

SHANGHAI INTERIORS

The image is a full-page photograph of a traditional Chinese interior. In the foreground, there are two large, dark brown wooden screens with a lattice pattern. Between them, a doorway leads into a brightly lit room. In the background room, a large mirror is mounted on the wall, reflecting a window and some plants. On a table in front of the mirror, there are several lit candles and a small framed picture. The overall atmosphere is warm and intimate.

STRUCTURE

SHANGHAI INTERIORS

Andrea Mingfai Chu

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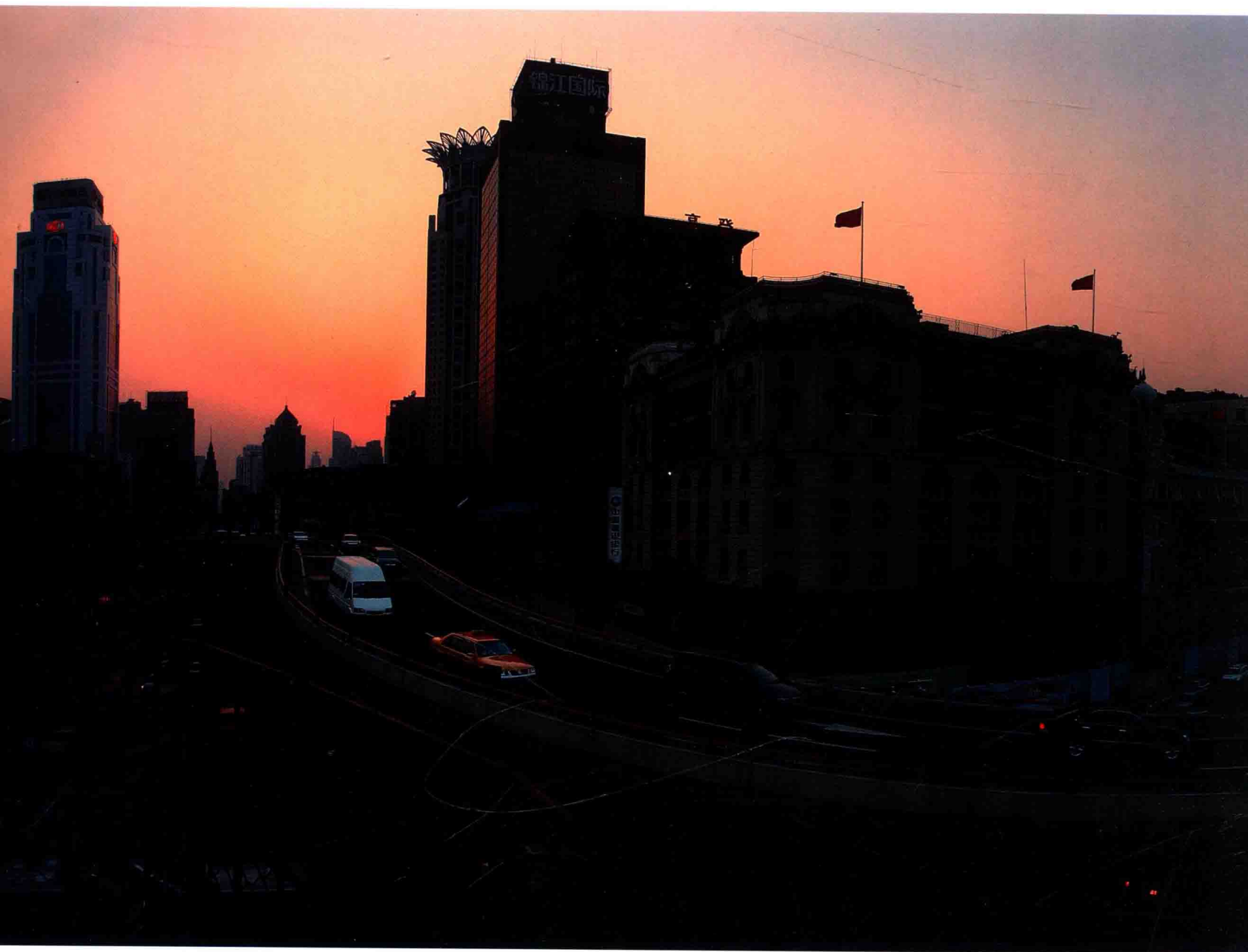
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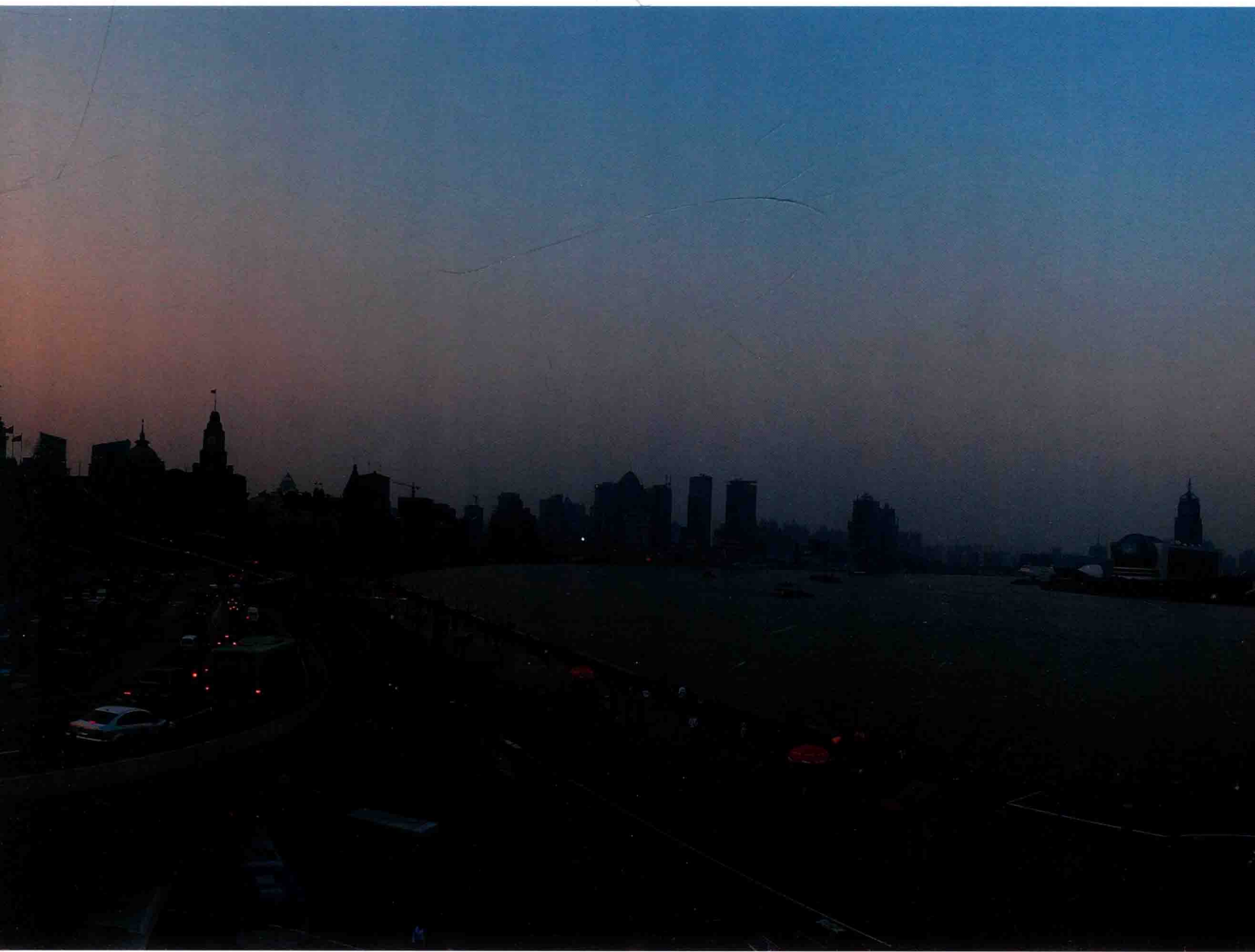
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This book is dedicated to my mother, calligrapher Chik Kwok-Wa.

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Foreword

This is a book about my hometown, Shanghai, and about my friends who live and love living here. The book evolved very naturally from a collection of monthly column which has run for the last three years in Binfen/Space Magazine, a Chinese architecture and interior design publication. The column profiles the restoration and innovative design of the vintage houses of Shanghai.

Earlier this year, I had the valuable experience of working with Angelica Taschen and Reto Guntli as the Special Contributor to their Living in China book. The book was published by famous German publisher Taschen Books. This experience was an inspirational catalyst for this title.

Time seems to move faster in Shanghai. Looking back, my roots in its traditional environs run deep as I was born in an early 1940's lane house in Shanghai. The city is justifiably famous for its dramatic skyline, but down at street level, it is heart-breaking to see that so many lanes from my childhood memories already have been demolished. In most cases, they have been replaced by tall cement or flashy glass modern buildings.

About three years ago, when I first proposed the column idea to Ms. Huang Xiaoping, the publisher of Binfen/Space Magazine, I had only recently returned to Shanghai after over ten years living abroad and in Beijing. Fortunately, Ms. Huang welcomed my proposal; and best of all, she provided me with a great deal of freedom for my articles.

Writing the column proved to be a journey of re-discovery. On weekends, I either walked or rode my little Phoenix bicycle around the old Shanghai neighborhoods and tried to recapture my childhood memories. Many old and new friends embraced this project along the way, enthusiastically introducing me to their own favorite Shanghai residences. All of our eventual selections are presented here exactly as we found them, although we have tried to supply historical context wherever it adds interest.

During the years while my column was being published, there was a fever pace of buying old houses in Shanghai; prices subsequently sky-rocketed. I was lucky enough to be able to "grab" one of them – albeit a tiny first floor apartment with a small private garden. Now I admit that I feel quite privileged to own a piece of the former French Concession. My humble little real estate investment is currently occupied by a girlfriend of mine, who also shares my appreciation for old houses in Shanghai. The apartment is featured in these pages and perhaps you will be able to guess which one it is after you have read the book.

The initial inspiration behind the column was simply a desire to share with others my strong conviction that old houses can be just as or even more charming than new architecture. My goal is to prove to my readers that these traditional houses can be fit well within the environment for modern city-living if the task of renovation is approached with proper care. I am reluctant to say that there are many people in today's China who do not share this opinion.

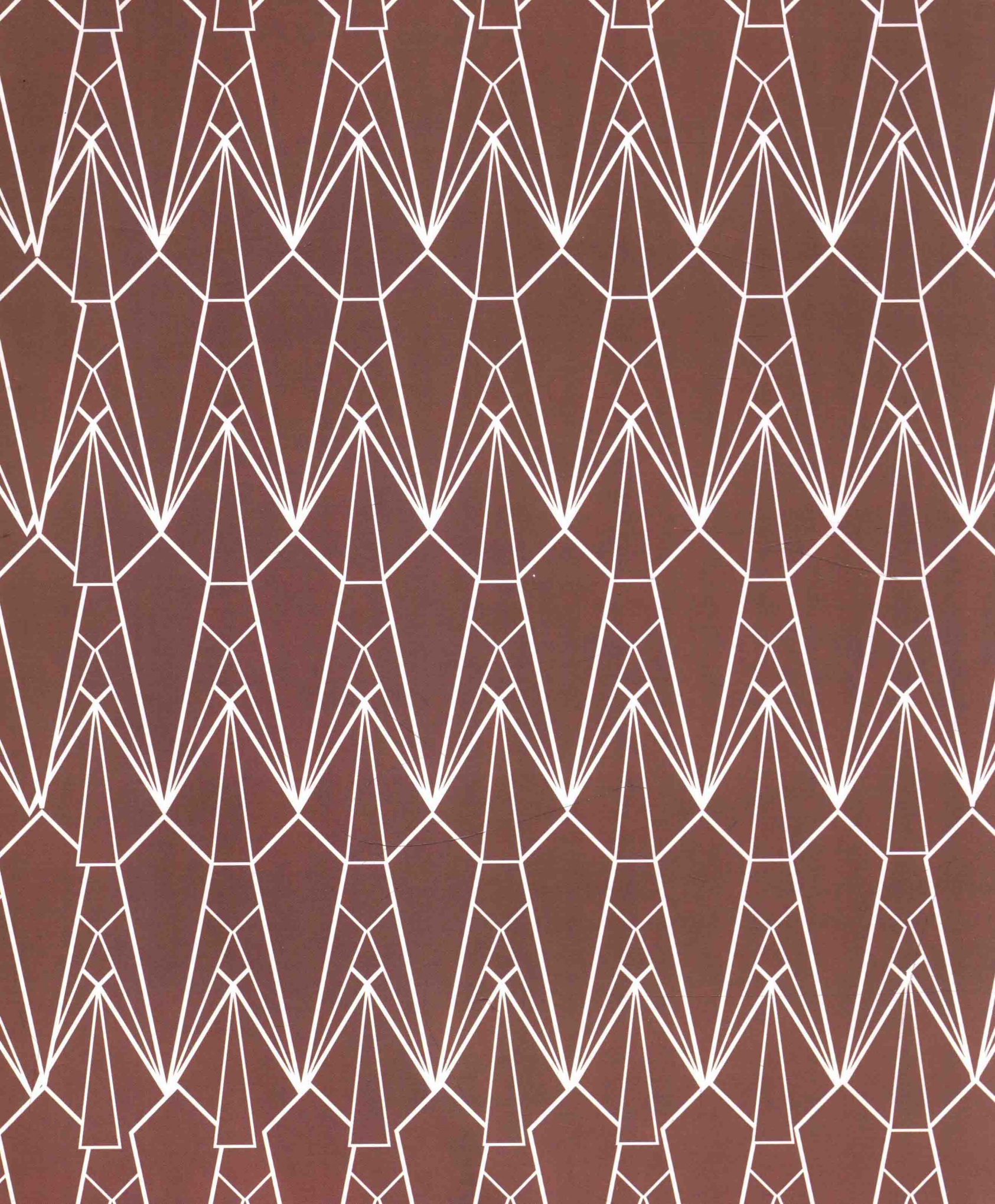
In this book, I do not set out to make opinionated statements about the design and style of the places which are represented. However, I cannot help noticing that Asian and oriental styles feature prominently among my selections. The images will let these homes speak for themselves.

I also offer an observation to my readers. For those of us living in China, where many decorative materials and furniture are produced and manufactured cheaply, it seems that it is sometimes hard for people to embrace the philosophy of "less is more." I do think that an uncluttered approach can make most home interiors even more beautiful and comfortable.

At the urging of my publisher, I agreed to write this book in both English and Chinese, which turned out to be much more than doubling of the workload. I hope this hard work is worthwhile and that the book will reach a wider audience.

I have enjoyed immensely my three-year journey as reporter and observer, drinking tea or wine with the residents of these elegant houses and sharing their experience of living in the quickly vanishing lanes of Shanghai. I hope that you will enjoy your own repeated journeys through these pages.

Finally, this book is dedicated to my mother. Although I could tell that she had doubts about my career path and entering the uncertain world of writing and publishing, she has always encouraged me to do the things I am passionate about. My mother has dedicated her life to the study of Chinese calligraphy, an art form that she has been passionate about since her childhood. I am grateful that she has taught me how to appreciate the simple things in life.



Houses

Art Scene in a Lane

For this project architects Wilfred Wong and James Saywell renovated a semi-detached garden house on Huai Hai Road in the former French Concession. The three-story house faces a tidy lane on one side and a garden that backs onto an ally on the other. The entrance feeds off a side passage that connects the two frontages and the principal rooms overlooking the oasis-like garden.

The revived elegance inherent in the building has been subtly enhanced with decorative motifs that might have emanated from the same period. These motifs include fireplaces in various marbles, frieze moldings, barrel vaults in the living room and master bathroom and the wood-lined library off the master bedroom.

On the ground floor, the living areas have patterned marble floors. A wood-paneled wine-pantry connects the kitchen to the grand dining room. The master suite occupies the first floor and includes an ample bedroom with a balcony overlooking the garden. Of all the houses I have visited in Shanghai, the bathrooms in this home are the most stunning. The master bathroom is a grand, vaulted spa lined in mint marble with black marble floor and a sunken Jacuzzi pool/shower in real jade tiles. A small second bedroom or study also has an ensuite, marble-lined bathroom with a shower area in onyx tiles.

Upstairs the layout is repeated with a large bedroom that opens onto a terrace and a bathroom in striped marble. A smaller bedroom suite mirrors the one below. A staircase with restored Deco style banister winds past a newly added vertical aperture, which transforms into a luminous Onyx light feature. The current tenant is the owner of Art Scene and has turned this home into a haven for eastern and western art and furniture.