



## **TONGFU BUILDING**

# **A CRESCENT OF APARTMENT STANDING ON WEST NANJING ROAD**



### **I. ARROW POINTING TO THE INTERSECTION**

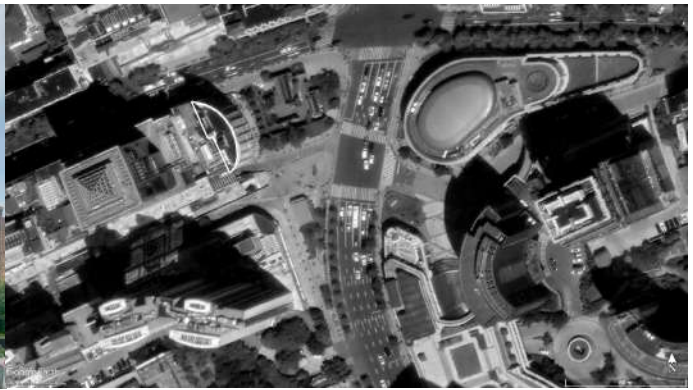
When you heading east through the bustling commercial street of Wujiang Road, the ever-changing shop signs on the street were crowded into view, as were the crowds lining up in front of the newly opened burger shop. It seems to be just a silent background as for the office buildings and residential areas behind the skirt buildings.



The view on Wujiang Commercial Street, 2021



The sharp corner of Tongfu Building opposite to the shopping mall, 2021



Satellite photo of the intersection of Wujiang Road and Shimenyi Road, 2021  
Site of Tongfu Building.

The jam-packed street became totally an open space when turning around at the intersection, with four curved facades from four different direction. Three among them, with billboards hanging on, belonged to the shopping mall. While the tallest one was the curved facade of Tongfu Building. The continuous horizontal sills and evenly openings on this facade formed an impression as elegant as other old apartments in concession area of Shanghai. However, unusually, a sharp corner was shielded behind this sophisticated facade. The sharp angle of the volume, which you could hardly remove your eyes from, like an arrow, straightly pointed to the crowd opposite the intersection.

## II. EXTRUDING A CRESCENT OF LAND

In 1918, Bubbling Well Road, which had been built during the first project of reclamation and construction of roads in Shanghai International Settlement in 1860s, encountered its second widening. The distance between road red line was increased from 60 feet in 1906 to 70 feet, aiming to meet the increasing needs of traffic in the concession area. While in the previous year, Yates Road, a north-south road that came across Bubbling Well Road, was widened from 35 feet to 40 feet.



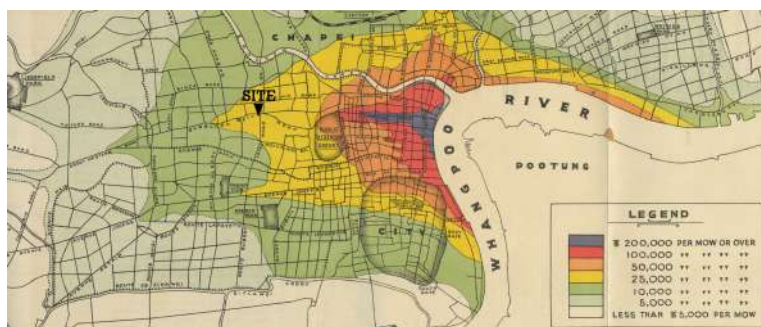
Map of Concession Area, Shanghai, 1935.  
Location of Tongfu Building.



Shanghai Street Direction, 1947.  
Road and built environment near the site.

Then in 1934, the Bank of China purchased a strip of land at the junction of Bubbling Well Road and Yates Road, expecting to build a new branch in the heart of the International Settlement. The strip was surrounded by Bubbling Well Road and Yates Road in north and east as well as Love Lane in the south, which is a quiet lane built also by reclamation in the end of 19th century. The various traffic demands of the three roads formed different turning radius in north and south sides of the strip. In addition to the straight boundary on the west, the strip turned out to be an irregular shape, like a crescent lying besides the street, in the total area less than 400 square meters.

As an extension of Nanjing Road, Bubbling Well Road was strung out along with the city's biggest department stores and the most opulent residences, leading to its rising price of land. The height and density for the building along the road had increased year by year as a response to expense.



Approximate Market Value Zones in Shanghai, 1926.

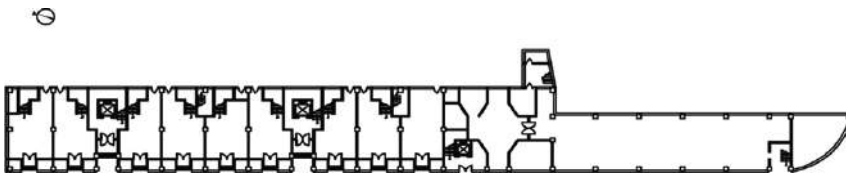
Under this circumstance, the first two floor of the building were planned to be the Bank and the upper eight floors would be rented out as private apartments. The dual usage demanded separate entrances and circulation for three different types of user: bank customers, private tenants and their servant.

How to satisfy the complex needs in such a narrow and peculiar site was the design challenge for Luke Him Sau, the Chief architect for the Bank of China. Under the limitation of site area and the complex functional program, it seems like an automatic choice to extrude the crescent of land, covering the whole plot with building. That lead to its curved facade and the sharp-angled volume which reproduced the irregular shape of the plot in three dimension. And the architects among them, compared with those who paid great effort to create a specific style of appearance, were better to be told as move with the tides than resolve the crisis. What they did was accepting the disadvantages, actively transforming them into characteristics.

### III. CURVE FACING THE CITY

The design of appearance began with the curved facade connecting the two intersections at the north and south of the plot, posing a direct impression to the citizens. In fact, this was not the first time Luke Him Sau had dealt with such a facade. His first building in Shanghai, the Hongkou branch, had faced the similar situation in both functions and site with Tongfu Building. The one-hundred-meter long facade of Hongkou branch along the North Sichuan Road terminated in a curve at the busy road junction adjacent to the Hongkou Hotel. Willing to reveal the vertically separated functions to the facade, Luke emphasized this sense of horizontality by using continuous concrete sills to unite the rows of windows, on the first three floors and chose to reverse on the upper floors where he instead inserted vertical bands between bays, like pilasters, to break the monotony of the very much longer facade. The curve culminates in the sculptural tower rising above the building to create a visual crescendo.





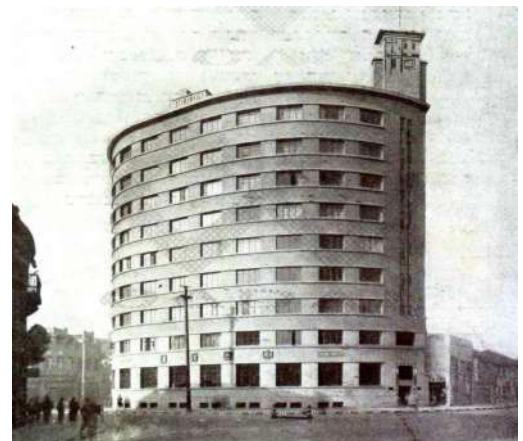
Luke Him Sau, Bank of China Hongkou branch, Shanghai, 1933.

Location, side view of the building revealing the structure's slender profile and the ground floor plan.

While this time in Tongfu Building, rather than call it “a facade with a curve”, it may be better to describe it as “a facade as a curve”. Also its location on Nanjing Road asked for a stronger sense of publicity and magnificent impression. Luke’s decision was to emphasis the horizontal continuous sills again, but in all nine floors from bottom to top, expecting to complement the shorter frontage by enhancing the the building’s curved profile. Vertical bands between bays were back off the sills in each floor, whose pleasing proportion were created by repetition.

The separation of functions was implied, but in a more delicate way compared with Hongkou branch. The ground and first floor were faced in stone, with brick used throughout the rest of the facade of the apartment. The orderly lines of fenestration became taller and squarer at the ground-floor windows than the windows above, ensuring a bright interior for the main banking hall.

Instead of running this horizontal details to the ends of the building, as he had also done at Hongkou, Luke made a feature of them. At both northern and southern ends he coiled accentuated the contrast of vertical and horizontal by extending the vertical line above the cornice into small brick towers. These operations of orthogonality elements made the whole building resemble a Chinese scroll. So the viewer, standing at any intersections, would feel the interface extend freely to the other side, beyond the limitation of the narrow frontage.

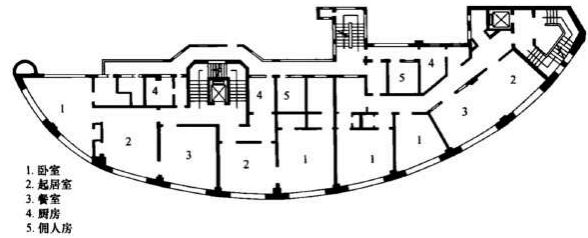


Yates Road branch, Shanghai, 1934.  
Horizontal details on the curve facade.

#### IV. REGULAR ROOMS INSIDE IRREGULAR PLAN

As describe above, the consideration for dual function turned out to be separation in the design of section, for the lower two floors occupied by the service hall and warehouse of the Bank while the upper eight floors were leased apartment. Wrapped in the crescent shape, the standard floor plan can be divided into three layers: bedrooms, corridors and BOH areas.

Each floor contained three different type of houses, with two, three and four bedrooms respectively. All nine bedrooms were equally arranged along the curved wall on the east side, corresponding to the evenly fenestration on the facade. The layer beside bedrooms was the internal circulation space for each apartment, connecting directly with the two stairwells and elevators for tenants.



Yates Road branch, Shanghai, 1934.  
Plans of standard floor.

The third layer was dining rooms and kitchens. By partly decrease the depth of the plan, Luke created a narrow patio to ensure the lighting and ventilation for each kitchen. An outer corridor was attached to the west facade, giving the servant easy access to the dining hall and the kitchen of each family by using the independent stairwell in the middle.

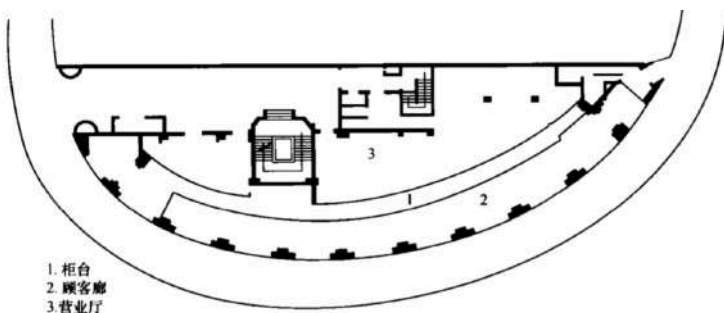
As an honest response from the architect, the layout of the plan undoubtably overcame the original challenge proposed by the limitation of land.



Narrow patio entered from Wujiang Road,  
2021

#### V. CIRCULATION AS TENSION IN BETWEEN

Between the external form, which reflected the laws in transportation and urban planning, and the internal layout, which responded to the individual needs of users, the traffic spaces, including corridors and stairwells, demonstrate balance between function and aesthetics, Connecting the life in the internal and External space, here the Ingenuity in architecture design shines.



Yates Road branch, Shanghai, 1934.  
Plans of ground floor.



Interior of the bank branch on the ground  
floor, 2021.

On the ground floor, different entrances indicated the separate function of the lower bank and the upper apartment. The service hall of the bank can be entered from both the south and the north side of the curve facade, aligning vertically with brick towers over the roof. The two entrances were connected inside the hall with a corridor along the curved wall, which offered customers continuous scenery inside.

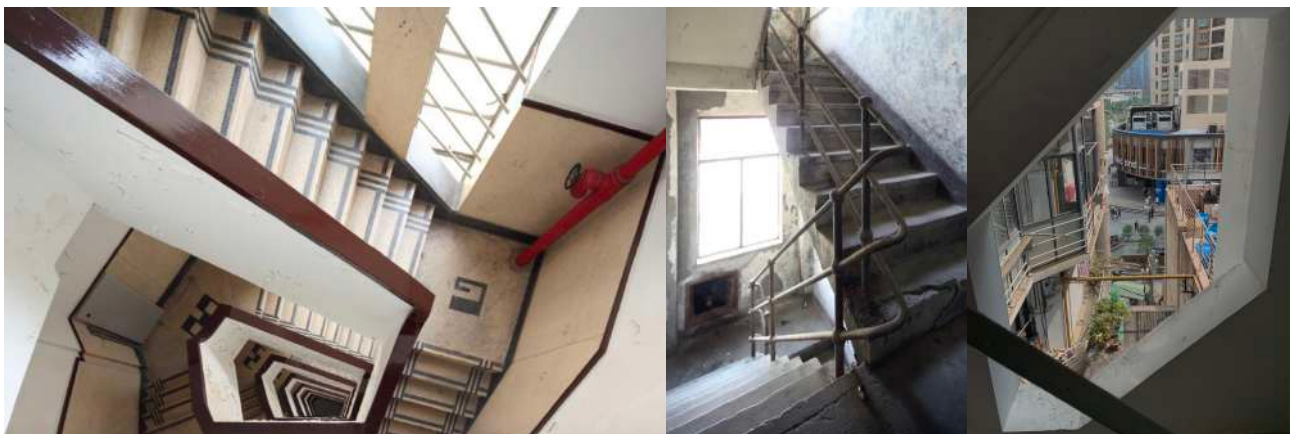
The upper resident also had two entrances on the ground floor. Entering from the gate on West Nanjing Road, tenants can get to the four-bedroom house through the northern stairwell; while entering from Yates Road, tenants would first come across a courtyard formed by the building volume and an enclosing wall. Two other stairwells were connected with the courtyard, one leading to the two-bedroom and three-bedroom houses while another leading to the BOH area of all three houses on each floor.

The standard floor plan shows separate circulation of the tenants and servants more clearly. All nine bedrooms were arranged along the curved wall on the east side, corresponding to the evenly fenestration on the facade. The layer beside bedrooms was the internal circulation space for each apartment, connecting directly with the two stairwells and elevators for tenants. The next layer was dining rooms and kitchens. By partly decrease the depth of the plan, Luke created a narrow patio to ensure the lighting and ventilation for each kitchen. An outer corridor was attached to the west facade, giving the servant easy access to the dining hall and the kitchen of each family by using the independent stairwell in the middle.

It's not hard for us to imagine the life scenes of both the tenants and the servants here. With the southern stairwell and the outer corridor interweaving but not intersecting with each other, an interest of the richness of life arose.

## **VI. DETAILED BALANCE BETWEEN FORM AND FUNCTION**

If it said that the design in plan and section show the architect's endeavor for satisfying user's needs, the consideration of details and materials would more reflects the balance between needs and aesthetics.



Yates Road branch, 2021.

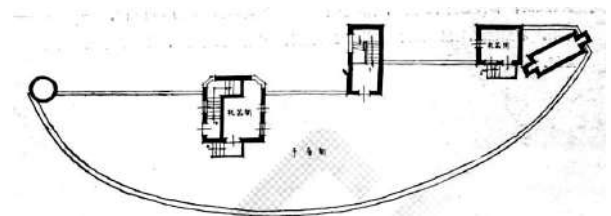
The northern triangular stairwell accessing the private the apartment the rectangular stairwell accessing BOH part in the middle.



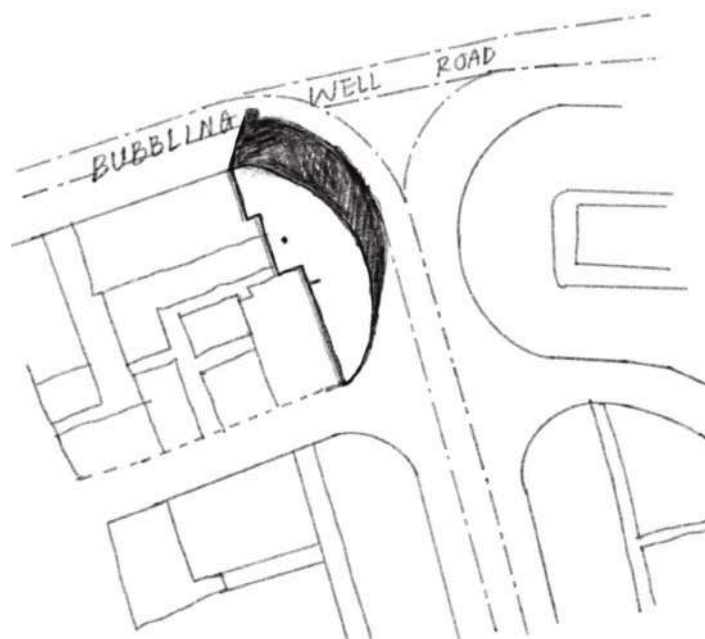
The three different stairwells in Tongfu Building confirmed this view perfectly, as this overlooked element was always taken into careful consideration by Luke. In the main staircase on the southern side, encircling a elevator inside, was patterned in a modern style with simple black geometric designs and narrow stripes inlaid in a pale terrazzo floor on the treads and landings. The solid wall was topped by a wide banister of dark wood forming a continuous line that snaked its way around the inside of the entire staircase.

For the stairwell at the sharp point formed by the curved facade as it meets the straight line of the rear wall, appeared as a steep triangular one. Though Luke was unsatisfied about its separation with the elevator and constricting the height of the Bank's Bubbling Well Road entrance at it ascends from the ground floor, it present a sculptural volume and created a classic beauty with the same exquisite materials as the southern one. The elevator mechanism was above the prominent cornice, but skillfully hid behind the brick tower to keep the building's quite appearance. These are obviously the results of the architect's hard work.

In contrast, the servant stairwell located in the middle responded more directly to functional requirements. The square shape, concrete materials, and semi-open walls together projected an atmosphere of bright and concise. Luke's quest for aesthetic vaguely revealed at the hexagonal opening on the wall here.



Yates Road branch, Shanghai, 1934.  
Plans of roof floor.



"...Therefore, we have got an answer to the very complicated question about our proposition on the art of architecture. We think that genre is unimportant. For a successful architecture, firstly, it shouldn't be separated from the need; secondly, it shouldn't leave the background of the era; third, it shouldn't be against the principles of art; fourth, it shouldn't divorce the spirit of culture."

Luke Him Sau and his assistant Wu Jingqi had published the article *Our Proposition* in the July 1936 issue of the magazine *China Architecture*, expressing their views on architecture design.

It seems we are far from the lifestyle that tenants and servants should be separated in their circulation. However, today in Tongfu Building, we can still appreciate how design was honestly presented between the demand and aesthetics as a response to disadvantages of site in the crowded city, and finally contained the variety and complexity of life. This is the deeds completely consistent with their words and also the altitude worth learning until today.

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