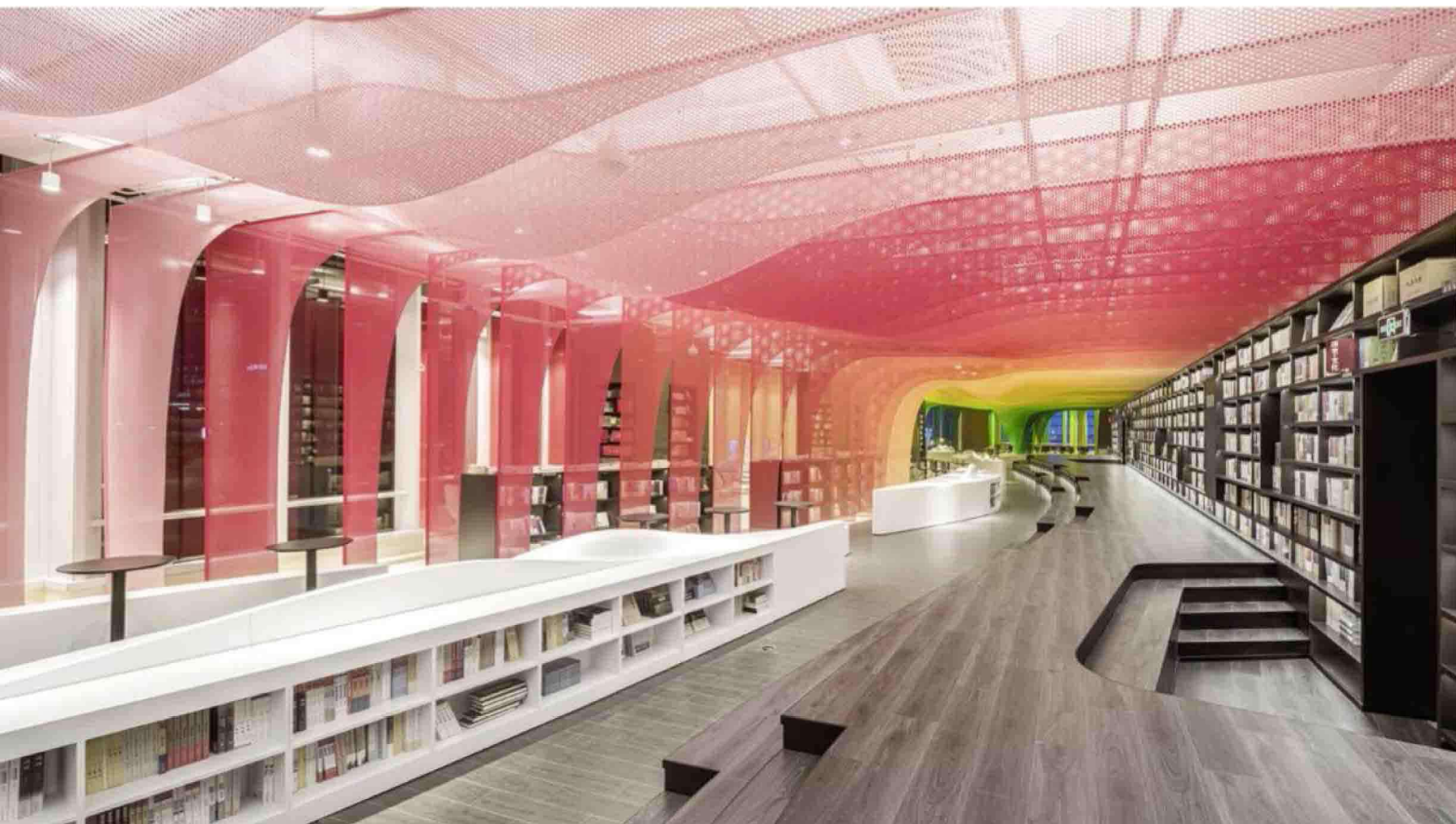


RETAIL

The latest in a series of mega bookstores in China pushes individual experience



CreatAR

SUZHOU – Printed books have been around for more than 500 years and are likely to outlive all the digital devices we currently use and most of those we can imagine. They are durable, portable and require no batteries, and they wait patiently on the shelf for a second reading, decades after the first. And yet, publishers and bookstores worldwide are under siege from online retailing and the distractions of social media. Jin Hao, a Chinese bookseller who is also a publisher, decided to replace his 20 small outlets in Shanghai, which were steadily losing business. He commissioned designer Li Xiang (*Frame* 116, p. 92) to create a spectacular interior in the historical city of Hangzhou, and he named it Zhongshu after his second daughter, Zhongshu.

The success of his first destination store encouraged Hao to commission others from different designers. The latest was entrusted to Wutopia Lab, a versatile Shanghai-based architecture firm that had put its stamp on an earlier Zhongshu bookstore in the Chinese metropolis. This time the studio took on a site in Suzhou, a city famed for its canals and ancient gardens.

Now that these megastores have begun to proliferate, principal architect Ting Yu was challenged to come up with an interior that would stand out from the crowd. His first move was to persuade the client to lease the second floor of a new commercial development, giving him twice as much space for the same amount of rent that is charged for half of the ground floor. »

A rainbow of perforated aluminium panels serves as a wayfinding device in the bookstore's main hall.







Shoppers enter the store through the Sanctuary of Crystal, in which books appear to float on acrylic-resin shelves.

‘Customers are encouraged to make discoveries and to find personal spaces’

Shoppers look up, catch a glimpse of the brightly lit interior through expansive windows, and are prompted to make the ascent.

Yu divided the space into four zones, each with a distinctive character, so that every customer is encouraged to make discoveries and to find a personal space in which to browse or linger. The most dramatic of these is the Xanadu of Rainbows, which serves as a multilevel reading room. Stepped bookshelves provide places to sit, and their undulating plan evokes a winding river. Perforated panels arch across the ceiling in a vibrant rainbow of colour. Rogers Stirk Harbour employed a similar idea in Madrid’s Barajas Air Terminal, but there the vault is high overhead. Here, the colours act as a wayfinding device and impart a dynamic

rhythm to the boxy volume. To conform to local fire regulations, the architects substituted perforated aluminium for the acrylic resin they had used in another project, and found they could layer it to create moiré patterns and different degrees of density.

The Castle of Innocence uses a different scale and vocabulary to attract small children and their parents. Terraced houses provide a play area and quiet retreats, and kids can gaze up at a starry sky: a bowed ceiling vault in which tiny points of light define constellations and a close-up of Saturn with its rings. Shoppers journey to these spaces via the Sanctuary of Crystal, where staff can engage customers and present new books, and the Cave of Fireflies, a dark tunnel lit with clusters of illuminated cords suspended from the ceiling. — MW

Children’s areas are often visually loud, but the Castle of Innocence is a retreat-like setting under a starry sky.



