As the Glass House becomes a living museum, can its creative spirit be preserved?
Pavilion of Prolonged Spring—the main structure in the newly reconstructed Jianfugong Garden, in Beijing’s Forbidden City—is bordered by rock gardens commissioned by Emperor Qianlong in 1740.
Then there is the authenticity issue: Why bother re-creating a destroyed antiquity?

be open to the general public, Harun says the final decision lies with Gugong officials. “I think the best way would be to allow restricted openings, say, one day a week a small group might be let in for a guided tour,” she says, adding that she has no problem with setting limits. “Rights should come with responsibilities. Most Chinese don’t have that sense of responsibility yet. The atmosphere at such a place should be solemn like in a church, not rowdy like in a Chinese restaurant.”

A noted developer familiar with the project takes issue with that approach. “Ronnie Chan gave his money out of perfectly good intentions, and it is a good thing he did,” says the developer, who requested anonymity. “But they obviously didn’t work out a clear plan about its function. A VIP clubhouse inside the Forbidden City? They won’t find many locals going there. The Chinese new rich don’t like that kind of old style. Some foreigners and Chan’s friends will visit. Other than that I think they’ll just lock up the place and leave it there.”

Tsao says the importance of the rebuilt garden transcends style or even program; he describes it as an act of values preservation. “It’s important to sift through the details of historic architecture to understand what part of its DNA you want to take with you,” he says. “And that DNA is not about swooping roofs or gilded columns, it’s about human interaction.” In an era of rapid transformation and constant destruction in the name of development, it’s clear that a project like this can help raise consciousness about the need for protecting China’s cultural heritage. Jianfugong is an unusual, perhaps even unique, undertaking that may inspire others—not to replicate but to renovate and preserve. And when they do, let’s hope they arrive with better plans.
A recent project completed in the heart of ancient China poses uneasy questions about authenticity and preservation.

At a May ceremony inside the Forbidden City, Hong Kong real estate tycoon Ronnie Chan—whose China Heritage Fund (CHF) bankrolled the rebuilding of the Jianfugong Garden—profusely thanks the Chinese government officials in attendance. Now that work is complete, Chan says, he is “handing the garden back” to Gugong (the Forbidden City’s Chinese name). Senior functionaries seated in the front row nod graciously. And somehow the moment, rife with order and bureaucracy, reminds me of the 1997 ceremony when Hong Kong was “handed back” to the mainland.

The event, held on a hot, windless Beijing afternoon, feels long and ponderous, so I’m relieved when Calvin Tsao, the New York architect responsible for the project’s interiors, offers to take me on a tour. The rebuilt Jianfugong Garden is a small portion of the Forbidden City, the ancient home of China’s emperors, a sprawling 178-acre complex dating back to 1420 and comprising more than 800 buildings and 8,000 rooms. According to UNESCO, the Forbidden City is the largest collection of preserved wooden structures in the world.

The new garden’s nine buildings are all reconstructed imperial splendor: red columns, green...
latticed windows, yellow glazed tiles, terra-cotta brick floors, and flying roof tips carrying sculpted dragons and other auspicious animals. It is rich and impressive but somehow feels too new, too bright, like a shining artificial jewel. Stepping into Tsao’s modern interiors provides relief, their muted colors and gentle play of light and shade offering a subtle contrast. “We wanted to do something recognizably new that didn’t challenge the nature of Chinese spatial and architectural rituals,” the architect says.

Out in the courtyard we walk beautiful stone paths inlaid with mosaics of animals and flowers. Some of these stones are among the few surviving items from the original garden. Commissioned by the young Emperor Qianlong, Jianfugong Garden was built in 1740 and featured nine ornate structures arranged in an intricate maze of walkways, courtyards, and gardens. Unlike other rigidly formal gardens in the Forbidden City, this complex was laid out in more diverse and playful forms: pavilions and chambers blended regional architectural styles from north and south. Qianlong grew so fond of it that he used it briefly as his primary residence, where he composed poetry and collected art. Later he ordered an identical one built on the northeast corner of the Forbidden City so he could enjoy it in his old age after abdication.

Comprising more than 800 buildings and 8,000 rooms, the Forbidden City is the largest collection of wooden structures in the world.
"Originally it was a total reconstruction," Calvin Tsao says. "They didn't need us to do that, so we suggested they use Jianfugong Garden as an opportunity to train people and revive craft."

For the next six generations of Qing rulers, Jianfugong also housed monks and courtesans, and served as a place of respite as well as storage for royal treasures. Then in 1911 the Chinese Revolution brought down the Qing dynasty, and in the years following the emperor's abdication Jianfugong fell into disorder. It is suspected that eunuchs started stealing treasures and selling them in the capital's antique market. Finally, in 1923, when an investigation was ordered, a fire burned the entire garden to the ground. It was probably set by thieves seeking to destroy evidence. For the next 77 years the site was a ruin—weeds crept up from cracks of the broken stone foundation and Gugong workers used it to pile junk.

When CHF raised $4 million, obtained official approval for rebuilding, and started construction in 2000, the project was considered unprecedented: it was the first time China had undertaken a reconstruction of this scale, working with an outside organization that not only funded but oversaw construction. (CHF would eventually spend $12.5 million.) At that point no one thought about what to do with the garden afterward; the focus was on rebuilding with maximum authenticity, in the process reviving old Chinese building practices and craftsmanship. "Originally continued on page 111
"The beauty of traditional Chinese architecture is in the process and the details," says Happy Harun of the China Heritage Fund.
continued from page 108: it was a total reconstruction," says Tsao, partner at Tsao & McKown and a longtime family friend of Happy Harun, CHF’s project director. “Of course they didn’t need us to do that, so we suggested they use this as an opportunity to train people and revive craft.”

To duplicate the original exterior, a team of Gugong designers combed Qing court records, consulted experts, and used old photos, paintings, and the garden’s replica as references. For the main pavilion, red pine harvested from northeast China was used, just like in the original. The crew searched for the same stone from the original quarry. Nearly 100 stonemasons, tilers, primers, carpenters, and painters worked on the site with traditional tools and techniques. Some methods were never formalized in written texts and relied on “verbal literature,” so apprenticeship became crucial. A number of older artisans were brought out of retirement to train the young workers. They were taught, for instance, how to coat the columns with dizhang, the traditional plaster mix that prevents wood from contracting and cracking. They were also taught how to make dizhang. **continued on page 125**

Opposite page: The Tower of Auspicious Clouds, facing a courtyard of original stone tiles, is one of the structures with space for VIP functions—a likely site for events surrounding the 2008 Olympics. The figurines on the flying roof tips are imperial charms depicting a procession of mythical beasts.

**Tsao used scale and proportion to diffuse the newer elements, creating an effect so that your eye is led to the historic material.**

The Pavilion of Prolonged Spring’s walnut staircase (bottom right) includes a distinctive handrail (top left) and an exposed skeletal ceiling of unadorned beams (below left). Throughout the garden Tsao’s spare interiors (top right) contrast with the ornately carved and painted exteriors (right).
A covered walkway connecting two pavilions in Jiankang Garden is lit by lanterns that Tsao designed based on a historical painting. The originals were made out of forged animal horns. Tsao’s team created sturdier polycarbonate-and-bronze replicas.
continued from page 111 which requires an elaborate process of blending pig blood, tung oil, brick ash, and flour in just the right proportions.

"The beauty of traditional Chinese architecture is in the process and details," says Harun, who oversaw the project. Many Westerners find Chinese pavilions decorated with bright images gaudy, but Harun would tell them about the method and the intricate steps involved in it: how to treat the timber, how to wrap plaster and sand the beam before you even begin to paint pictures on it. "Only after they listen to my explanations would they begin to understand its subtlety and beauty."

There was, however, grumbling in the ranks when Harun and Tsao proposed contemporary interiors. Although the Forbidden City is opening up in recent years to certain "modern influences" such as digital archiving, dominant attitudes are still conservative. Tradition is held in such reverence that a good imitation is often considered superior to an innovative change. Harun defends her choice by showing me albums of eighteenth-century Qing palace interiors: every image is extravagant, almost baroque. "It's very hard to find all these materials," she says. "And even if we did, we couldn't guarantee the quality of the imitations."

While Harun worried about the budget and other logistical issues, Tsao was sensitive to the cultural ambiguities underlying the project. "If you duplicate completely, it's a fake," Tsao says. "That's why it was crucial for us to understand the implications of Chinese form."

As we tour the grounds Tsao talks about his childhood of split worlds. Born in Hong Kong after his parents left Shanghai on the eve of the Communist victory, the family sent Tsao to California when he was 12 because his parents felt that the British colony wasn't suitable for their children's educations. Having studied calligraphy and Chinese folk dance as a boy, Tsao admitted that his idea about culture and tradition had been "very romantic and sentimental." Although his parents wanted him to pursue business, he studied acting and then architecture at the University of California, Berkeley, becoming a Modernist with a social conscience. "We should not," he once said, "litter the world with our own agenda." It's a belief he still espouses. "Coming to China was a slap in the face," Tsao says of early visits to his ancestral home. In the early 1980s, while at I. M. Pei's office, he worked on the Fragrant Hill Hotel, outside of Beijing; he also completed a residential tower ("something really Western, very new"), which he now regards as a failure. The Jianfugong project in a way marks a symbolic return for Tsao. "The Chinese believe that the Forbidden City is a microcosm of China," he says. "If it isn't perfect—or one section of it is left unfinished or in ruins—then China can never be perfect."

Sensitive to history and cross-cultural perspectives, Tsao brought a keen eye to preserving the spirit of the past while trying to insert something modern into Jianfugong. "We should not finish the interior spaces," he explains, choosing his words carefully, "not damage anything or do anything irrevocably, but instead create a humble and simple state to use for current purposes. Later, if they want a change, they can revert quickly and do other things."

"Though stressing that "our time on earth is transient," Tsao knows that on formal and aesthetic issues he cannot escape identity. "If we create something that's in juxtaposition to the spirit of the original, it has to somehow speak eloquently and iconically to both old and new," he

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strategy; they felt the colors were too plain for foreign VIPs. The hues are a contrast to the dazzlingly ornate exterior, but they’re visually harmonious with the whole. Tsao also left the ceilings exposed: they look airy and modern, but the skeletal structure showcases the intricate joineries and woodworking that are trademarks of the traditional style. The lanterns Tsao created for the rooms are interpretations of the original ones he saw in the Forbidden City’s warehouse, yet they’re graceful and harmonious with the outside lanterns in the corridors, which are copies of the original.

When Tsao leads me to the main structure, Pavilion of Prolonged Spring, the experience of walking up the narrow, huiling wooden staircase to the spacious top chamber and seeing a sudden vista of green trees from windows all around is quite dramatic, and somehow mysteriously satisfying. In Qianlong’s time a steep ladderlike staircase led to the top floor; the one Tsao created is imposing, but by channeling natural and artificial light to dematerialize it, he allows it to fall quickly away into the space. These are some of the uneasy lines Tsao straddled—between his Modernist sensibility and respect for the culture of his ancestral land, between interpretive impulses and the need to preserve—and he accomplished it with delicacy and modesty.

Since completion Jianfugong has attracted a lot of media attention in China. Journalists lauded the effort, experts praised the authenticity and quality of the reconstruction, and distinguished visitors came to admire it—but in private some unsettling questions were raised. “All that money and elevated talk, it’s essentially just a show for foreigners and officials,” says Wang Mingxian, a noted Beijing architecture critic and a preservation activist. According to Wang, many worthier preservation projects have not gotten funding because they’re not as glamorous as Jianfugong. “This is typical. Since China depends heavily on outside money, foreign money gets to decide what to build.”

Then there is the authenticity question: Why bother re-creating a destroyed antiquity? Wang concedes that China is a special case because the basic building material, wood, is fragile and prone to deterioration. Even so, he sees no good reason for bringing Qianlong’s ruined garden back to life. And the idea that completing the Forbidden City is completing China? “That’s hype,” says Wang. “Gugong took up the project because there was money for it. It has little to do with the ordinary Chinese.” He even disapproves of Tsao’s interior design. “Crossbreeding style like that changes the original flavor. Now it’s neither real nor fake. To put it harshly, it makes me think of McDonald’s.”

That’s clearly too harsh. Colonial Williamsburg, on the other hand, might be the appropriate analogy, with the difference that Jianfugong is the lone piece of “fake” inside a real thing. Tsao cites the Italians’ success in inserting modern interiors into ancient buildings as a model for preservation. “Rather than severing themselves from their history, they know what is temporal and what to preserve,” he says. But those ancient Roman structures are real, and Jianfugong is something else; new replicas of old

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