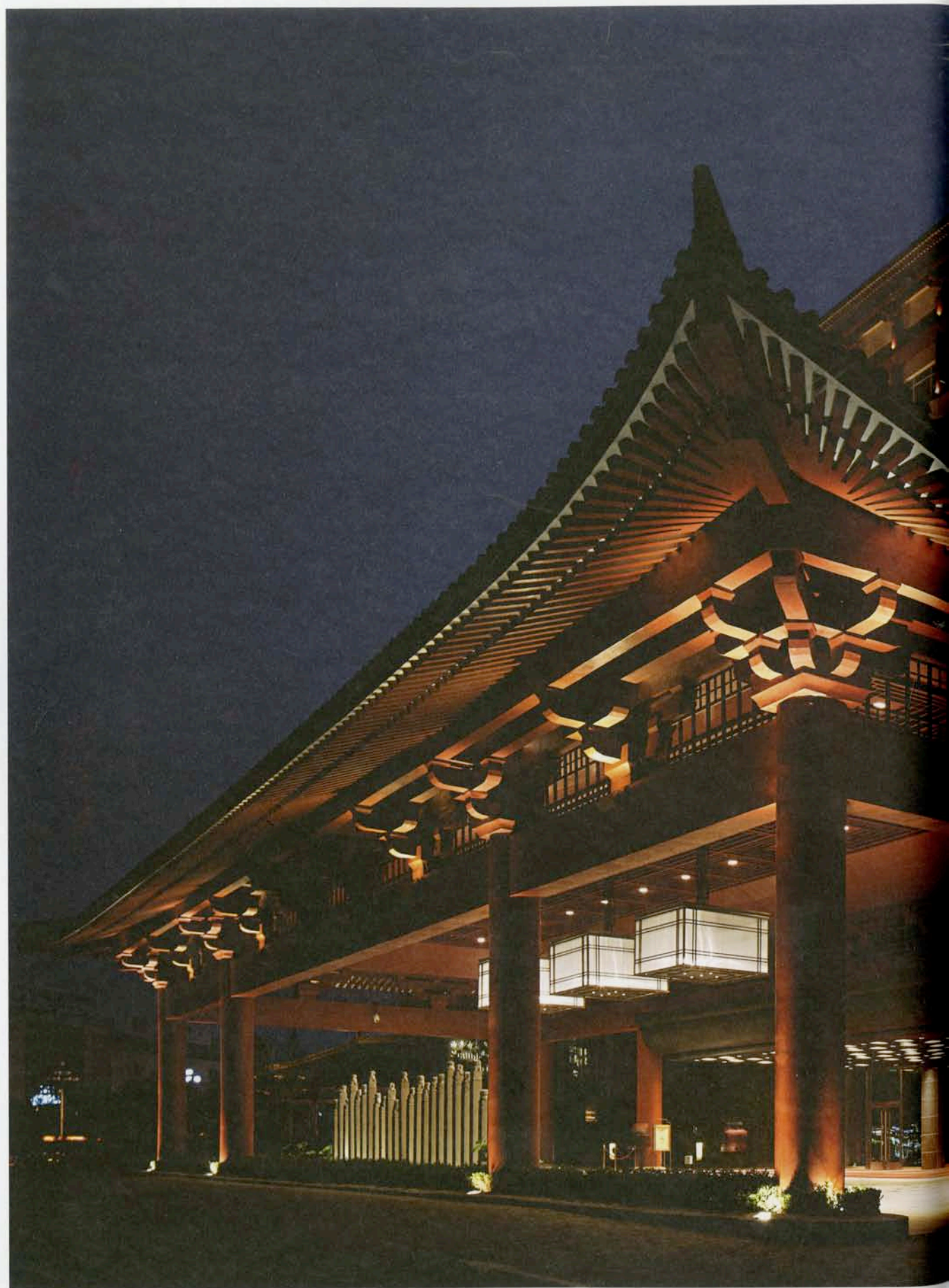
/ INTERIORS

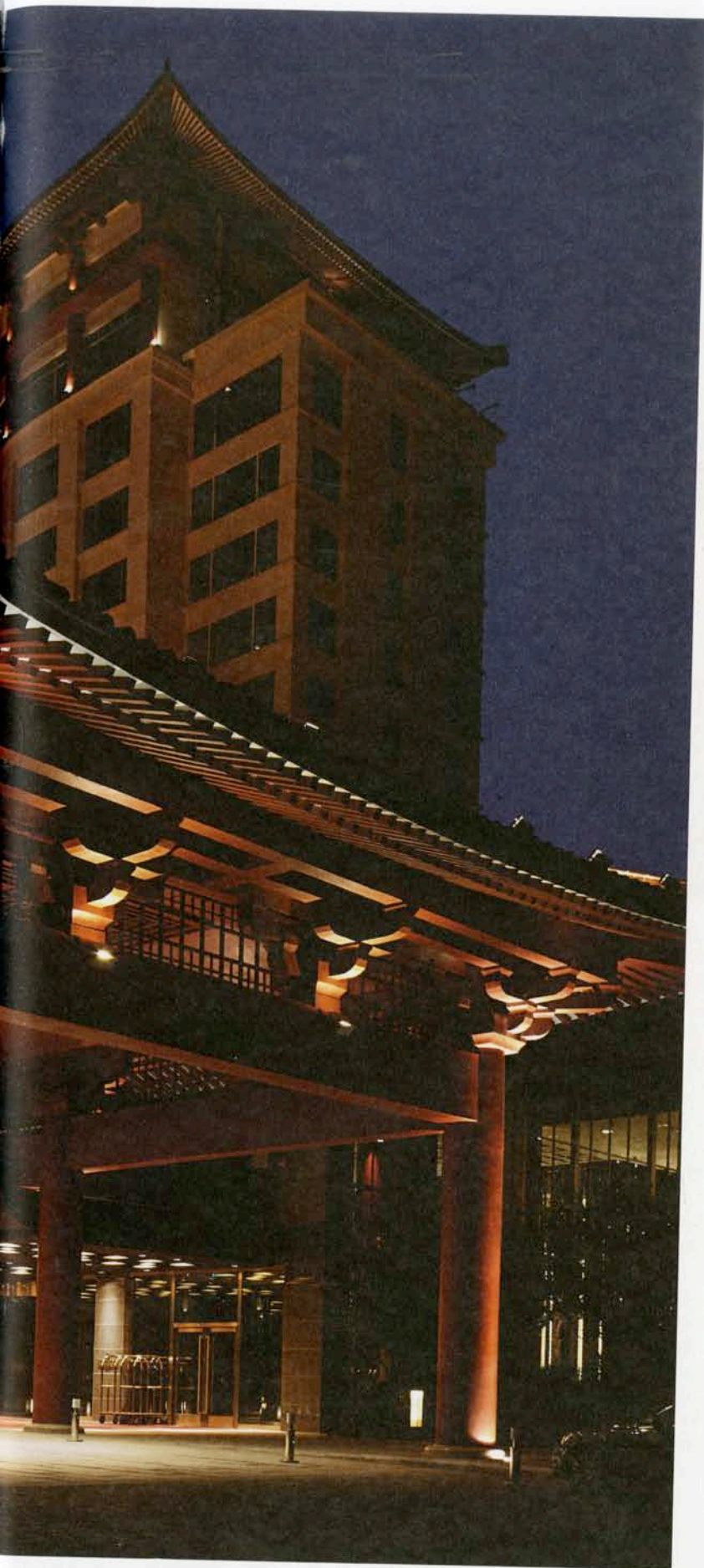
/ ARCHITECTURE

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ISSUE 2





Humble Luxury

Images / Chester Ong, courtesy of AB Concept



Ed Ng, co-founder of AB Concept

Since its launch in 1989, Hong Kong-based design firm AB Concept has grown to become one of the most respected boutique firms in the region. Specialising in high-end residential and hospitality interiors, their projects span the Asia-Pacific region, the Middle East and Europe. The firm's staff of 70 is spread across Hong Kong and Bangkok, and is split into teams that specialise in disciplines such as graphic design, furniture design and 3D rendering. It was with regard to their latest award-winning project, the Shangri-la Qufu (for which they just picked up the Hospitality Design Award for Best Public Space), that we spoke with co-founder Ed Ng.

Design Anthology: AB Concept specialises in five-star hotels and high-end residential projects, so you must be very familiar with the concept of luxury and what that means to different people. How do you personally define luxury?

Ed Ng: I think next to 'luxury' I almost want to put an equals sign and then the word 'comfort'. I think as I'm getting older this becomes more important to me personally, even with clothing. I want something super-comfortable, made from fine materials. The look is less important, but I think if something looks comfortable

you'll feel comfortable. That's a simple definition for me.

Luxury is really not about how much money you spend on something. And the more we engage with luxury projects and top-tier owners, the more we realise that they don't go for brands. They don't care about brands. If something is perceived as good quality, then they don't care about the price tag. So for us it's about the comfort factor, and providing clients with a comfort zone. Are you going to be comfortable on that piece of furniture? Are you comfortable with that painting? Whatever. It just needs to provide you with a sense of comfort.

This project is not your first collaboration with the Shangri-la hotel group, but what was your first reaction when they approached you to design a hotel in such a historically and culturally significant city as Qufu?

The first word that comes to mind is 'destiny'. I actually visited Qufu when I was a university student. I didn't plan for it. I was on a backpacking tour of China in the 80s and actually I was supposed to take the train from Shanghai to Qingdao, but then a bunch of other students told me they'd get off at the next train station. So I asked where they were going. They said 'Qufu', and I asked, 'What is Qufu?' They told me it was the birthplace of Confucius, and they wanted to visit. I thought it sounded interesting, so I joined them. I spent a whole day there.

So when Shangri-la called me, because the chairman felt we had the right vibe to design the public spaces for a hotel in Qufu, I replied 'Yes, I know Qufu', and they were actually quite surprised. They thought I was such a scholar (*laughs*), but really it was by chance.

Also, coincidentally, when I mentioned to Terrance (Terrance Ngan, the co-founder of AB Concept) about the project, he told me that it was where his ancestors originally came from. His direct ancestor, Yan Hui, was a disciple of Confucius, the most beloved one, whose name everyone knows.

So after all this, we felt we must do the project.

AB Concept is known for creating a strong narrative that underpins the design concept. How did that process start with the Shangri-la Qufu?

The strongest gut feeling I got about this project was the concept of humble luxury. Shangri-la is known as a luxury brand, but a 'bling bling' style luxury didn't seem to fit in this city. Confucius was all about being humble. His philosophy was about integrity, respect and harmony. So I thought that we should try to combine the aspects of humility and luxury. We didn't want the design to be loud, but it had to make a statement to this ancient city, and it had to have the luxury to meet today's hospitality standards. So that was our challenge. How to refrain from being a common, 'bling bling' style luxury.

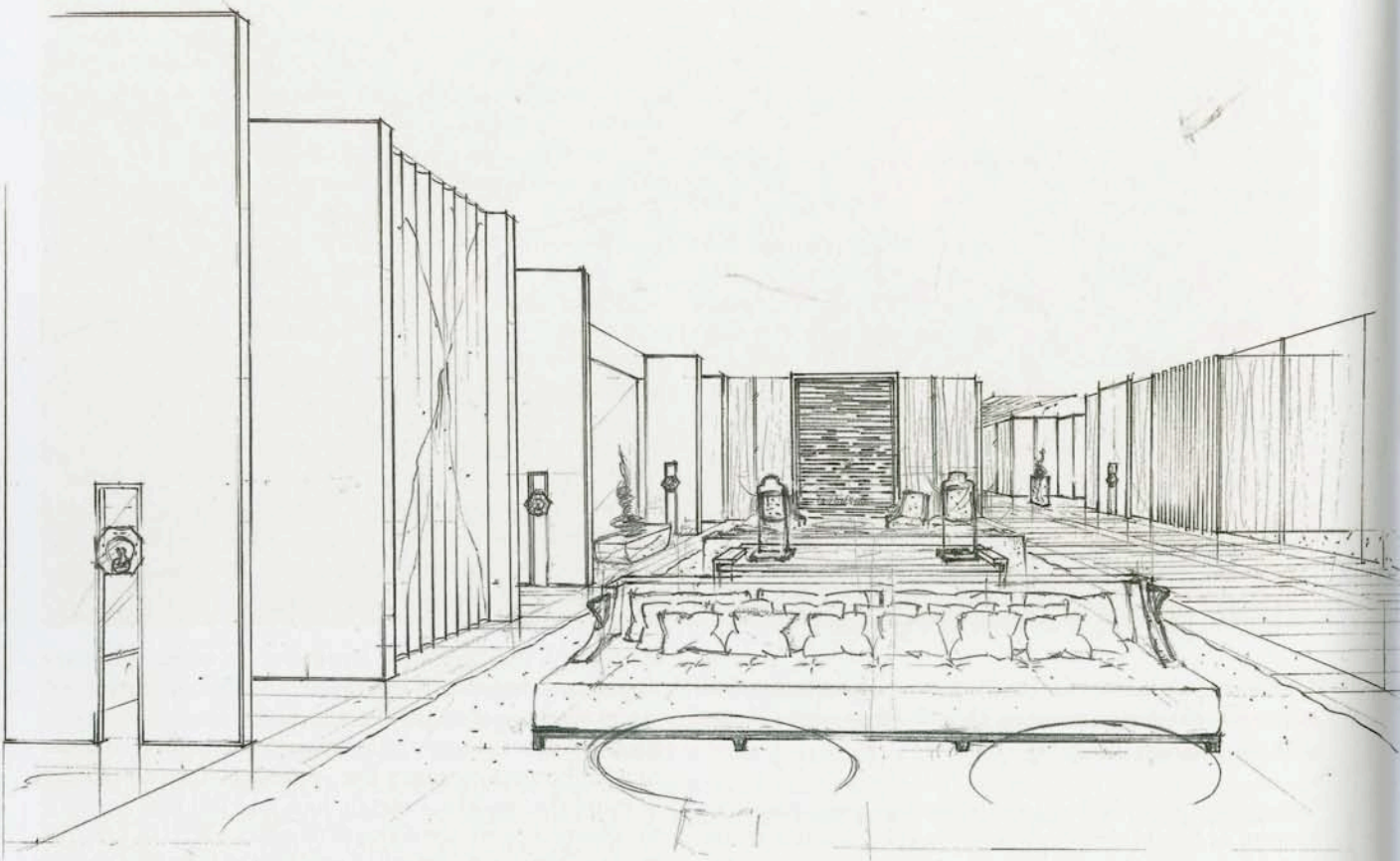
So how important is it to your design philosophy to create a sense of place in a hotel, particularly in a town as historically and culturally significant city as Qufu?

Like what we did with the Shangri-la in Tainan, and many of our other projects, we tried to design something for the city. Our prime objective was to make local people feel comfortable. We wanted to create something they could be proud of, rather than 'Wow, what is this?', like some strange UFO that doesn't belong. We don't want that. That's why the narrative is so important. We really need to tailor, or carve, a story to fit the local context to make the local people feel comfortable. For example, the red we used in the lobby spaces, we actually took pantone books into the temples to match the colours, so when locals visit they'll feel that it's so familiar to them. Our twist was to change it from matte finish to piano gloss finish. We actually spent several days in Qufu visiting all the temples and monuments, photographing architectural details. Our aim was to capture the essence of the city without being too literal. Anyone can copy and paste details. We want people to see the inspiration, and to notice that we've twisted it, that we've re-interpreted it into today's language. That's always our intention. So it's actually more than just creating a space that has a sense of place, it's also creating a place for the people of that place.

With this project, like many of your others, so much of the lighting, carpet, furniture, et cetera has been custom-designed by AB Concept. You have teams within the company set up now to work specifically on elements like furniture and graphics. Did that eventuate because of the demand from clients?

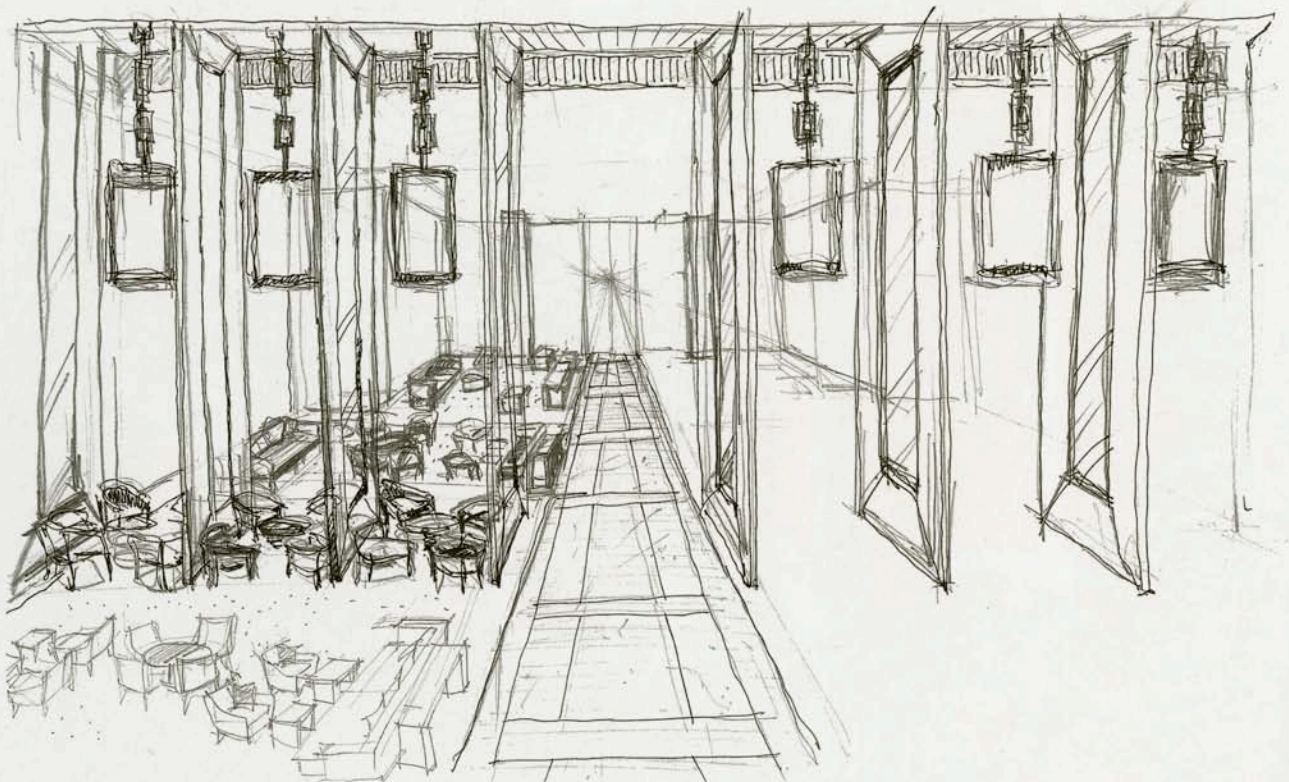
Actually I feel graphics, furniture, et cetera are very important components in a project. And sometimes when you're working on a project and at the same time you're trying to develop something, it can be too rushed to come up with something great. But we always have something in mind that we like, a certain look and feel that we want to achieve. But we always want to retain a level of bespoke for each project. So we try to explore the form and design as a foundation — we want to build our vocabulary. And then for each project we twist that vocabulary a little bit, to make it something really AB Concept.

When it comes to furniture specifically, you need time to explore ergonomics, time for testing and prototypes, so that's the reason our team is constantly working on new designs. I think if we just started the process once we started a project we'd have to rush it to get it done, and won't always meet the level of quality we're trying to achieve.



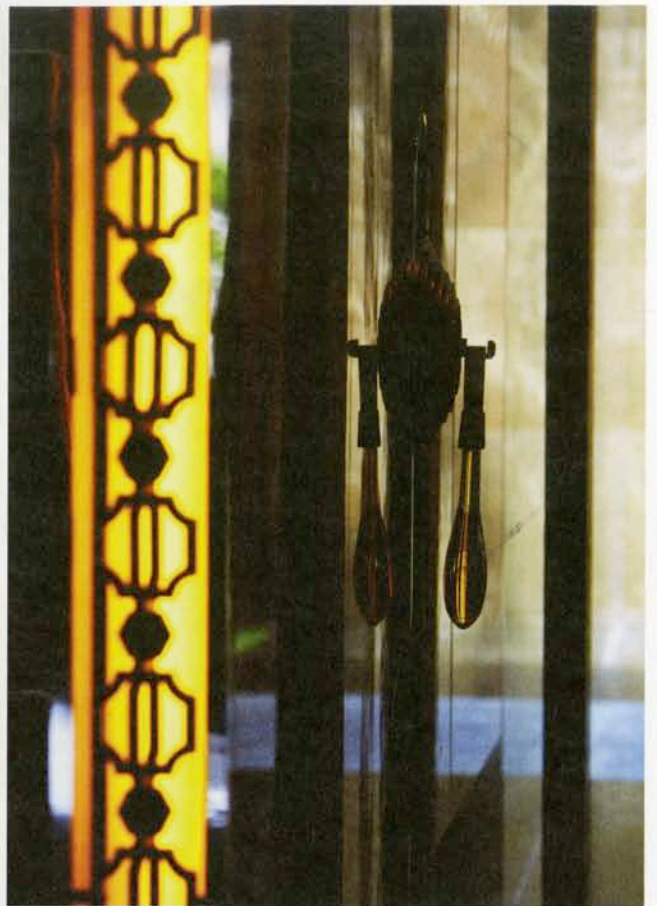
This page: One of AB Concept's working drawings of the lobby area showing the details on the wall partitions
Facing page: The finished award-winning space





This page: A working drawing showing various seating arrangements and the bespoke 'Confucian' lanterns
Facing page: Two views of the lobby space including the reception desk, behind which is a custom artwork depicting a Chinese plum tree created by a local artist from buttons and beads





God is in the details. Clockwise from top left: Cabinetry hardware, glass door handles, high gloss ochre-red that reflects the exterior view, bespoke bronze lanterns.