

The man behind Shanghai Library's stunning new branch in Pudong

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Architect Chris Hardie was stopped by an old man at Shanghai Library East Branch.

"You look familiar," the old man, holding a semi-professional camera, asked in English with Shanghai accent. "Oh, are you the architect?"

He wasn't the only one who's in the new library to take pictures. Some had come many times.

The new library, which opened at the end of September in the Pudong New Area, has quickly become a new landmark and the city's latest favorite photogenic location. It has not only attracted the social media generation with all kinds of mobile phone photo filters but also grandpas and grannies with big cameras.

"I'm very happy to see that," Hardie, the library's architect, told Shanghai Daily during a recent interview, after he posed with the old man, at his request, in front of the building's architectural model.

"Libraries are my favorite

public buildings. If you go to a theater, you can watch plays. If you go to a gallery, it has exhibitions. Libraries have it all. Library 3.0 is far beyond just a reading space."

Hardie is principal and design director at Danish studio Schmidt Hammer Lassen and global design firm Perkins&Will. Having designed many libraries around the world, he said this Shanghai project is still special.

Its monumental shape is inspired by a unique type of stone from the region, the Taihu stone, which has perforated surfaces and eroded hollows.

"It's also called the scholar's rock in English, which matches with the idea of a library, not just a reading space, but a place where people can have scholarly dialogue," he explained.

The two pavilions that the library looks to be "floating" above amidst the forest contain the Reading Theater and a children's library with a central courtyard and outdoor spaces.

In November, the library

staged its first musical performance at the Reading Theater, titled "Six Chapters of a Floating Life," based on the Chinese classic romance literature. Many audiences found it refreshingly intriguing to watch a musical at a library.

Modern libraries, according to Hardie, are no longer just about books but about connecting people who use the spaces. That means more public spaces for social needs such as exhibitions, performances and events, or simply for people to relax.

"See? That guy is napping," the Scottish-born architect said proudly, pointing down to a chair on the second floor while stopping on the fourth to make observations.

"And that woman not far away is having fun with that exhibition. Everyone can enjoy different functions in this space."

The three-hour interview was conducted while strolling around the new library, often stopping for observations like this. The architect, who visits



Artist Xu Bing's giant installation "Living Word" becomes one of the most popular photo spots at the new library. — Chen Cheng

almost every week, still has fresh discoveries here and there — new exhibitions, rooms that were not used before, new machines and visitors using the space differently.

"Serendipity," he said. "People come here for different reasons. You can focus on yourself, or you can wander around and discover something. It's designed so. And you may discover something new every time you explore, like I still do."

Those who show off their pictures and tips of the new library on social media platforms often praise the multiple exhibition and event spaces covering each floor. One of the most popular photo spots is the reading room on the third floor with artist Xu Bing's giant installation "Living Word."

The artwork is composed of 842 acrylic characters flying across the south side of the floor. It is also a secret favorite spot for Hardie, but from a different perspective — looking back to the building from Century Avenue, especially at night.

Then, the façade becomes like a big TV screen showing

all the activities inside. The bamboo is like the trees outside; the installation looks like birds flying over the trees.

He hesitated about revealing it, "because I want people to discover their own favorites."

Hardie has designed many libraries around the world, but it is the first time he has done so "in my home."

His first business trip to suburban Beijing was planned for a month, and he ended up living and working in Shanghai for more than 10 years. The city is his home, where he has made many friends and where his two children grew up.

"This is my home. So it's definitely more challenging," he said. "Because my friends will come, my kids will visit and their friends too."

To his relief, the feedback is quite positive, especially in terms of large public spaces with huge potential to explore new formats for social functions.

"Many foreign architects admire what's happening here in China, in Shanghai," he concluded. "Not every place can still devote so much into building public spaces like libraries."



Architect Chris Hardie stands with the architecture model of Shanghai Library East Branch. — Dong Jun