

Research on the Environmental Design of Contemporary Chinese Tea Houses

From the Perspective of Spatial Narrative (Case Study of Changzhou)

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Research Origin

From "visual symbols" to "everyday experience"

Tea culture is a key part of traditional Chinese culture. New tea houses keep opening in the Jiangsu-Zhejiang-Shanghai region - but they look more and more alike.

White walls, dark timber, wooden lattice, dry gardens and floating tea tables have become a repeatable "generic Eastern" template. Culture is reduced to a photo-friendly visual.

This study asks: how can a teahouse in Changzhou move beyond symbols and become a space for real everyday life?



Old Tea House

Chain Tea Room

Qingguo Alley

Old tea house · chain tea room · Qingguo Alley street

Research Subjects, Topics and Tasks

RESEARCH SUBJECTS

Tea spaces within the Qingguo Alley historic district, Changzhou.

RESEARCH TOPICS

How Jiangnan regional identity translates into tea space design.

RESEARCH TASKS

Read the site, propose design principles, and build a six-tier spatial system for daily use.

Object, Subject and Scope

Item	Content
Object	Contemporary teahouses in the Jiangsu-Zhejiang-Shanghai region
Subject	Spatial narrative design methods for tea houses
Scope	China · Changzhou · Qingguo Alley · 2020s
Case	Renovation of a riverside unit in Qingguo Alley



Qingguo Alley: river, street and alley fabric

Methods and Technical Route

FIVE METHODS

01	02	03	04	05
Literature Review	Case Comparison	On-site Observation	Online Reviews	Site Survey
Tea culture, Jiangnan space, critical regionalism.	7 tea houses, China and abroad.	Watching how spaces are really used.	Dianping and Xiaohongshu comments as aid.	Qingguo Alley on location.

TECHNICAL ROUTE



Research-through-design: theory, cases, fieldwork and design test each other.

Literature Review I · Tea Spaces and Culture

Tradition

Tea houses have existed for thousands of years.

Names change - tea house, tea gathering, tea garden - but the core stays: drinking tea, relaxing, socialising.

Japanese chanoyu is a mature model: small scale, simple materials, ritual path, light and body.

Today

Tea houses are now "third places" - low-pressure social rooms between home and work.

Western studies look at class, gender and public life.

But a teahouse is not only a visual scene. It must support sitting, talking, reading, staying.



Literature Review II · Regionalism

Critical Regionalism

Frampton: resist placeless global style, but avoid romanticising folklore.

Regionality comes from site, climate, materials and daily life - not from symbols.

Jiangnan is not only gardens

Jiangnan also means canal trade, street and alley life, neighbourhoods, craft, food and modern urban change.

Changzhou, Wuxi, Jiaxing, Shaoxing are not the same city.

*Key move: treat "Jiangnan" as a spatial mechanism, not a style label.
It is built from four layers - canal and street movement, humid climate, the modest everyday scale of Changzhou, and different intensities of stay and solitude.*

Research Gaps

01 Visuals studied, real use ignored

Most studies look at Eastern atmosphere, not social-media-driven consumption.

03 "Gardens and symbols" bias

White walls, black tiles, lattice, water are used - but street scale and canal docks are not.

02 Everyday life overlooked

Tea houses as short-stay, low-pressure, solitary community space is understudied.

04 Changzhou itself missing

Canal culture and old streets of Changzhou have no tea-house design framework.

This study builds a frame: "Jiangnan identity – everyday urban life – tea house spatial model".

Case 1 · POINT Viewpoint Tea Room



POINT Viewpoint Tea Room · interior

Tea fields and settlement image

The design uses the layered rhythm of tea fields and hill-top settlements as a spatial idea.

Vertical elements, filtered daylight and low green-brown tones build a quiet, meditative mood.

Case 2 · Wujie Xixi Tea House



Wujie Xixi Tea House · courtyard

Old and new, one courtyard

A central foyer acts as the narrative core. Around it sit private landscape tea rooms and a multi-function dining room.

Old fabric is kept; new additions are light and reversible.

Abroad Cases · Four References

Chi Ban Tea House

Tight scale, layered screen, calm ritual sequence.

Tea Room in the Sky

Lightweight glass box on a rooftop; sky and horizon as material.

Boa Nova Tea House (renovation)

Alvaro Siza's coastal site: building meets landscape with quiet restraint.

Deulkkotsoop Coffee

Fields, flowers and forest: nature as the main narrative, not decoration.

Shared lesson: abroad, tea spaces treat light, horizon and landscape as the narrative material. Back in Changzhou, the parallel materials are canal, alley, brick and time.

Site · Qingguo Alley, Changzhou

Qingguo Alley sits in the old city of Changzhou, beside the Grand Canal.

Since Ming and Qing times it has been a hub of canal trade and literati culture.

It has a typical Jiangnan fabric: one river, one street, narrow lanes, deep courtyards, small waterfront wharves.



The canal at dusk — Qingguo Alley

Six Dimensions of Place

Dimension	What we see on site	Design meaning
Street-alley relation	Narrow lanes, deep yards, low eaves.	Extend the lane, do not break its scale.
Spatial scale	Human scale, semi-private, low ceilings.	Control doors, windows and sign size.
Light and shadow	Side-lane patches, courtyard top light.	Use light as a narrative material.
Water-town flow	Small wharves, winding paths by the canal.	Rebuild the waterfront edge.
Material time	Grey brick, old wood, bamboo, worn stone.	Let materials carry time.
Operating mode	Neighbours daily, tourists at weekends.	Split time and zones for different users.

Problem 1 · Commercialisation vs Local Character

Since reopening, Qingguo Alley has become a tourist destination.

Shops use the same visual language: "New Chinese Style", "China Chic", "Jiangnan imagery".

Daily life, gentry-courtyard culture and canal-trade memory are squeezed out.

Risk: a living district slides into a "check-in spot".



Problems 2–5 · Scale, Symbols, Function, Generic Jiangnan

Alley scale vs facades

Over-open shopfronts and out-of-scale signs break the rhythm of the lane.

Symbols on the surface

Wooden lattice, folding screens, grey bricks, dry gardens are used as a "Eastern" formula, not tied to the site.

Function serves the photo

Big feature walls and central water features look good on camera but fail seating, privacy, acoustics and stay-time.

"Generic Jiangnan"

Suzhou, Wuxi, Jiaxing, Shaoxing are flattened into one label. Changzhou's canal and industrial character disappears.

SWOT Snapshot

S · Strengths

Living historic fabric; canal memory; deep courtyards; everyday street life.

W · Weaknesses

Old building structure; limited circulation; waterfront access fragmented.

O · Opportunities

Growing demand for low-pressure everyday cultural spaces; post-pandemic stay-cation.

T · Threats

Generic Jiangnan narrative; rising rents; gentrification of the historic district.

Four Design Strategies

01

Street Extension

Semi-open facade and transitional corridor blur inside and out. The entrance becomes a natural extension of the lane.

02

Light & Shadow Narrative

Prioritise natural light. Filter it through louvers. Layer warm artificial light so the room follows the day and the seasons.

03

Waterfront Reconstruction

Rebuild the relation with the canal: waterside seating, a translated dock memory, and a rainwater system - not a decorative pool.

04

Material Temporality

Local grey brick, tile, aged wood and bamboo weave. Reuse old pieces, keep hand marks. Time becomes spatial value.

Six-Tier Spatial System



Tier	Use mode	Privacy
01 – 02	Short stop, passing by	Public
03	Light socialising, shared table	Semi-public
04	Pause, transition, breath	Threshold
05 – 06	Solitude, small cultural events	Semi-private / flexible

Materials, Light and Water

MATERIALS

Grey brick · old tile · aged
timber · bamboo weave · stone.
Reuse existing pieces. Keep hand marks
and wear.

LIGHT

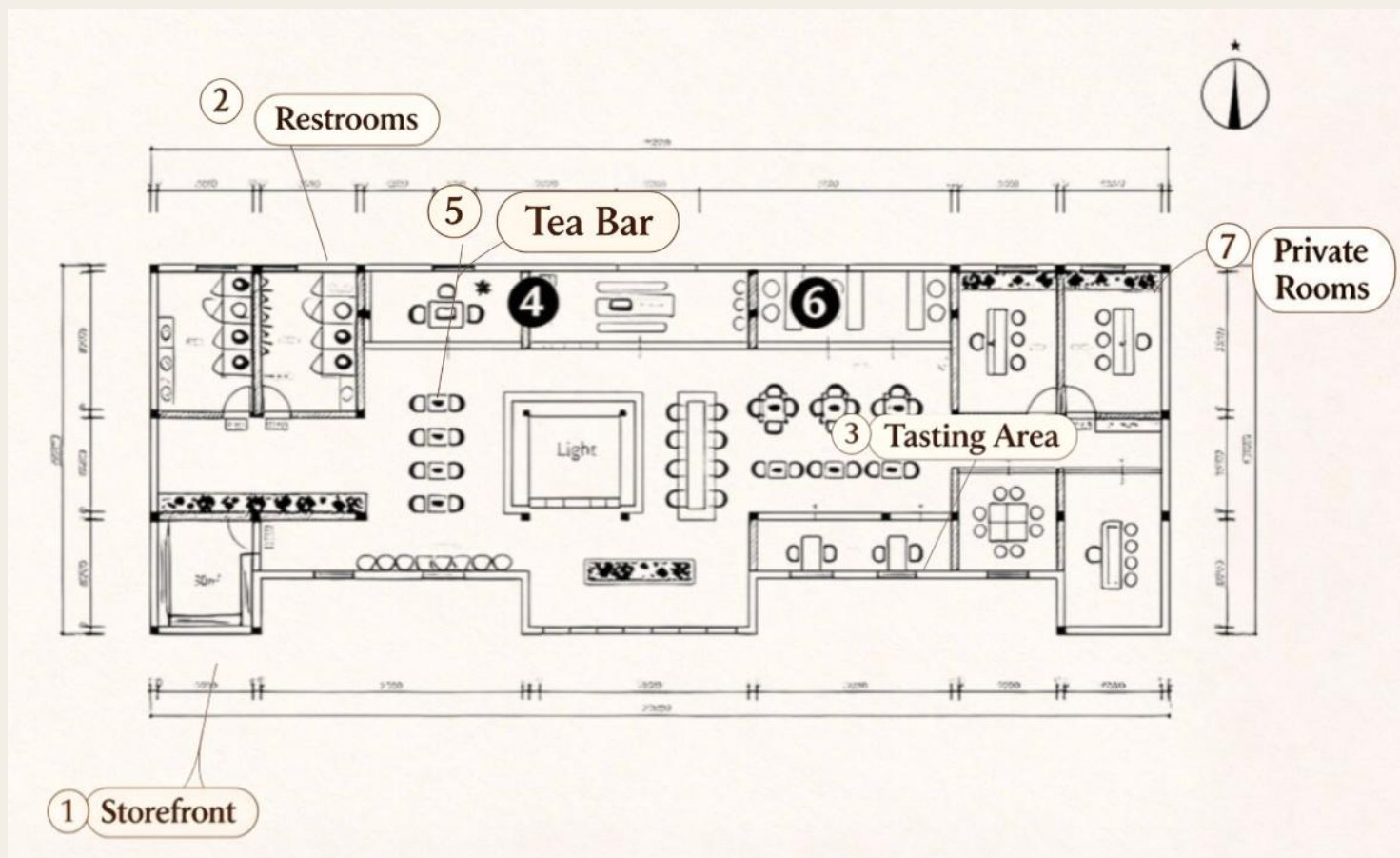
Natural light first. Louvered filter.
Layered warm artificial light - no cold
gallery glow.

WATER AND BORROWED VIEW

Rainwater feeds the inner court.
The corridor ends in a borrowed micro-
landscape.

Attitude to the old building: keep load-bearing walls and timber frame. All new parts are reversible. The riverside opening rhythm matches the original facade.

Master Plan and Circulation



Two clean loops

Customer path: storefront → corridor → shared room → court → private rooms → waterfront.

Staff path: back-of-house, never crosses the customer loop.

Functional Zones

- ① Storefront - arrival threshold
- ② Restrooms - public amenities
- ③ Tasting Area - Tea Tasting Space
- ④ Tea Bar - service counter
- ⑤ Shared Hall - open seating
- ⑥ Light Court - central tea hall
- ⑦ Private Rooms - enclosed tea rooms

Tasting Area



Ceremonial, calm

Symmetrical axis. One central tea table, two round-back chairs facing each other.

Microcement walls, dark grey stone floor, dark wood.

Multi-layered light: chandelier, recessed ceiling, shelf glow, wall wash.

Open Shared Rooms



Open Room 1 · tea bar



Open Room 2 · long table

Open, airy, layered

Open plan, central tea table as focus.

Sheer curtains softly divide space. Wooden lattice ceiling and square lights.

Warm grey, natural wood, deep brown. Hidden LED strips.

Landscape Experience Areas



Area 1 · borrowed mountain view, low platform



Area 2 · raised platform over water, wooden blinds

Floor-to-ceiling windows pull in distant rooftops, water and greenery – wooden blinds filter the light.

Private Rooms



Room 1 · Oriental study, bookshelves and long desk



Room 2 · wabi-sabi, grey brick, rock and moss

Two private moods – the study for focus, the wabi-sabi room for stillness.

Hallway



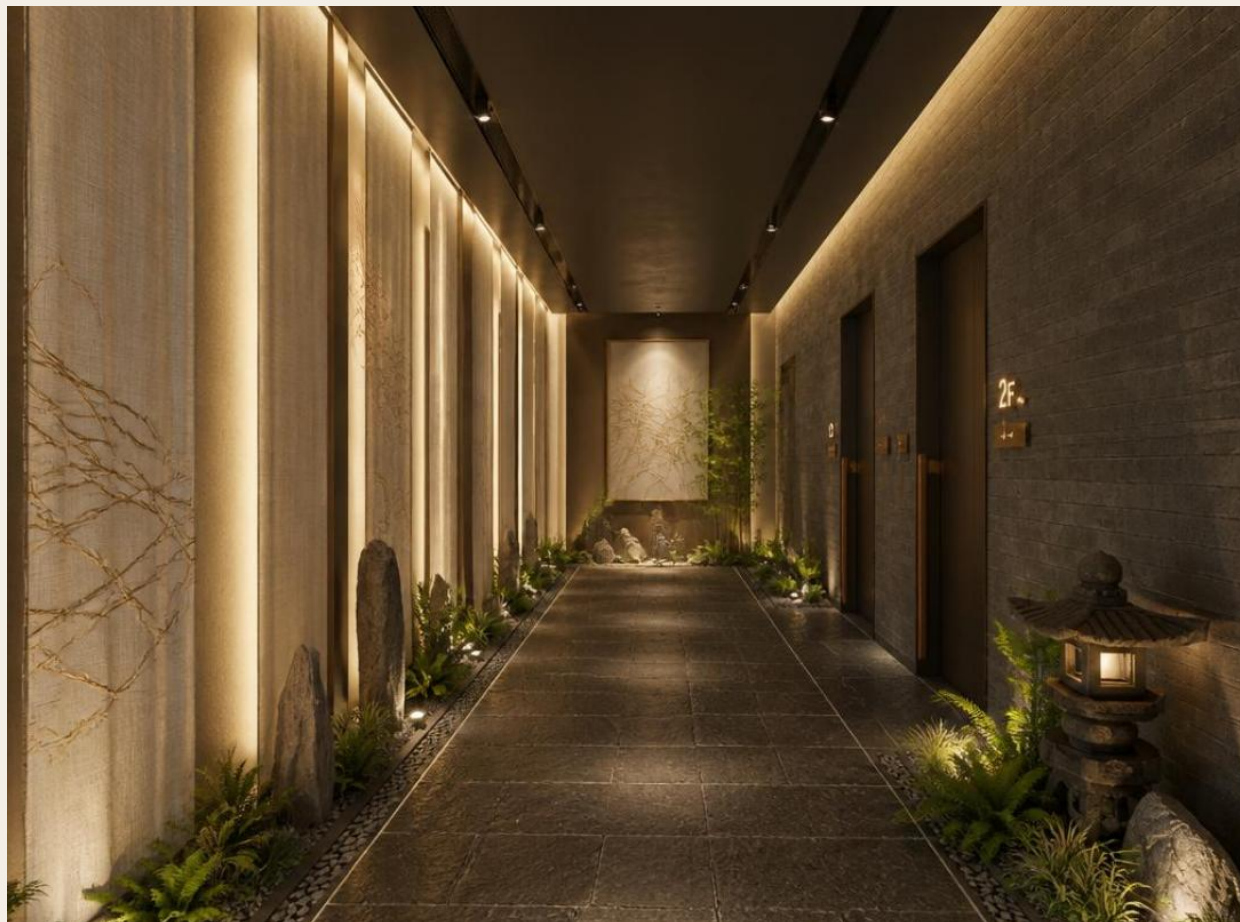
Transition between worlds

Dark stone floor, grey brick walls, miniature dry gardens on both sides.

Wall-wash light guides the path.

The hallway slows you down before you enter the tea rooms.

Corridor and Transition



The path slows you down

Dark stone floor, grey brick wall on one side,
linen fabric panels with uplighting on the other.
Stones, ferns and moss line both edges.
A stone lantern marks the way. The corridor is a
slow, deliberate approach.

Conclusions

01 · Site

Qingguo Alley is read through six dimensions: street, scale, light, water, material, operation.

02 · Problems Answered

Commercial homogenization, scale imbalance, superficial symbols, and the "generic Jiangnan" narrative.

03 · Spatial System

Six layers from streetfront to waterside hold four modes: short stop, social, solitude, small cultural event.

04 · Material & Atmosphere

Reclaimed brick, wood and woven bamboo. Multi-layered warm light, borrowed scenery, sheer curtains — a calm, elegant tea space.

General Conclusion

01 A three-part frame

Jiangnan identity — everyday urban life — tea house spatial model.

03 Changzhou stands on its own

Canal, alley and daily character, not a copy of Suzhou or Hangzhou.

02 An operable method

Six-dimension site reading plus six-tier spatial system, ready to build.

04 Transferable

The logic fits bookshops, guesthouses and community spaces in other old districts.

Jiangnan is not a picture to copy. It is a set of spatial experiences to read, translate and live in.

Limitations and Outlook

LIMITATIONS

Single case study.

No post-occupancy evaluation yet.

Operation model stays at proposal level.

Online comments are auxiliary, not survey data.

OUTLOOK

Track real use after the project opens.

Test the system in bookshops, guesthouses, workshops.

Co-design with the local community.

Watch out for gentrification and cultural essentialism.

Thank You

I welcome your comments and questions.

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