

OLD HOUSE FACE: TAIWANESE LIVES IN THE HISTORY, ARCHITECTURE, AND STORIES OF OLD BUILDINGS

老屋顏：走訪全台老房子，
從老屋歷史、建築裝飾與時
代故事，尋訪台灣人的生活
足跡

Buildings are more than artifacts of human history; they are quiet witnesses to that history, repositories of stories, places of reconnection, and potential sites of renewal. The authors and photographers of the Old House Face Studio bring us an in-depth, full-color tour of such architectural landmarks all over Taiwan.

Buildings are more than artifacts of human history; they are also quiet witnesses to that history, repositories of stories, places of reconnection, and potential sites of renewal. Their features reflect the unseen choices of our ancestors and ourselves. A building that has survived through decades or even centuries in a place like Taiwan can tell stories of several different worlds.

This exposition of old Taiwanese buildings by the artists of the Old House Face Studio gives these old sentinels a new voice via in-depth interviews, travelogues, extensive research, and a rich array of photographs. The first section focuses on several distinctive features of older buildings from the Japanese occupation onwards, such as decorative wrought-iron window grilles, ornamental concrete screen bricks, and magnetic tiles, each of which represents a branch of



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craftsmanship come and gone amid social development. The book's second section dives more deeply into human narrative, as the authors interview the people whose lives have been shaped by these buildings.

By pairing visual with textual imagery, the authors of *Old House Face* unite the historical and contemporary significance of beautiful old buildings all over Taiwan, and provided aficionados an exciting guide to Taiwanese historical architecture.

Old House Face Studio 老屋顏工作室

Studio founders Hsin Yung-Sheng and Yang Chao-Ching travel all over Taiwan to photograph old buildings and document the stories of people whose lives are touched by them. Hsin and Yang share their findings widely on several social media platforms including Old House Face, a self-developed app that locates these landmark buildings within a digital environment.

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By Old House Face Studio

Translated by Mary King Bradley

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Iron Window Grilles

The handmade aesthetic of everyday society's master craftsmen

Iron window grilles made their way to Taiwan in 1920 in the wake of Western modern architecture. Once common on temples, western, and shophouse-style buildings, their totemic patterns were created from welded, forged, and bent wrought iron. As Taiwan's economy soared after 1970, people worried less about basic needs and gradually began to value the finer things in life. In addition to theft protection, iron window grilles and the complicated techniques used to make them allowed craftsmen and homeowners to put their original artistic visions on display. The grilles quickly became very popular on residential buildings.



Window grilles had no standard patterns. Their design relied entirely upon the craftsman's ingenuity, but geometric patterns formed from straight or curved lines were the most common. Figurative designs such as Mount Fuji, cherry blossoms, and plum blossoms were also common. Some homeowners with a particular fondness for music designed several grilles with musical staves and notes. The variety of designs always surprises us.

At the peak of iron window grilles' popularity, there was heavy competition among the craftsmen who made them. These artisans sought to vary their designs by integrating different totemic patterns and forms as well as three-dimensionality. Classic designs were then assembled into product catalogs from which customers could choose. After a homeowner selected a design, the master craftsman would visit the site to measure doors and windows before adjusting the grille dimensions for each accordingly. As a result, every grille was a custom-made work of art.

Handmade window grilles rapidly disappear after 1990

The exquisite craftsmanship of wrought iron window grilles rapidly disappeared in the 1990s, pushed out primarily by marketplace innovations in decorative materials and building styles. Though beautiful, wrought iron grilles rusted easily and required regular painting to keep them in good repair. The cost of making them was also much greater than the price of new types of building materials. Wrought iron, no match for the galvanized iron (stainless steel) that became widespread in the 90s, was immediately supplanted. Over time, window grilles became entirely functional. Mechanized production increased manufacturing speed but left no room for variation, turning household balconies into silver cages of stainless steel. In addition, the architecture of a densely populated Taiwan gradually evolved from single-story homes into multistory buildings, lessening the need for window grilles day by day. The evolution of materials and residential buildings drew a line dividing the old grilles from the new, likewise marking the endpoint of this handcrafted artform's popularity.

Although wrought iron window grilles are very nearly a thing of the past, with some careful observation you can still find these works of art in use while out and about. We enjoy a game of "window grille deconstruction" as we admire them. A seemingly complicated grille design can be viewed from various directions and angles and disassembled into a simple four-way continuous pattern. Alternatively, we look for the irregularities in the regular that suggest an interesting mental association. In the course of our observational journeys, it sometimes seems as if we are moving from one window grille rhapsody to the next.

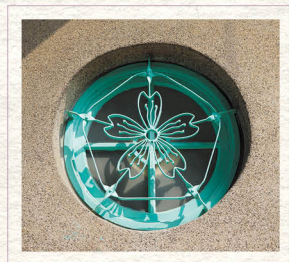
A window grille's simple lines mean less material is needed for its construction, saving time and money. We greatly admire the master craftsmen of earlier years, who could take into consideration and then balance everything required, despite having limited materials at their disposal. Even if the design is the same, handmade window grilles can have subtle differences arising from the method of construction. Observing the differences between two grilles is just as much fun as a game of "Spot the Difference."

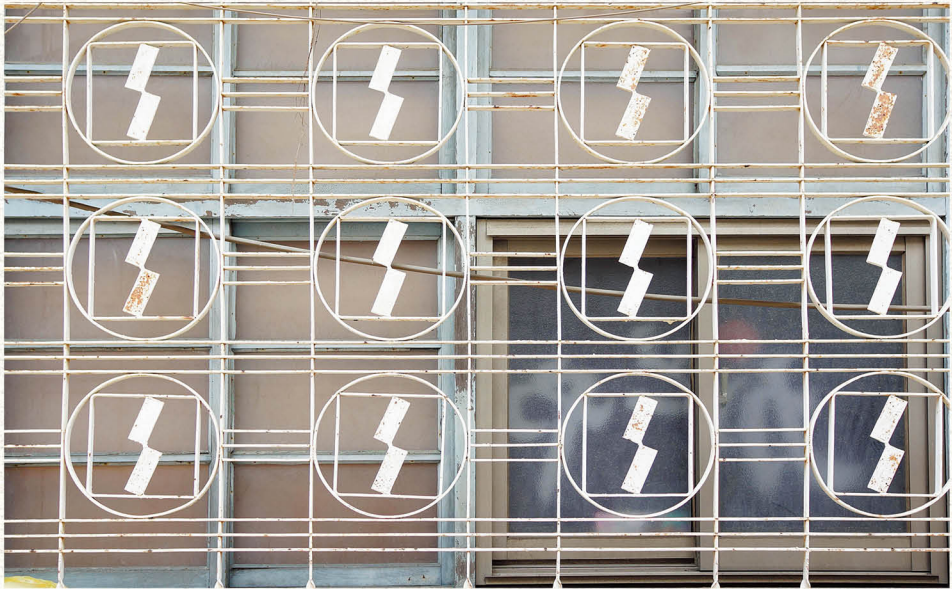
The once plentiful and beautiful window grilles are now gradually disappearing in the wake of changing urban lifestyles....



A building's design pairs a round window with a square breaker box. The window grille's crisscrossing straight lines have been manually adjusted into curved arcs. Doesn't the checkered pattern of the iron grille over light seeping through frosted glass give this window the appearance of a delicious pineapple bun?

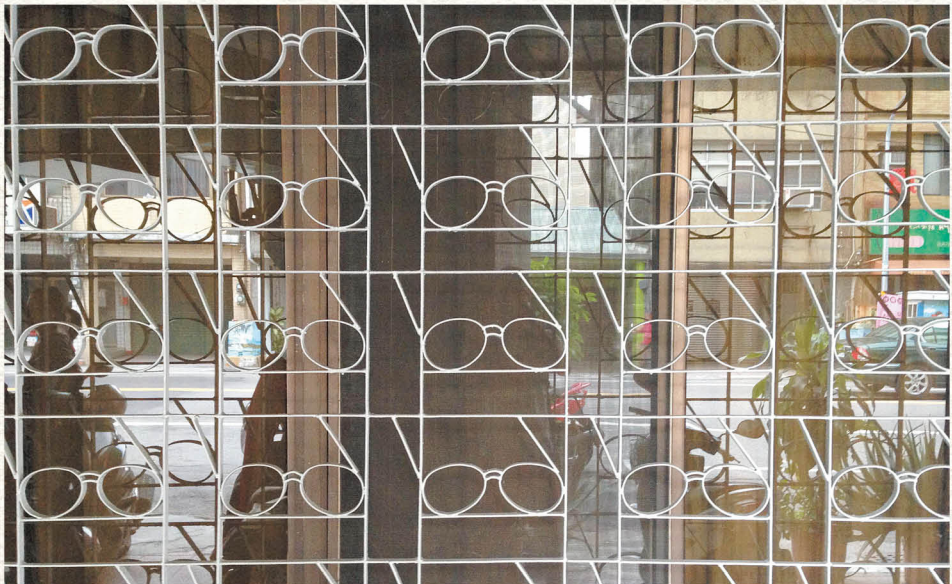
An elaborate cherry blossom is in full bloom on this small round window. The window's light blue-green color is complemented by the wall's brown grit wash plaster, accentuating the window grille's gracefulness.





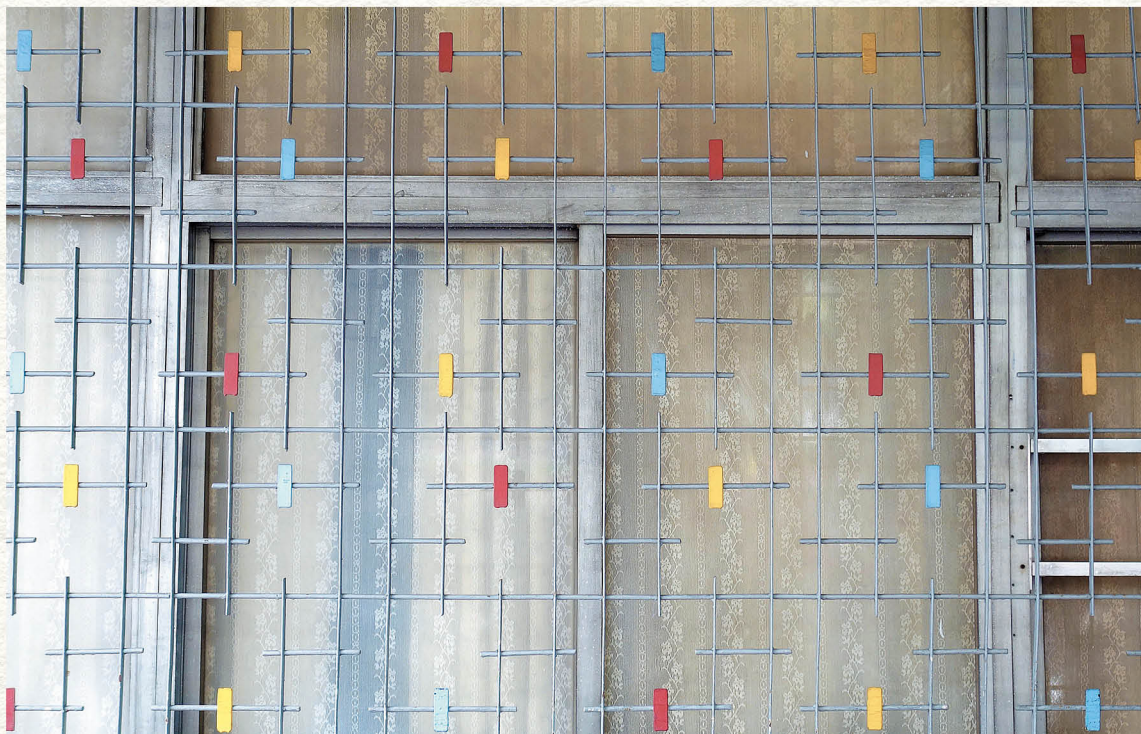
As a child, I would rush to take possession of the area under a banyan tree as soon as the school recess bell rang, then draw a circle on the sandy ground. This was the battlefield where we children played marbles. Rectangles that form a lightning-bolt inside a circular design resemble the colorful pattern that somehow made its way into the translucent, sparkling center of the marbles.

This window grille looks like a wall of eyeglasses on display. Perhaps this place was actually an eyeglass shop? Worth mentioning is the atypical style of this window grille's design, which does not appear to be a flat plane. The straight diagonal lines of the eyeglass frames create a 3D perspective.





A boat in the design of a window grille near Kaohsiung Harbor in the Yancheng district suits the local atmosphere to a tee. When I inquired before taking photos, the proprietor said he had never noticed it. Many beautiful things exist in life. We were pleased we could help the store's owner discover this lovely nook.



Vertical and horizontal lines extend and intersect but break off in unexpected places. It's unclear if the red, blue, and yellow were arranged on the gray grid deliberately or at random. We were told this is a "Mondrian" rhythm.



This window grille, gorgeous and complex, was presumably the pride and joy of the homeowner. Did you notice the "sovereign decree" hiding in the center? (Hint: It's a Chinese character surname.)



Circles and squares with small holes in them are reminiscent of soda crackers. Set a pot of tea next to them, get the jam ready, then add the crackers from the window. You can take a break from your window grille travels to put up your feet and drink a cup of afternoon tea.

This window grille has several layers of fortification! The outermost layer is a stainless-steel railing, followed by black plastic mesh and then the innermost layer of the window grille. It's rare to see anti-theft materials from different periods in simultaneous use, but what attracted us most were the small white flowers that seem to stretch their necks as they lift up their heads to greet grandpa sun!



Iron window grilles aren't always found on a building's façade. The Jinzi Theatre in Tainan has a ticket window decorated with a design of four-pointed stars and Buddhist hooked crosses. Contrasted with the overall simplicity of the building's exterior, this small detail becomes an unexpected focal point that grabbed our attention.

Considerable effort was required to create what looks like the chaotic disorder of a children's painting. Every point where lines join had to be welded, testing the craftsman's patience. Despite the chaos, we look for the regularity in the irregular. Can you find the hidden bunch of grapes and the parrot?