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forms sensational

POINT92 DAMANSARA PJ ZIG DESIGN

PARKROYAL ON PICKERING WOHA

PALOMA MUSIC COMPLEX TETRAC ARCHITECTS

dwell

COUNTRY HOUSE KODAIKANNAL/INDIA

+ NODE HOUSE FUKUYAMA/JAPAN

BLUE PLANET 3XIV

THE ALEPH BUENO AIRES/BRAZIL

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# the high road

BY REBECCA LO | IMAGES COURTESY BLVD

China-born Honglei Liu is the creative director behind Beijing-based BLVD, an award-winning architectural, landscape and interior design firm that is fast gaining buzz across the region. Together with her husband, architect Yun Du, Liu brings an international approach to sensitively detailed designs for hotels and restaurants. Many of BLVD's projects take on the form of a narrative journey, with spaces that are poetically framed to evoke a sense of place that is in tune with its environment. She speaks to REBECCA LO about how her studio works, why she loves designing hotels and what her dream project would be.



Yun Du (left) and Honglei Liu of BLVD



## Where are you from originally? Why did you decide to work in Toronto?

I was born in China. When I graduated from Tsinghua University's architecture school, I gave up a postgraduate study opportunity and chose to go abroad. I did this in order to expand my vision, broaden my thinking, and accumulate more multi-dimensional experience for my future design career. During the five years that I was working in Canada as an interior designer, I had the good fortune to work for two world renowned companies: Yabu Pushelberg and II by IV.

## What types of experiences do you feel working in Canada contributed to your overall approach to design?

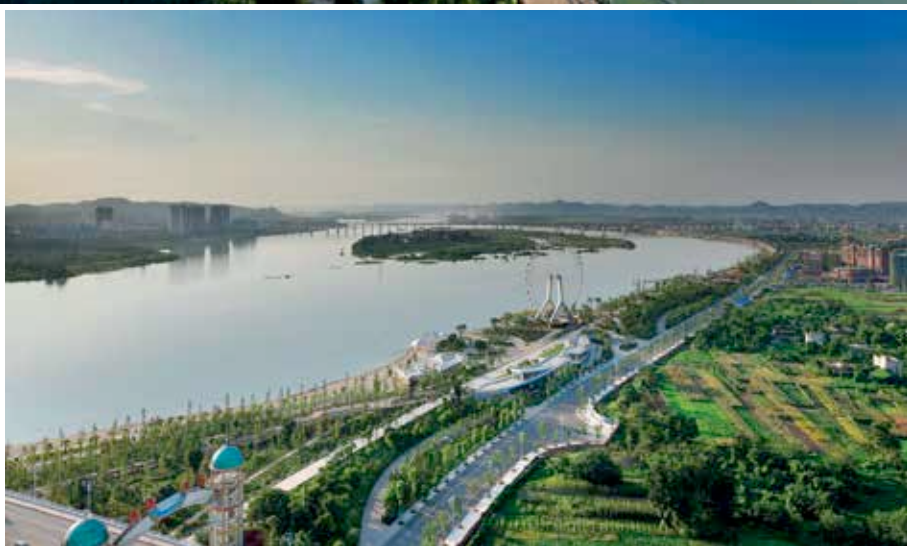
What I learned there was not just about how to approach design problems – my experience also shaped my aesthetic tastes and my views towards life. These experiences gave me a more international awareness of design as well as instilled in me a great passion for what I do. I started looking at design from a global perspective and, as my thinking developed, it was reflected in a growing love and appreciation for my work.

## How did you and Yun meet?

My husband and I met at Tsinghua University. He is a very driven person, both in life and in his work. He expects to do meaningful things for society.

## What did you start a company with him?

Our common career pursuits led us to establish BLVD. We want to spend our lives practising design. We may be viewed as a couple that think romantically and rationally when we're together. In terms of work, we have



Suining Riverside Park & Wetland



**Hanzhong Great Han Culture Park**



**Eadry Royal Garden Hotel Haikou**

with literature, designers should be actively sensitive towards anything that is beautiful in this world. Designers can draw excitement, inspiration and passion from the wide variety of beautiful things the world has to offer.

**What makes BLVD's work different from other Chinese hospitality firms working today?**

What makes us unique is that our approach is always to strive for excellence in quality for every job that we take on. For BLVD, every project is like a raw gem. We are responsible for cutting and polishing it to create a precious piece of jewellery. Since the founding of BLVD, this pursuit for perfection has never changed. And it is this approach that will drive BLVD to become a better design firm.

**Where do you see your company in another five or 10 years? Do you want to work on projects in other parts of the world?**

We are privileged to be in a leading position in China's design industry today. In recent years, our approach and delivery of high quality projects has brought us many international awards, such as the Hospitality Design Awards in 2012 and Asia Pacific Interior Design Awards in 2011. Along with our clients and supporters, we are all optimistic about BLVD's future development. In five to 10 years time, we hope that BLVD will grow to be the most competitive design firm in China. We aim to clarify our design philosophy and way of thinking, and make valuable contributions to the design industry through our projects. The goal is to develop BLVD into a high end internationally recognisable design brand.

**What would be your dream project?**

Of course I hope to have more opportunities to cooperate with high end fashion brands. My dream is to design high end hotels the likes of Armani Hotels. I hope to work on very creative public buildings. In addition, I would love to exchange and collaborate with world renowned design masters. +



**Holiday Inn Changbai Shan**

different fields of specialisation and we support each other. Seldom do we have conflicts. After being partners for a dozen years, we have formed a mutual understanding towards our work as well as solutions to resolve our conflicts. *(Chuckles)* Although we have different viewpoints sometimes, we try to be reasonable, exchange ideas and broaden our thinking. The key is thinking as business partners. Meanwhile, it's important to put myself in his shoes. Through many discussions between us and our management team, we eventually arrive at a solution that balances our different viewpoints.

**Why did you decide to return to China and set up a studio specifically in Beijing, as opposed to other cities in the country such as Shanghai or Hong Kong?**

After we had both accumulated rich professional experiences abroad, we sought opportunities to set up our own practise. In 2007, China was opening its arms to the world. It was just a good time to start a business here, especially in disciplines related to cultures. We both are Chinese and we have a home in Beijing. So without any further hesitation, we headed back home to realise our dream.

**What does hospitality design offer creatively that makes it more challenging and rewarding than other interior design disciplines?**

In opinion, hotel design represents the best components of interior design. It is comprehensive – functionally, many projects have extensive programmes and include a number of facilities such as guestrooms, restaurant, cafeteria, spa, conference areas and other requirements. Meanwhile, it has to provide a unique experience for its guests. Hotel design and guests' emotional responses are closely related. To provide personalised, thoughtful and memorable experiences for guests is actually both challenging and exciting. I've worked as a chief designer previously and have completed many types of projects, including clubhouses, offices, restaurants, entertainment venues and hotels. I enjoy hotel design best and find it the most satisfying.

**Please describe your studio and how it works. How many staff do you have in Beijing and Shenzhen?**

BLVD has been operating in China for 11 years. Now there are around 200 people in our offices in Beijing and Shenzhen. We have three creative departments:

architecture, interior and landscape design. Our projects are spread across several provinces and many cities in China. For years, we have insisted that our teams provide a full set of services to our clients: from architecture, interior to landscape design. We have a combination of international and domestic designers working together. Human resources and information are pooled, allowing BLVD to work efficiently as well as to achieve higher quality of design.

**Do you handle every project or do you delegate the design to different teams? How do you and Yun divide up the responsibilities in your company?**

From the beginning, BLVD maintains a corporate-style management. I allocate projects to different teams, and will participate in the key process for every project. BLVD places a lot of attention upon work quality. We have an international team consisting of talented designers and our design director is responsible for each project's direction. As BLVD's founders, Yun and I have separate roles. I am in charge of interior design, and Yun is in architecture and landscape design. In many cases, we also work together on large scale and comprehensive projects.



**Winter Palace Restaurant**



**Jintang Dock Theme Park**

**Which projects are some of your most favourite?**

I love challenging projects. They are sometimes large scaled or have programmatic complexity. On the other hand, I also enjoy projects that require strong creativity. When we are working on a challenging project, bit by bit we work towards providing smart solutions. When the job is finally done, we are so pleased to have overcome the difficulties with our creativity that no words can express the satisfaction we feel.

**How do you keep yourself inspired to come up with new designs for every project?**

In design, inspiration is necessary and is something I am constantly pursuing. I try to be sensitive to everything around me. I look at life with an open mind and heart to feel the beauty of everything on earth. I think about the magnificent creativity of our natural environment. Other people may look at a flower when it blooms and then forget about it, while I wonder when this flower will look best and what kind of lighting would bring out its texture. This world can always look more beautiful when viewed from another angle. With this mind set, there is always inspiration for every new project.

**What do you do when you are not working? How do you de-stress and relax?**

When I am not working, I play sports to relax. I also like visiting art galleries and museums to savour diverse design and to travel around the world without leaving the city. I am always working at improving my aesthetic appreciation of everything around me, to nourish my body and soul. Just like a painter with colour, musician with notes and writers