

dynastic ambitions

The Emperor, a boutique hotel by Graft, sets out to rule Beijing

text: fred a. bernstein photography: hong chao wal



Since its Hotel QI opened in Berlin in 2004, the architecture firm Graft has been fielding calls from hoteliers around the world. Principal Gregor Hoheisel has a simple explanation for all this success. "Our designs are joyful," he says. And it can't hurt that the firm has offices on three continents: not only in Berlin but also in Los Angeles and Beijing. Not surprisingly, the first of the new wave of Graft projects is in the Chinese capital, where construction happens at warp speed.

It took Graft only one year to complete the Emperor, a 60-room boutique hotel on a site that's one of the best in Beijing,



offering thrilling glimpses over the walls of the Forbidden City one block away. The hotel's three-story, 50,000-square-foot building had been offices before Graft masterminded its metamorphosis. Now the front facade is punctured by a glassed-in lounge containing a slender orange banquette that curves up along a wall, then across it, and back down again—picture a pumpkin-colored Möbius strip. Elsewhere on the facade, Graft painted the original gray brick, Beijing's traditional building material, with swaths of the same bright orange.

One of the hotel's owners, Liu Shao Jun, is a financier with a deep interest in his country's past. "He was eager to get a lot of references to Chinese history into the hotel," Hoheisel says. Graft, however, is known for a jazzy minimalism. (And a close association with actor-activist Brad Pitt. After completing his Los Angeles guesthouse and designs for his New Orleans rebuilding project, the firm is now working with him on a hotel in Dubai.) So, while each of the Emperor's 60 guest rooms is named for a Chinese emperor, whose stylized portrait appears on the doors, the evidence mostly disappears after that. ➤





Previous page: Microfiber-covered cushions and mats and painted MDF tables, all custom, furnish the restaurant lounge at Graft's Emperor hotel, Beijing

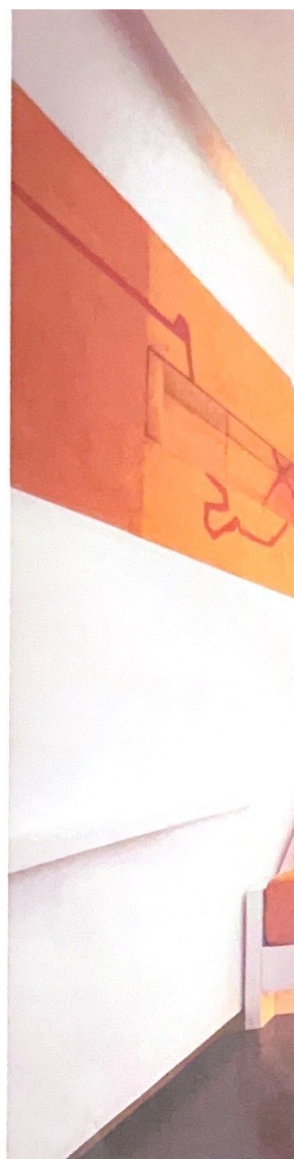
Opposite top: Graft added orange paint to the exterior of the former office building

Left: The windowless basement lounge is illuminated by fluorescent ceiling fixtures

Right, from top: In a typical guest room, the roofline of the Forbidden City appears both etched into the glass bath enclosure and printed on the microfiber faux-suede wall covering. Carpet runs along a corridor's stained-wood floor.

Left, from top: An 800-square-foot corner suite features LED rope lighting in ceiling coves and beneath the furniture. A chair by Charles and Ray Eames pulls up to a junior suite's built-in writing table. **Right:** The flexible stainless-steel lamps are custom.

Opposite bottom: Each room is named for the ruler whose caricature is stenciled on the door. This is the Song dynasty's Emperor Qin Zang.



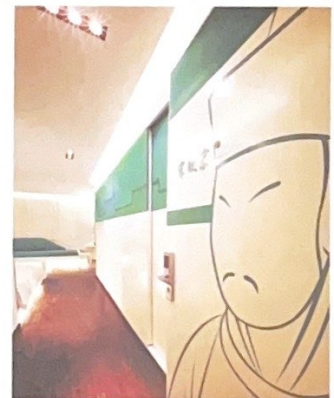


"We're weren't going to have themed rooms," Hoheisel says. Yet there's one design device that is blatantly representational: Mimicking the profile of the Forbidden City's rooftops, a line wends its way across the faux-suede wall covering, and the same motif is etched into the glass bath enclosures.

Graft used LED cove lighting to dematerialize the guest rooms' ceilings, while LEDs installed beneath colorful banquettes and white platform beds make them seem to float. Not-quite-there furnishings include skinny gooseneck lamps and small tables that slide along the banquettes. In junior suites, built-in writing tables and the banquettes' tapered back cushions introduce opposing angles to the strongly horizontal scheme. The banquettes also climb walls and turn corners, blurring the line between the building and its furniture.

Hallways blur that line, too, thanks to cushioned "caves" cleverly set between the structural columns, occupying space that otherwise would have been wasted. These alcoves look like perfect spots for meditating, making out, or making friends. Though the dimensions have changed from the guest rooms, Graft's impulse—to turn the entire building into a giant conversation pit—has not.

Hoheisel, the principal based in Beijing, says he's learning the pros and cons of working there. On the one hand, he says, "You can do things that would not be possible in the West, where costs are so much higher." On the other, he admits, "You're dealing with inexperienced workers. It's hard for them to execute anything close to perfection when they've never seen perfection." Craftsmanship aside, not all the firm's materials choices are practical for Beijing. The city is extremely dusty, so the lobby's smooth black artificial-marble flooring must be constantly wiped of footprints. Then, too, the hotel lacks an elevator. Adding one would have meant losing three guest rooms and a small portion of the roof terrace, and Liu decided to stick with stairs. According to Hoheisel, China has adopted an equivalent of the





Americans With Disabilities Act, but existing buildings may be exempt. The lack of an elevator makes much of the Emperor, including the showstopping roof terrace, off-limits to anyone who can't or won't walk three long flights.

For those who are strong-legged and well-heeled, the rooftop bar—called He, Mandarin for *drink*—has been a draw from the start. “That has nothing to do with our design,” Hoheisel says modestly. “With that location, we couldn’t have messed it up.” So how to explain the success of the viewless basement restaurant Shi, meaning *eat*? It could be the fusion cuisine. Or perhaps it’s the fusion architecture: Western, with powerful allusions to the East. —



PROJECT TEAM

LARS KRÜCKEBERG; ALEJANDRA LILLO; WOLFRAM PUTZ; THOMAS WILLEMEIT; RUAN JIN; LI MEI; KEIZO OKAMOTO; ANNE PESTEL; CRYSTAL K.H. TANG; TINA TRÖSTER; WEI XIN; SUN DA YONG; GRAFT WALTER JUNGER & FRIENDS; HOTEL OPERATIONS CONSULTANT: BEIJING GUANG TAI ELECTRONIC CONSTRUCTION; MEP: BEIJING EASTERN WEIYE FURNITURE; WOODWORK: JIANG SU NAN TONG 2 CONSTRUCTION COMPANY; GENERAL CONTRACTOR.

PRODUCT SOURCES

FROM FRONT: DA ZHAI MEN LIGHTING; CUSTOM LAMPS (GUEST ROOMS); HOU DAO WOODEN COMPANY; FLOORING (GUEST ROOMS, HALL); VITRA; CHAIRS (GUEST ROOM, ROOF); ROCCA; TUB (BATHING AREA); THROUGHOUT: BI YA FABRIC COMPANY; FABRIC.

Top: Tub surrounds are painted MDF, while sink vanities are solid surfacing. **Center:** Custom shades can cover skylights. **Bottom:** Pressure-treated pine slats wrap the pool terrace while unifying the fitness center and the rooftop bar.

