



**OPEN PLAN**  
*Gathered Sky*,  
by James Turrell,  
a Skyspace  
in Beijing's  
Temple Hotel.

## LIGHT FANTASTIC

A forgotten Qing Dynasty temple in Beijing has been restored and transformed into a luxury hotel filled with luminous art—including China's only James Turrell installation.

BY TONY PERROTTET



“AFTER YEARS OF INDIFFERENCE, CHINESE PEOPLE OF MEANS ARE NOW INTERESTED IN RESTORING ARCHITECTURE FROM THE IMPERIAL AGE.”

—JUAN VAN WASSENHOVE



**Y**OU NEVER KNOW what you'll find when you go bicycling in Beijing. Eight years ago, the Belgian entrepreneur Juan van Wassenhove set off from his home in the Chinese capital to pedal around the vanishing *hutongs*, the labyrinthine alleyways that were once the heart of the ancient city, when he glimpsed what appeared to be the tip of a stupa rising above slate-gray roofs. After shouldering open an iron gate, he was amazed to discover a derelict wooden temple with a beautiful double-level main hall crafted by artisans in the Qing Dynasty—a rare architectural treasure. “That day I found my mission,” he recalls.

The antique structure—known to the faithful as Zhizhusi, the Temple of Wisdom—was one of three Tibetan Buddhist temples built in the mid-18th century near the Imperial Palace. Battered and charred by fire, the edifice was hardly promising for development. But years of restoration has transformed it into an art hotel with eight luxury rooms, a gallery, a restaurant, a courtyard adorned with sculptures and—in a surprisingly effective stroke—the only James Turrell Skyspace in China. Stripped of its bleak Communist facade, the near-ruined temple today has a new life, subtly blending Eastern spirituality with contemporary Western style.

The dramatic saga of China is written in its walls. In the mid-1700s, at the height of the wealthy Qing Dynasty, a pious emperor decided to build a Tibetan temple on the site, and Zhizhusi became home to a revered sage known as the Living Buddha. The sixth Living Buddha was still residing there two centuries later when the People's Liberation Army marched into Beijing in 1949, and symbols of the Imperial Age were repurposed for the Communist Revolution. Zhizhusi became a factory, first for mosaics, then bicycles, medical supplies and, in the 1970s, China's first black-and-white televisions. Neglected and abused, the building slowly decayed. “Left to its own devices, the temple would not have lasted even three or four more years,” van Wassenhove says of his first visit in 2005.

He contacted two business partners—Lin Fan and

#### SACRED GROUND

Clockwise from top left: The hotel features monks' chambers converted to guest quarters, at left; inside the temple's main hall, where film screenings and cultural events are held; the main hall aglow at night.

Li Chow, both veterans of the local film industry—and in late 2007 the trio funded the removal of debris so investors could see the temple's potential. When a shabby modern ceiling within the main hall was removed, it revealed wooden panels covered with Sanskrit paintings. By 2008, when the plan for a boutique hotel was revealed, investors, mostly wealthy Chinese, were enthralled. “It was the right time to do this project,” says van Wassenhove. “After years of indifference, Chinese people of means are now interested in restoring architecture from the Imperial Age. Ten years ago, we wouldn't have had the skilled workers available in China.”

The public got its first glimpse in 2011, when a wing opened containing the Temple Restaurant Beijing, a palace of French gastronomy run by Ignace Lecleir, the Belgian-born former general manager of Daniel in Manhattan who moved to Beijing to open Maison Boulud in 2007. When he first saw the site, Lecleir was charmed by the space, but felt its condition was too poor for a serious business—until he saw the renovation. Today his restaurant attracts a mix of affluent expats, curious travelers and wealthy Chinese residents. “I was worried that local Chinese people would avoid this neighborhood,” Lecleir says. “Now they are about two thirds of our business.”

The hotel is also a showcase for contemporary art, both Chinese and international, sourced by van Wassenhove through friends. “I particularly wanted to find artists who work with light,” he says. “It suits a temple.” The German light designers Ingo Maurer

and Atelier Areti provided state-of-the-art illumination. But the coup was securing the James Turrell work *Gathered Sky*, which lured the notoriously reclusive artist himself to Beijing to fine-tune the design. “James was very touched by the temple space,” says van Wassenhove. “This is not a museum; it's a living place in an intensely urban setting. Being in the heart of a city with millions of people, it's the most accessible Turrell work in the world.”

The hotel is an oasis of relative calm within the traffic-clogged Chinese capital; here, one can still hear birds in the morning and spot the occasional butterfly. Several of the guest rooms are in the old TV factory, but more atmospheric is to sleep within the centuries-old chambers that were combined to make guest rooms; their floors heated in winter and lattice windows protected by double-glazed glass. And now, every Sunday at dusk, guests and the paying public can partake of the serene Turrell Skyspace. As classical music softly plays and LED lights complement the shifting colors of the waning day, I lie on the floor and watch swooping bats and then—miraculously for Beijing—two stars appear in the sky. After, I return to the hotel courtyard, past statues of tiny monks carrying small light bulbs like sabers, into the restaurant bar beneath Ming Dynasty eaves. “I think we've extended the life of this temple for 300 years,” van Wassenhove tells me. “I feel we've done our duty. Hopefully others will now follow suit.”

*The Temple Hotel, 23 Shatan North Street, Dongcheng District*