



ZHIZHUSI REBORN

In central Beijing, a forgotten Qing-era temple compound is once again in the spotlight
BY TOM O'MALLEY

Old revolutionary songs stream from a transistor radio as an elderly man shuffles down the alley. On both sides, dusty buildings stare one another down inscrutably. Though you'd never dream it standing here, somewhere beyond these drab facades a long-forgotten Buddhist temple has recently reawakened.

Ignace Leclair, general manager of Beijing's Temple Restaurant, leads me into a nondescript office, through a corridor, and back outside until, like a mirage in a desert of gray, there it is—Zhizhusi, the Temple of Wisdom.

A classic piece of Chinese-Buddhist temple architecture, Zhizhusi stands restored but unpainted, earthen timber stained and



COMPOUND SOLUTION From top: The main temple hall at dusk; the compound's makeover includes this installation of figurative sculptures by Beijing-born contemporary artist Wang Shugang.

faded by the years. Carved dragons writhe upon beams as broad as tree trunks, and vermillion columns are visible through latticed door screens. Commissioned in early Qing times when Tibetan Buddhism was the official religion of China, it's at least 400 years old.

Today, the great hall is the centerpiece of the Temple Hotel, a 3,500-square-meter complex that includes art spaces, conference rooms, and the Temple Restaurant, set in an annex built in the 1950s. Eight luxurious hotel suites are due to open in the first half of this year.

"The most important thing for us was to pay homage to this incredible site as much as possible," says Ignace, pointing out the curved stupa crowning the temple roof, illuminated by a single spotlight. German lighting designer Ingo Mauer has played with subtle blocks of light throughout the site, creating an ambience that is both romantic and reflective. A circular arrangement of black figures clothed in peasant garb squats in the courtyard, one of several installations by Chinese contemporary artist Wang Shugang.

It's hard to fathom that such a grand site could ever have been forgotten. Erica De Stales, the hotel's marketing director, explains that like most Buddhist temples in the city after the 1950s, it was simply swallowed up by its surroundings over time. "When the three founders first discovered the place, the peaked roof was hemmed in on all sides by a smoke-belching factory and a run-down motel."

Under the guidance of Beijing's Cultural Relics Bureau, they uncovered beautiful ceiling frescos hidden beneath decades of dust. About a third of the 180 coffered panels were restorable, some still bearing their original Sanskrit inscriptions. Incongruously, a Mao slogan hangs in the temple's eaves, exhorting workers to BE UNITED, EARNEST, AND LIVELY. After 1949, the grounds served as a factory producing China's first TV sets.

"We took out 200 truckloads of rubble restoring this place," says De Stales, "but we wanted to preserve every layer of history."

The temple's reemergence caused a minor stir when a blog article about the opening of Temple Restaurant drew some impassioned comments, one citing a "classic case of the misuse of cultural relics." De Stales sets the record straight. "Heritage restorations take many forms in China. But unlike many others, where a new coat of paint was applied to old relics, our purpose has been to keep the original colors and traditional woodwork, uncovering what lies beneath centuries of dust. This is what makes it so special." ☺

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