

The Hyperstationary State: Five Walks in Search of the Future in Shanghai

By Owen Hatherley

Abstract

Shanghai is invariably used in film sets and popular discourse as an image of the future. But what sort of future can be found here? Is it a qualitative or quantitative advance? Is there any trace in the landscape of China's officially still-Communist ideology? Has the city become so contradictory as to be all-but unreadable? Contemporary Shanghai is often read as a purely capitalist spectacle, with the interruption between the colonial metropolis of the interwar years and the commercial megalopolis of today barely thought about. A sort of super-NEP has now visibly created one of the world's most visually capitalist cities, at least in its neon-lit night-time appearance and its skyline of competing pinnacles. Yet this seeming contradiction is invariably effaced, smoothed over in the reigning notion of the 'harmonious society'.

This essay is a series of beginners' impressions of the city's architecture, so it is deeply tentative, but it finds hints of various non-capitalist built forms – particularly a concomitance with Soviet Socialist Realist architecture of the 1950s. It finds at the same time a dramatic cityscape of primitive accumulation, with extreme juxtapositions between the pre-1990s city and the present. Finally, in an excursion to the 2010 Shanghai Expo, we find two attempts to revive the language of a more egalitarian urban politics; in the Venezuelan Pavilion, an unashamed exercise in '21st century socialism'; and in the 'Future Cities Pavilion', which balances a wildly contradictory series of possible futures, alternately fossil fuel-driven and ecological, egalitarian and neoliberal, as if they could all happen at the same time.

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Nothing in this world develops absolutely evenly; we must oppose the theory of even development or the theory of equilibrium.
Mao Zedong, 'On Contradiction', 1937

1. Flyovers

There is a theory about the People's Republic of China, voiced most recently in Boris Groys' intriguing, if historically nonsensical *The Communist Postscript* (2010), that what seems like merely the administration of capitalism by an oligarchy that is a Communist Party in nothing but name, is actually a gigantic, prolonged version of the New Economic Policy embarked upon by the Bolsheviks throughout the 1920s – the use of a dirigiste, state-planned capitalism to build up productive forces to a level where the population has gone from being poor to being reasonably comfortable, after which the Communist Party could take command of this wealth and use it for the building of full Communism, something which can, after all, in 'stage' theory only be achieved after the development of a mature industrial capitalism. This is at least what Deng Xiaoping always claimed was going on.

And this stage of 'building up the productive forces' has lasted thirty years – why not? Lenin, for instance, clearly envisaged that NEP would last a lot longer than the 8 years it got before it was replaced by Stalin's forced collectivisation, chaotic industrialisation and total suppression of private commerce. If we make what seems – with good reason – to be a rather extravagant theoretical leap, and see this as a super-NEP, what could the future Communist China do with the hypercapitalist infrastructure, the gated communities, the skyscraping office blocks, of the largest Chinese (and, in terms of 'city proper', largest world) city? One symptomatic question is – if, as is often claimed, China is making the world's biggest investment in green technology, then what are they going to do with all those flyovers?



Shanghai is laced with elevated roads, all built over the last ten years or so, at roughly the same time, but to rather more impressive effect, as the Metro system. That system of public transport is very nice, but aesthetically forgettable (and one

could contrast the extreme flamboyance and spaciousness of Soviet metro systems here); this system of flyovers is monstrous, dominant and utterly unforgettable. The friend who is showing me round tells me of a conversation he had with a Party member, on the (apparently still extant) left-wing of the CCP. When global warming really hits, when the oil runs out, and the use of the car has to be curbed, what will the Party do with all this? Can they just ban people from driving? Will people accept it? Yes, was the reply, but the Party merely lacks the will. So before I had even seen these constructions, I had in mind the idea of them cleared of the traffic which is too thick and dense even for their astonishing capaciousness, with bicycles and walkers making their way along these lofty elevated roads. They're one of the most impressive works of engineering I've ever seen, for the less than impressive function of moving the private car with its internal combustion engine from A to B – though, at least for the moment, taxis are so abundant and so cheap, sometimes equalling the levels of private cars, that to call it wholly 'private' feels a minor misnomer.

After driving along and under a few of them in a dazed, numb state when off the plane, the first of these flyovers that I really saw was in a working class district in the north of the city, near Caoyang New Village, a 1950s housing development which my friend was showing to his students. The area around it was so impossibly dense, the width of its expressways so yawning, the clusters of towers so high, the metro station toilets so abject (the PRC's inegalitarian public convenience policy is notable here – in an area where there are likely to be westerners present the loos are impeccable, elsewhere they're infernal) and the crowds so massive that I simply gave up and went back to bed, taking a photograph of two towers seemingly being eaten by the flyovers before passing out.

The flyovers too are hierarchical. While the flyovers in the centre have the smoothest-finished cream concrete you're ever likely to see, in the suburbs it's a much more standard material. They still tend to be rather dominant, but they're not meant to be looked at, and they travel through what is still a heavily industrial landscape, with huge factories on either side of the motorway. While some flyovers are meant for spectacle, these don't feel like they're meant for people at all, instead inducing the feeling of being a vulnerable fleshy part of a metallic network of freight, lessened only by the all-too-human aggressive driving that is ubiquitous here. There was one horrible



moment on one of these expressways where various container lorries constantly overtook each other, manoeuvring into position to the point where it seemed as if they were actually intent on crushing the pathetic little car we were in. But many of the flyovers really are meant to be seen.

Near People's Square, the former racetrack for the Europeans transformed post-revolution into a large public plaza, there's some sort of flyover convention, an intersection which is less spaghetti junction and more the intestines of a terrifying mythological beast. These sorts of organic metaphors tend to come to mind here, because there's little rationalistic or machinic about this place. The concrete itself is of the very highest grade, but note also how there is planting running half the way up the concrete pillars, an effort at civic beautification which is visible mainly to the pedestrian, more than to the driver. Presumably this is there as a gesture to The Harmonious Society, with nature intersecting with technology in non-antagonistic manner, but it's far more like the engineers kept in mind the possibility that sooner rather than later these monuments will be obsolete, so made them pre-ruined, with picturesque vegetation creeping up them to simulate what they might look like when they've fallen into desuetude.



They also serve to frame the skyscrapers around, to delineate them, present them in their best light, to let them be seen from a contemplative distance, which gives a futurist flash to what can often seem crushingly dense and badly made on closer inspection. Except that's the sort of thing only noticed later on – you don't notice the details. When I first saw the Huaihai intersection, I was absolutely

frozen in awe, and then impressed by the fact that everyone else seemed entirely used to it, that it had become normal, just something you'd cross under on the way to work. There's a general ability to seem completely unbothered by what feels like a bloody steamroller of gigantism and force here which is admirable, although slightly worrying. Groping around for comparisons, the nearest thing seems to be the spidery expressways of Los Angeles – but those course through a low-density suburban sprawl, rather than charging through super-dense conglomerations of competing skyscrapers. But here too, any putative Reyner Banham would probably find that the flyovers are the main event, works of public infrastructure more impressive than the baubles on top of the towers of capital. Their forcing through areas of already huge density necessitates an extra pedestrian layer being inserted into them – there's plenty of these intersections that have pedestrian walkways running across, such as the blue steel and glass pedway sandwiched between the roads in the last of the pictures above. There you can also see a pillar with some dragons on, some sort of tribute to the non-human forces that made this intersection possible.

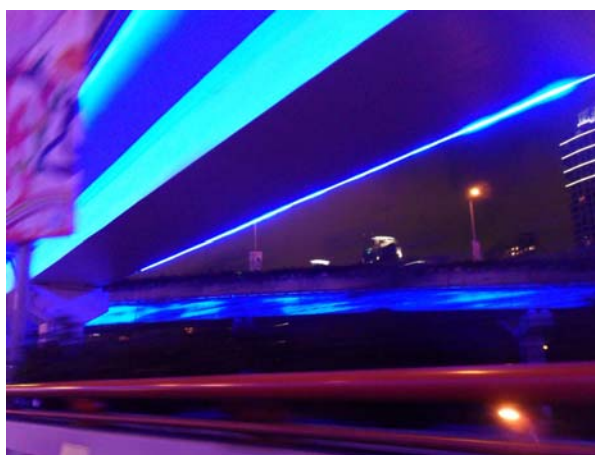


Yet throughout Shanghai, and here especially, it's hard not to wonder – how does this work, how does this sustain itself, and how do you get to the point where you're entirely blasé about all this? Looking up at the flyovers, I'm as completely at a loss to get any impression of how all this works as I would be looking at an electrical diagram, only capable of interpreting it as an abstract sculpture or as a shocking biomorphic organism – a potentially lethal one, in both cases. But not as

a road. In terms of confrontation with an alien and awesome modernity, I feel here like the proverbial European visitor to New York or Chicago around 1920; the *components* of this cityscape are all familiar, there are no objects or forms I haven't seen before, but all of them have transformed into monstrous and illegible new combinations.

Keep the not-so-small nature of combined and uneven development out of your head for a moment, and the 'Shanghai as the Future' argument is the most seductive one of all the potential futures on offer in the dubious field of architectural futurology. To the untrained eye – *very* untrained – this seems the more preferable future city, more than the hooray-for-shanty-towns strain or the isn't-Dubai-like-super-interesting strain; the Foxconn factory in Shenzhen is a long way from the centre of Shanghai, and the ugliness of primitive accumulation is less immediately apparent; and I didn't see anyone sleeping under these flyovers. But the real reason why Shanghai-as-the-future is so convincing is because it looks like you imagined the future would look like when you were 14 years old. If the primary coloured wipe-clean architecture of New Labour Britain was designed by and for overgrown infants, Shanghai seems to have been designed by and for overgrown adolescent boys. It's as if the engineers, architects and planners watched *Akira* and, rather than, say, picking Richard Rogers' plans for Pudong, looked at the dystopian animated city and thought 'hmm, let's build *that* instead.' We'd be fools not to indulge the disappointed teenagers who hoped the 21st century would be a damn sight more aesthetically invigorating than Greenwich Millennium Village. If you feel you've been denied the future, then to find it elsewhere looking *exactly like you expected* is a little uncanny. Disappointing, if you thought the future should be qualitatively rather than quantitatively different from the past. Yet Shanghai's sheer revelling in its own modernity is very difficult to resist, at first, and it's most difficult to resist when you travel along the flyovers at night. 'What's this for?' I ask my friend, somewhat taken aback. 'Aesthetics!' he answers.

For the moment, then, abandon any critical edge and just salute the preposterous place, stare in abandonment at a city which lines its *flyovers* in endless strips of blue neon at night, that makes the mundane act of driving into an abstract procession of light and geometry, that intensifies the process of commuting into this outrageous onrush of non-objective sensation. There are apparently a lot of car crashes in Shanghai.



You eventually reach ground level at something like this, with pedestrian walkways cutting across neon-lit geodesic domes, skyscrapers with searchlights cutting through the ubiquitous fog, and some rather familiar corporate logos. This massive project of state-built infrastructure is the less trumpeted of the major public works in the city. There's the Metro, of course, with nine underground lines built in the time it takes to string a tram line from one side of Manchester to the other, but there's also the Maglev magnetic levitation train. I didn't take it, although by all accounts it's marvellous, for the main reason that it gets you – at record-breaking speed! – from the airport to the tabula rasa business district in Pudong, which was not where I was going. The Maglev might be the one area where the prolonged NEP of the People's Republic entailed doing something *differently*, where it put a genuinely advanced technology at the service of a public, rather than private means of transport, but compared with these monuments to the desire, as P.J O'Rourke delightfully puts it, of 1.3 billion people for a Buick, it seems paltry indeed (O'Rourke 2010).



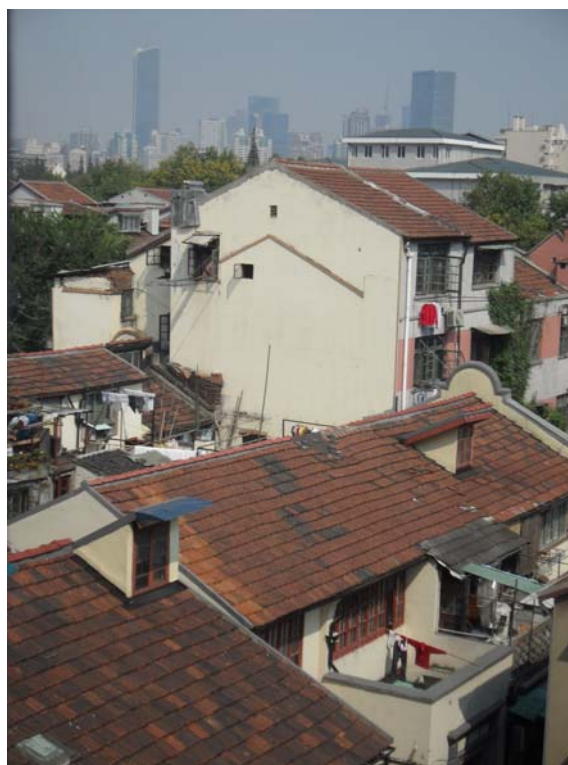
2. The Juxtaposition

While I stood taking a photograph of tightly packed terrace paths leading to a cluster of skyscrapers, a sardonic voice from behind me said ‘ah, I see you’re doing *The Juxtaposition*’. ‘It’s ok, I did that all the time the first few weeks I was here’. The Juxtaposition is, however, all but irresistible for the amateur architectural photographer in Shanghai, as many articles and collections have made clear. This is The Juxtaposition in its purest form – a decidedly low-rise, tumble-down old Chinese street, with washing and power lines criss-crossing above your head (the washing lines have apparently been attacked in a ‘Be Civilised!’ campaign on behalf of the city government, along with the wearing of pyjamas outside) that terminates in a skyscraper. The point of The Juxtaposition is that it’s the easiest way to capture in a single image the process of either a) the unrush of development that is soon to transform everyone’s lives for the better, or b) the way that wealth has hardly ‘trickled down’ in contemporary China or c) the denigration and domination of traditional housing in the form of imported skyscrapers, depending on your aesthetics and politics.



Try a different Juxtaposition, and you find more ostensibly traditional houses, in rather better condition; as are many of the courtyard and terrace housing compounds that still make up a large proportion of the city, and once made up its majority. They’re not what they seem at first, and to straightforwardly call them ‘traditional’ or ‘indigenous’ is to make something of a category mistake. In fact, the main forms – the alleyways of the *Lilong*, the redbrick compounds with their stone gates called *Shikumen* – are as much a product of modernity as anything else, a form of speculative housing created in the early 20th century combining ‘Western’ models

– the English terrace, the profitable maximisation of space, and quite often art deco detailing – with the hyper-dense models of Chinese cities. The photograph below is another way of doing The Juxtaposition. Again, the low-rise housing with the washing hung out to dry, with this time the skyscrapers in the further background (this is a question of angle – just behind, but at a tricky angle are the massive towers and malls of Xujiahui), and if you look closely at the windows, you’ll notice that they’re Crittals – the same metal windows you’d get in a 1930s semi. Which is also appropriate, as there’s also a lot of 1930s semis in Shanghai.



The climate is not that of the places where 1930s semis are usually to be found. The city is stiflingly humid, even in October, and there’s all all-pervasive smell which seems to be made up equally of exhaust fumes, open drains, sweet food and



the plane trees planted everywhere by the French when they ran (this part of) the place; and all this is at its worst in the areas where there’s most space and least shade. An extremely dense Lilong area is, for all its deficiencies of private space, climatically highly appropriate, the way the houses rear up to provide access and enclosure also a means of catching one’s breath. It’s an excellent way of (unintentionally, no doubt) providing a truly pedestrian architecture. This is where one might lament the destruction of these forms in favour of a pomo-meets-Corbusier landscape of towers and expressways, but actually this place is recently renovated, and in excellent nick, right down to the small details.

This sort of light, small-scale preservationism is not what is generally expected here. Some of these dense low-rises have been even more heavily Regenerated nearer the centre, selling various nick-nacks, with the probably unintentional effect of making the place feel like The Lanes in Brighton in clientèle, product and urban form. Here, more happily, it's just housing.

There is, famously, a housing development on the outskirts of Shanghai called Thames Town, which simulates suburban England; yet that's not merely some *Evil Paradises*-style innovation of the neoliberal city, but also a continuation of the urbanism of the International Settlements, when Shanghai was a semi-colonial city with an intricate proto-Apartheid system. They were already building the disingenuously traditionalist, hedge-protected, class-and-race-ridden world of classic English suburbia here in the 1920s – or was it partly an import from the imperial periphery into the imperial centre? There's an essay surely waiting to be written that places the birth of suburbia, as a way of sheltering from the urban proletariat, in the colonial city rather than Letchworth or Bedford Park. Yet even more than in North London, you have to leap through a fair few hoops in order to take photographs of these houses, so heavily guarded are they by sundry gates, hedges, driveways and walls. Some of the villas are picturesquely worn, some of them so heavily restored that it's very hard to tell if they were built in the 1920s or 2000s. Not for the first or last time here, any finessed Hegelian ordering of architectural history is completely confounded. Is this kitsch because it's a recent remaking of a colonial villa or is it kitsch because colonial villas are inherently kitsch? Or both?



Lots of the villas were subdivided during the Cultural Revolution, when briefly Shanghai was the Shanghai Commune, governed by an alliance of non-state bodies – militant, factory-based bodies like the Workers’ Headquarters. In Shanghai, the largest industrial city in China at that time, as it was until very recently, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was more a genuinely ‘proletarian’ thing than a matter of student Red Guards having pitched battles with each other, something analysed in Elizabeth J Perry and Xun Li’s *Proletarian Power* (1997). Here, if not elsewhere, the Cultural Revolutionaries’ logic was undeniable – in a city this dense, it is and was obscene for one family to have so much space to themselves. What makes this place so unlike Finchley, or, one suspects, Thames Town, is the sheer closeness of such typical suburbanism to, not only the extremely dense Chinese compounds, but also the ultra-metropolitan architecture built in a more obviously European style. At one moment you might find a typical piece of late 19th/early 20th century *Groszstadtarchitektur*, occupying an entire block, which is right next to several one-family villas, like the burbs were built next to the metropolitan centre.



This is all a mild digression from the main matter of The Juxtaposition, because this might lead one to assume that the villas exist in their own space, that a viable suburbia could still exist in the centre of Shanghai. On the contrary – most of them are loomed over by high-rises. In one by Huaihai Road, next to an intriguing, almost brutalist-meets-deco-meets-Chinoiserie block of pre-war flats in purple engineering brick, you find a house with banners on it which I’m told are

protesting the apparently poor remuneration being offered by the city council to purchase the plot.

Here The Juxtaposition is once again in full effect, with the sheer gigantism of the towers making their precursors look even sillier. On close inspection, there's rather a lot going on here. What you have is, facing the street, basically what would have been facing the street in 1937 – the villas, obviously, the shops and restaurants, and also clusters of small blocks of flats, sometimes with architectural ambitions, like these Frank Lloyd Wright projections – and behind them, tower after tower of residential flats.



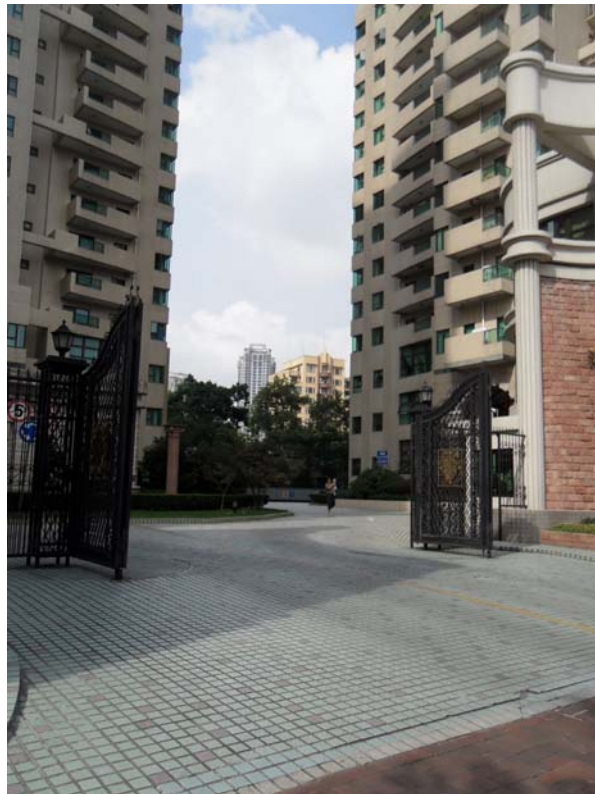
Yet there are still many of these villas and low-rise blocks of flats in the French Concession, particularly strangely, lots of them are left lining the main road, Huaihai Lu. On a train to Nanjing a few days later I flick through a bilingual in-train magazine, which has an article profiling this 'aristocratic' street and one of its former inhabitants, an industrialist who was involved in philanthropic causes of various kinds. The article was centred on the question of what really makes An Aristocrat, and asked in conclusion – is the true aristocrat merely someone who drives an SUV, who buys expensive gadgets and clothes, and surrounds himself with beautiful women? No – a true aristocrat is someone who is highly educated in arts, culture and science, keeps apprised of the social issues of the day, and donates to charitable causes. The ideological implications of all this were too much to think about on such brief acquaintance with contemporary China.

There are still, if you have someone telling you what to look for, ways of discerning the class and national differences in these places, though. The proliferation of satellite dishes in the block above, for instance, is a sign that it's a block occupied largely by expats, as, in a less high-tech version of the Great Firewall, Chinese residents are discouraged from getting dishes, lest they pick up television of dubious provenance. I did get the chance to watch some legal Chinese-English television, in a Nanjing hotel. It was a show called *Luxury Time*, in which a Chinese presenter spoke to a French couturier about the fact that he makes his clothes in China, something deeply unusual in the high-end market. As

the presenter repeatedly pointed out, the moral of the story is that China can produce niche goods too, not just mass-market sundries (This luxury has a Potemkin quality, sometimes. Nanjing, a place even more precipitously uneven than Shanghai but which I spent little enough time in to feel less qualified to pontificate about, has the most strikingly empty branch of Prada). Those socially concerned aristocrats, again.

It would be a fallacy, meanwhile, to assume that villas = rich, high-rise = poor, as the really untrained English eye might. These gates open out to a gated community of enormous concrete towers, not of little houses with gardens. The development, again in a strangely Brightonian moment, is called Embassy Court.

The long art deco block is also, if scaled down a little, something you could imagine on the Sussex coast. It is after all the sort of place those who used to live in the villas here might have moved to after 1949.



Of all the pre-war architecture left around – apart from the 1930s’ almost-skyscrapers – the most memorable were the Shikumen. The comparison which is apparently usually made is to English terraces, as mentioned, and you can see some of that – and these are denser, deeper and darker than the most intricate and harsh of West Yorkshire back-to-backs – but this compound, at least, was apparently built for clerks, who could afford the elaborate ornament, rather than industrial workers, who presumably had to make do with something even smaller and darker; but, again, the darkness, if not the smallness, is a very rational approach to building in a place as humid as this. At the entrances to these courtyards there’s usually a chap keeping an eye on the place, and a board with some information in Chinese. My friend was usually translating these, but stupidly I wasn’t taking notes. Without wanting to denigrate in any way the much-overlooked (by the English at any rate) virtues of gigantic, serried and identical tower blocks, these courtyards and alleyways do feel genuinely special, with a feel

of community and collectivity which feels very rare in any contemporary housing. Yet it would be ridiculous to insist that a population continue to live in places this cramped. Is there a way of replicating that without retro-kitsch? Could, or does, Shanghai have an equivalent to a Park Hill, a Byker Estate or a Walden Two, a place that tries to transfer this accidental ethos into something truly modern? At the entrance is a name and a date, 1927. The year that the first, abortive Communist Revolution broke out among the proletariat of the industrial city. It escaped to the countryside after being slaughtered en masse, returning 22 years later after having to gradually rewrite its theory about urban and industrial primacy inbetween.



The past is revived in other ways. On the outskirts, towards Jiaotong University's main campus, you can find a Klimt building, a piece of simulacrum Shanghai Secession. This piece of gratuitous Junkspace contains sgraffito work copied from the Viennese soft-porn decorator's corpus, and a silver Josef Hoffmann entrance. There are, as we shall see, many different ways of building where nothing was before, and this is one of the more symptomatic yet surreal approaches – to create here a version of Old Europe that could never, ever have existed in this form. In its wilful miscegenation it's in the tradition of 1920s Shanghai, a place which clearly always excelled at The Juxtaposition, both in architectural terms and in terms of having the extremely poor in the closest proximity to the extremely rich.



Yet the final juxtaposition here is to stand in for something I couldn't photograph. It might be the largest city of the world's largest manufacturing economy, but Shanghai itself is deindustrialising, and the Expo is on a massive brownfield site, just like the Stratford Olympics. What the city really makes its money from is a property boom, just like London. There was something horribly depressing in that realisation, akin to the amazed incomprehension when you check China's world position in terms of size of economy (2nd) and in per capita income (99th, below Jamaica, Albania and Angola, amongst others). Yet, as soon as you're out of the city, you're in the Yangtze River Delta, one of the most heavily industrial areas in the world, a mostly-continuous strip of cooling towers, factory farms, blast furnaces, big sheds and cities, places like Zhenjiang, the size of or double the size of Birmingham, each crowned with a couple of their own glittering, Jin Mao-style Chinese skyscrapers among the residential high-rises. You could see whole new towns, which nobody has moved into yet – not that you could always tell the difference, as the railway station platforms never have people on, as they file onto the platforms from airport-style waiting rooms above, leaving all these enormous cities looking disturbingly empty to the passing commuter whether they are or not – perhaps advisedly. This is a ground zero of primitive accumulation, the contemporary equivalent of the charred, destroyed landscapes of the north of England in the 1820s, an apocalyptic pandemonium wrenched out of the paintings of John Martin, set in and consuming an incongruously placid wetlands landscape.

Europeans born after the 1970s haven't ever seen an industrial economy going full-pelt. It's an incredible and horrible sight. I couldn't photograph it as we were on a high-speed train, which went from Shanghai to Nanjing in just over an hour – it takes 6 on the normal train. The nearest approximation to it of all the photographs I did take depicted a snatch of the suburban landscape on the way to Jiaotong university. Round here, it's all factories, instant cities and messy, gimcrack commerce, and in-between are small strips of the rural, with amputated villages and peasant remnants peeping out. When I took this, I thought I was looking at a wasteland in the foreground, but looking at it now, I wonder if they might be allotments, and that I'm looking at agriculture.



3. Megalopolis

If all that sounds like I have a problem with the ubiquitous high-rises of Shanghai, then that's not quite it. In a conversation when here, my Chinese-speaking interlocutor interrupted my spiel on the skyscrapers here with the well-placed phrase 'Koolhaas alert!' and one of Koolhaas' smarter statements on matters East Asian was that it's somewhat unseemly how Europe is so panicky and hand-wringing about high-rise when in much of the rest of the world it's just the normal means of accommodation. Yet the high-rises are as strange, fascinating and worrying as anything else here, a form which has gone mutant, and as Koolhaas is one of the few to have ever seriously analysed this - by which I mean in the absolutely peerless 'Junkspace', not in OMA's sillier or more glib pronouncements and projects - to end up with a certain amount of Koolhaasism is an occupational hazard here (Koolhaas, 2002). Below is a view of Xujiahui, one of the Shanghai districts which were designated as capitalistic Special Economic Zone in the early 90s expansion of market reforms that followed the 1989 protests and the Tiananmen massacre. It's dominated by two towers called the 'Grand Gateway'. They do something rather typical for Shanghai. Mostly, they're smooth, SOM or late-Foster glass skins, but at ground level they're typical pink-glass shopping malls, the sort of tat you'd expect to find in 80s London or today's Moscow.



The fact is, architectural periodisation is completely meaningless here. In Shanghai there wasn't really a socially engaged Modernism along the lines of the *Congres International d'Architecture Moderne* in the interwar years, there was *Moderne*, *Art Deco*; and after the war, *Stalinist Gothick* and unpretentious (but hardly modernist) utilitarianism prevailed. Now, in the skyline, you can pick out everything from historicism to pomo to *Constructivism* to *Expressionism* to serene *Miesian Modernism*, with the only logic seeming to be that rather chaotic notion of *Harmony and Pluralism*. There is one unacknowledged influence on the contemporary skyline, and that's *Socialist Realist*, or more precisely *Stalinist architecture*. I'm not using that as a pejorative, but as a description.



Above is a typical example - serried, identical towers, with south-facing aspect, generously proportioned windows and breathing space inbetween, which are dressed with clearly machined-ornament, whether the pitched roof at the top or in the 'brick' coursing at the corners. It's not the crass, appallingly planned, architecturally illiterate, Zhdanov-goes-to-Vegas Yuri Luzhkov style drolly described as 'Capitalist Realism' (Meuser & Goldhorn, 2006), but something with rather more conviction and thought behind it; it comes out of a combination of market preferences which the UK market, for instance, is unwilling to service (the south-facing aspect), and state edicts - the pinnacles that you find on every block and which have such an effect on the Shanghai skyline, are the result of state policy, to stop extra floors being built on top, as they were in boomtime Hong Kong; like the New York Zoning Code analysed by Hugh Ferriss, Corbusier and Koolhaas (Koolhaas 1994), is dirigisme leading to delirium, rather than a pure, Babylonian capitalist potlatch. What it *really* is, is the modernist spatial planning of the Congres Internationale d'Architecture Moderne going Classicist, and here we should remember that the architect Andrei Burov, one of the CIAM's 20s Soviet contacts, was later one of the leaders of Socialist Realist architecture, pioneering the use of prefabricated ornament in monumental construction. Much of contemporary Shanghai is the fusion of Burov's two preoccupations into a new architecture.



The block above does this with more demented panache than any other I see here - the sheer length and height of it, slathered in all kinds of prefabricated 'stone', with the particular approach coming very, very close indeed to the style of 1950s Moscow; except rather than the boulevard-and-courtyard approach, it's towers geometrically organised in parkland. This is another unphotographable prospect, because this is one of eight identical towers stretching all the way past a main road in the southern suburbs. The lower, retail block in front is part of the same tabula rasa. The approach is redolent of the notorious photograph of a statue factory in the 70s USSR churning out identical Lenins, and I'd be intrigued to see a picture of the ornamental production line. Elsewhere, you occasionally find a pure example of a neo-Karl Marx Allee approach, although these were almost completely unphotographable....more often, you have small pavilions to the street and towers spiralling off into the distance just behind, of staggering density.



So in short, contemporary Shanghai is in many ways the fusion of the two architectures that contemporary urbanists find most uncomfortable - the repetition and lack of any 'street' in CIAM/Athens Charter high modernism, and the imposingly monumental, obsessively ornamental approach of the Soviet Union in its fully Imperial, pre-Khrushchev pomp.



Appropriately enough, there is one fully fledged example in central Shanghai of the full-blown Stalin style - the former Palace of Sino-Soviet Friendship, one of those peculiar 'gifts from the Soviet people' that were built in satellite states in the early 1950s - see also the Stalinallee, the Warsaw Palace of Culture and Science...with the difference that China was never really a satellite, and after the Sino-Soviet split it became the Shanghai Exhibition Centre (and I think 'Top Marques' is another instance of Luxury Time). Aside from all the Corbusier-meets-Lev-Rudnev, which is more prevalent in the residential suburbs, the other main influence - and I hesitate to call it that - is the Manhattanism that prevailed before a more sober modernism made it across the Atlantic, and similarly it's a serendipitous consequence of planning edicts.



That's not to suggest that it's all a pure matter of importation and adaptation. In one of the extraordinary essays in his 1998 *Terminal Architecture*, the late lamented Martin Pawley included one on 'Asia Reinvents the Skyscraper', where he pointed out how all of the innovations in skyscraper construction since the Sears Tower and the World Trade Centre were completed in the 1970s took place in Tokyo, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, Seoul, Taipei and (lastly) Shanghai, while

Europe and America retreated into the aforementioned handwringing. He'd no doubt have added Dubai and Abu Dhabi if he'd written it a decade later, but as it is, the analysis is about protectionist, developmentalist capitalism rather than neoliberal dreamcities. It discusses overlooked architects like C.Y Lee, and argues that they started to influence international architects like Skidmore Owings Merrill and Kohn Pedersen Fox, not the other way round. However, the difference with Shanghai is that it already had a skyscraper urbanism 60 years beforehand, which can even now be seen, crowded in by its grandchildren.



The Park Hotel, the finest of these, was



designed in 1932 by Ladislaus Hudec, a Hungarian architect, and it partakes of the clinker Expressionism of the period - it's like something in Hamburg, only gone up to full skyscraper velocity, but with a very similar approach to the Baltic nautical style. It's rather beautiful, and coexists rather well with its groping-for-attention partners, like the wonderfully absurd UFO-topped Radisson. Inside, though, it's not quite so Expressionist. It's the international luxury style of the 1930s, an opulent streamline classicism that could be found in the Queen Mary, or indeed in the Overlook Hotel. There's a similar sense of guilt and horror just offstage from the dinner jackets and bobbed hair.

Liverpool was the British Empire's main attempt at a real 20th century urbanism of steel frames and high-rises, and accordingly a lot of Shanghai looks like Liverpool. The still-extant firm of Palmer & Turner were the main architects of this Mersey-on-Yangtze, and it should be noted that they are now wholly an Asian firm. In their colonial days they designed is the clocktower of the racing club, from whose racetrack the People's Square was created, and from which you get a marvellous view of the Puxi skyline, where the 1930s are hardly visible – the Shanghai Number One Department Store can be seen in the bottom right-hand corner, dwarfed.



The towers take the planning requirement for an anti-speculative pinnacle very seriously, setting out to use it as an excuse for proper Gotham spectacle, to varying effect. Some of them have a Babylonian power which marks them out as true successors to 1930s Spectacle-Architecture, the attempt to ennoble and glorify hotels, trading floors and suchlike. The aesthetically worthwhile towers are in the minority, but they're also often the tallest. The largest above is the Shimao International Plaza, the fourth largest in the city, designed (apparently) by Ingenhoven, Overdiek und Partner, East China Architecture and Design Institute. Like lots of these things, it's mostly a hotel - 48 of its 60 storeys. Those prongs at the top and the general thrusting gives the requisite sense of the overpowering, a latent violence and paranoia. As does this, Tomorrow Square.



There's not much in the way of even today's circumscribed architectural avant-garde in the Shanghai skyline; the architects are elsewhere. There's Holl and OMA in Beijing, Hadid in Guangzhou, but here the main monuments are by Skidmore Owings and Merrill, Kohn Pedersen Fox, and of course John Portman. Tomorrow Square is one of Portman's hotels. The hotel designer and entrepreneur whose LA Westin Buonaventura was Jameson's defining moment for postmodernist architecture – a new architecture which, in Jameson's case, very presciently had nothing to do with the shortlived Michael Graves/Terry Farrell bells and whistles ornamental style, although that too has many descendants in contemporary Shanghai (Jameson 1991). The presence of Portman, always an exemplar of the entirely unashamed melding of art and development, is another reminder of how a socially concerned Modernism makes little sense in the Shanghai cityscape. What Portman's firm are very good at, however, is designing sleek and sinister buildings, and Tomorrow Square is a marvellous example of it – mute, inscrutable, and like the Shimao, with a science fiction hint that all that frippery at the top might have some function, as a launch pad, or in some way be convertible into some piece of technological villainy.



In ‘Communist’ China, some – like Nick Land in his book on the Shanghai Expo (2010) – seem very pleased that Modernism in Shanghai essentially picks up where New York left off before the 1932 *The International Style* exhibition, before the central Europeans with their Commie ideas got in the way of Manhattanism’s path (in its Shanghainese form), interrupting the play of eclecticism and miscegenation, and of spectacle. Land laments the *Style’s* purism, as most sensible historians would, but given the cheerleading for Chinese neoliberalism, it’s also clearly an argument based on expunging much of what is relevant in Modernism to our wildly unequal cities, leaving it also as mere style, just not a style of unadorned surfaces and flat roofs. Eclectic spectacle, purist spectacle, it’s all much the same, and neither have much to do with, say, Brutalism or Constructivism – but the aesthetic charge of the Shanghai skyline is furious and undeniable – at times, at least.

The name People’s Square evidently has some reference to the People’s Square it stands in front of. So what is the connection between Tomorrow and the People? In 1989, People’s Square was a place of assembly and protest but it didn’t see any massacres, apparently because of the constant presence of armed forces looming over the plaza. The Shanghai authorities’ handling of the situation earned them a prominent place in government – Jiang Zemin, most obviously, whose Three Represents became Chinese neoliberalism’s numerical successor to the Four Olds and the Four Modernisations. The square is of course loomed over by these skyscrapers, but also by a far less interesting city governmental building. Evidently the Party has little interest in emulating the capitalist delirium all around, or even at joining in the extraordinary CIAM Stalinism of the outlying residential areas, instead providing something sober and bland, with perhaps a little hint of the Fascistic stripped skyscraper style favoured by the Kuomintang.



The square is filled also with various kinds of advertainment, little corporate pavilions, which help to keep any more *dubious* uses at bay. Around is the pedestrianised strip of Nanjing Road, and more Manhattanism. An angular tower-and-base design with skyway round the back is a superlatively cranky composition, a much earlier example of the interesting things that can occur with ultra-density, when you have to force a tall building rudely into a site. A short walk from here, to The Bund, the command centre of the International Settlement in the semi-colonial era, is in order – specifically indoors, to the portals of Palmer and Turner’s Peace Hotel. The Hotel is of almost-skyscraper proportions, slightly smaller than the Liver Building, Liverpool; and the opulence of the place is matched only by what is, by contemporary standards, a rather small scale entrance, with no vast atria, although the construction technology would have allowed at least a grander entrance than there is here. It’s very much an earlier, more buttoned-up opulence than the dance-before-the-Japanese-come style of the Park Hotel, opalescent and exquisite. There’s one section where reliefs show the hotel as it fitted into the cityscape at the time, with rickshaws passing by. Its green mock-Chinese peak anticipates the legally obliged peaks of today:



Next to it is the same firm’s Bank of China building, which my guide considers to be an example of ‘Kuomintang Fascist architecture’, combining the symmetrical, stone-dressed modern classicism of Mussolini’s Italy with fairly tacked-on Chinese details. The pronounced vertical emphasis, though, puts it squarely in the almost-skyscraper category – in fact, this one can probably get the ‘almost’ taken away. It was finished in 1937, the last on the Bund before the very

similar neo-deco Peninsula Hotel, which is Shanghai's foremost example of Luxury Time. However, the people in front of it are photographing in the other direction.

The Bund's curve along the riverside now faces one of the unambiguously Good Things about contemporary Shanghai, a fantastic public space, an Improvement made as part of the Expo year. It's one part riverside promenade and one part square, and it is absolutely full of people, all photographing each other, as it should be. The tower just behind the 1910s-30s skyline was, we were quite sure, a direct transposition of the Ziggurat in Metropolis, and it has one of the most compellingly megalopolitan architectural elements in the Shanghai skyline – a searchlight as part of its illuminated crown. This is the Custom House, the Liver Building abroad – the most Liverpoolian building ever erected outside of Merseyside. There are currently proposals from Chinese property developers to build around the historic Liverpool skyline a 'Shanghai-inspired' new high-rise district in order to return the favour, but the city seems less than keen, which is a little unsporting.

And then, the lights went on. They come on roughly all at the same time, between 6 and 7pm. They vibrate, they pulsate, they shimmer different colours, they declare different slogans, and they give the effect of a city of excitement and melodrama, somewhere which, like New York in the 1930s, ought to be inspiring great poetry, films, and music, but strangely doesn't actually seem to be, by all accounts (most of those I speak to on the matter agree that the art and music scene in 'bureaucratic' Beijing is far superior).



If the architecture has antecedents in Sino-Manhattanism, or China's transcendence of Manhattanism as described by Martin Pawley (1998), then the lighting has more in common with the abstract play of light in Weimar Germany,

the sort of thing profiled in Janet Ward's *Weimar Surfaces* (Ward 2001), more than it does of the dully literal advertising lightscape of 1930s American, or the simple giant banal adverts of contemporary East European cities. The lights are mostly not really selling anything in particular, their spectacle is more complex. The floodlighting of the Bund is part of that rather than a historicist riposte, establishing a link between the two eras of determined display. The more raffish buildings are especially appropriate – the Hugh Ferriss Babel of Broadway Mansions is dressed with yellow neon, the very English-industrial bridge in front in vivid red.



Many of the Bund's buildings have the red flag of the People's Republic flying from them, something which forces you into a minor double-take, realising that it signifies something quite different here, or rather it does now. The Custom House's chimes play 'The East is Red' on the hour. The smaller, earlier public space here is where the notorious sign that didn't actually say 'No Dogs or Chinese Allowed' but did say something very similar in more polite language used to be, and it now has two monuments to the revolution that ended that.

One of them is typical figurative flag-waving hurrah socialist realism, and aside from a couple of curious snappers, lots of whom must be provincials up for the Expo, the large crowds entirely ignore it.



The Monument to the People's Heroes, meanwhile, is completely abstract – it could be a monument to practically anything, and it could be admired by a Speer as much as a Mies – which doesn't stop it being a rather powerful sculptural object, its rectitude a contrast with everything around as much as its high-rise form is a complement to it. Whether it conveys the Chinese people's struggle against imperialism and capitalism is less certain.

Yet the architectural money shot, if you please, the thing that everyone in front of the Bund was taking photographs of rather than of the Bund itself (developmentalism winning an aesthetic victory over imperialism, there), is the skyline view. A clear vista like this is pretty damn rare in Shanghai, because of the height of everything else and the ubiquitous smog, so when you get it it's all the more breathtaking. This is the skyline not of Puxi, the only built-up side of the Huangpu river until the early 90s, but of Pudong, the area that is really an entire new town which sprang up from



marshland after Shanghai was designated a Special Economic Zone – something the Chinese government originally refrained from, in order not to encourage the massively uneven development that made parts of Shanghai into one of the most modern cities in the world in the 1930s while horrifying poverty stalked much of the rest of the city, and of China. That the return to fully uneven development should coincide with the notion of the Harmonious Society is one of those ironies of history.

The skyline itself as the lights come on, like the expressways at night, is a joy that only a churl couldn't be in any way moved by, as if the Empire State Building couldn't be enjoyed because of the Dust Bowl (some *did* argue that, of course). To pick out details – the giant illuminated globes again, Adrian Smith's smooth, tapering, gorgeously elegant World Financial Centre, the improbable declaration 'I

Heart Expo' on the part of the Taiwanese Aurora company's offices, the pulsating lights extending even to the Expo-sponsored sightseeing boats (replacing much unsightly freight)...and, in the form of Oriental Pearl TV Tower, the curious feeling, once again, that you've seen the future somewhere before...that the future resembles very closely the past's idea of the future. It's the Space Needle or the Berlin Fernsehturm with an extra spiked bollock. There's no time, evidently, to imagine a new idea of the future.



On my second day here, as we sat in a cab careering northwards, my friend argued that what looks like it's moving at a thousand miles per hour is slowing down – that the famously accelerated growth rates are falling, but are still high enough (and the promise of success, symbolised by that empty Prada in Nanjing, is enough) to prevent any explosive social unrest; and yet the country's 600 million poor peasants aren't going to be on Luxury Time any time soon. In short, that China is actually approaching the stationary state, that it will soon enough be the most powerful country in the world and still a poor one. Just like the Soviet Union, the world's second largest economy from the 1950s to the 1980s. Only this time the American adversary will be tithed and indebted to them. I found this all rather hard to take when careering down a ten lane expressway lined with gargantuan skyscrapers, that made the continent I'm coming from seem utterly petty and provincial, but after ten days and several books it started to sink in. Perhaps one concept that could be applied to what's happening here now is one taken from music, Simon Reynolds' (2011) notion of *Hyperstasis*. A whizz-bang

brightly coloured gymnastic everything-at-once eclecticism which, while enormously immediate and sometimes completely thrilling, almost seems designed to hide the fact that no new forms are actually being created, that there are no new ideas behind it, and that any alliance between art and politics, any revolution of everyday life, has disappeared from the agenda. The hyperstationary state?

The lights all come on between 6 and 7, but the concomitant of that is that they all go off at around midnight. The apparent reasoning behind this is derived from environmental imperatives – all that wasted electricity – but the effect is ‘ok, you’ve had your fun, now go to bed’. The intended effect of the lights might be to present a vibrant and delirious techno city that never sleeps, but it’s hard to be the city that never sleeps when you have to get up at first thing in the morning for a day of hard, hard work.

4. Expo (International)

It’s difficult to quite capture the magnitude of the Shanghai Expo. In one sense, it’s another example of the bizarrely retro-futurist nature of Chinese ultramodernity – the dams, the skyscrapers, the UFO– topped hotels, the neon – and here an Expo, the first to have received the slightest bit of public attention since Hanover in 2000, which was noticed purely because Kraftwerk did the (delightfully retro-futurist) theme tune, or the Calatrava-popularising Seville in 1992; but, basically, this is the first of any note since Expo ‘70 in Osaka. For Nick Land in his Expo guide, this means China is waking us up from the long



nostalgic sleep of postmodernism, letting us revel once again in the thrills of a real urban modernity (Land 2010). There is at least some truth to that. The first thing you notice in the Expo confirms this – the hulking pedestrian bridges that traverse it, and in that even here, the infrastructure is an enormous and unavoidable

presence, the walkways lifting us from the tedium of the eyes on the street; and the second thing proves that things are really rather more complicated. That second thing is the queues.

The Expo's site extends across an area on the scale of a decent-sized industrial town, on both sides of the Huangpu river, hence necessitating a metro line to get from the Pudong side (the international pavilions, the bit in the magazines) and the Puxi side (the national and corporate pavilions); this comes free with your ticket. Reports suggest there were some major attempts to engineer the visitor figures above Osaka 70's record, with workers taken there on their holidays whether they wanted to or not; and those queues are astonishing. All around the site, giant screens inform you which Pavilions have queues that might last two to four hours. That most state socialist thing, an endless, bickering queue, dominates this showcase of dynamic, eclectic, ultra-capitalist spectacle. And everyone not in a queue is taking photos. Like most of contemporary Shanghai, the Expo doesn't exactly discourage foreigners, but it's also pretty clear it's not *for* them; it's presented as a way of seeing the world without leaving China, as an enormous festival, as a temporary theme park, as an Olympics (the clean-up job on the city, in both senses of the term, was apparently more intense than Beijing's before 2008), a mass event, and emphatically not a matter for disinterested *flanerie*. It's about crowds, and woe betide anyone that can't take a heavy crowd here; by this point I had started to get used to it. Those crowds, or rather those queues, weren't so much there to look at the architecture, but the stuff inside – which pavilion had a '4D film', which had the best freebies, which was serving what food.

My friend suggested we meet outside Venezuela; the route there took me through part of Eastern Europe. I walked first past Bosnia, one of many retoolings of a basic shed design provided by the Expo authorities for free for those who can't pay for their own architects. These decorated sheds had their moments, generally being more fun the less seriously they took themselves. Too much of it was good taste high architecture, so the undisputed winner of the Denise Scott-Brown Memorial Decorated Shed Award was 'Europe's Last Dictatorship', the post-Soviet state highest on the Human Development Index, Belarus. Its piece of Mittel-european silliness is perhaps inspired in some way by the Belarussian Marc Chagall, or maybe it's inspired by chocolate boxes, Soyuzmultfilm and neo-classicism, but it seemed the most popular of the East European sheds for photographers either way.



Venezuela, our meeting point, had far greater architectural ambitions, housed in a rather excellent pavilion by Facundo Teran, a dramatic but non-ingratiating sculptural creation, its clashing volumes centred (in a manner which distantly recalls Melnikov's similarly politically charged Soviet Pavilion at the Paris Expo '25) on a steep staircase. While I sat here, one – I would say definitely *not* Shanghainese – visitor came and sat his son next to me, and went off to take a photo of him next to this amusing *Laowai*.



The Bolivarian Republic is next to its comrade in Latin American Socialism, Cuba, but sadly puts it completely in the shade – even within the limits of the free shed genre, a hell of a lot more could have been done than their sad little red and blue box, which clearly showed the likely very austere grip of the Raul Castro regime. However, those of us who still hold out hope for 21st Century Socialism found a great deal to admire about the Venezuelan Pavilion – in fact, its similarity to Melnikov and Rodchenko's presence in Paris in 1925 or El Lissitzky's in Cologne 1928 is much more than an aesthetic matter. The queue, however, was pretty mild – a mere 15 minutes – suggesting that word had spread among Expo visitors that there wasn't much to see in here.

First of all, the pavilion makes very clear that it takes the Expo slogan 'Better City, Better Life' more seriously than does perhaps its originators, only expanding it out rather further, across 'Mejor Mundo'. The theme of the Pavilion is, quite simply, 'Revolution' – and bear in mind here that the last 'revolution' here, in the late 1960s, is now held in massive governmental opprobrium. Here, as so often

with the Bolivarian Republic, they talk such a fantastic fight that if I judged the place purely on this pavilion, I'd probably emigrate there at once. It all sounded more than just a little pointed. 'Everybody may get involved and take decisions in politics, economy and culture' 'a country where all are included'; and surely, in a subliminal reference to Shanghai's hyperstasis: 'a revolution makes everything move again'.

Cut-out figures give testimonials of all the things the Bolivarian Revolution has done for them – stories of collective ownership, co-operatives, workers' councils, of expropriation, of non-alienated labour, told by construction workers, teachers, slum youth. My friend points out that 'nobody reads the signs on anything in the Expo', so it is perhaps a little misjudged in its heavily textual approach. He does find one gentleman reading them with great intensity, and asks him in Mandarin 'so what do you think of all this talk of revolution?' 'It's great – but it'd be a long story to tell you why', was the response. 60 000 people were displaced from their homes to make way for the Expo.

The Pavilion is a series of rooms with canted stairs going off at angles from them, and on the ground floor, open to the air, there are several definitions of what Revolution might be, printed on cotton blinds. It is, respectively, Individual Revolution, Collective Revolution, World Revolution. The central part of the Venezuela Pavilion is where the freebies are given out – here, it's chocolate and coffee, and on the coffee tables are, in classic national pavilion style, descriptions of the country's cash crops; and, in far from classic national pavilion style, descriptions of its class and historical relations, like the role of the sugar industry in the slave trade. The aspect of the Venezuelan Pavilion where all of this suddenly seems to be too good to be true is at the back end, where you get a lovely view of a steelworks, one of the few non-adapted parts of what was once the industrial centre of China's greatest industrial city. At the back of the Venezuela Pavilion are thousands of red, plastic flowers, with the following message: 'if the climate were a bank, it would have been bailed out by now'. True enough. As any fool knows, the Bolivarian Revolution's reforms have been paid for by oil revenues.

Yet if there's a cause for optimism in the Shanghai Expo it's in this place, somewhere which argues that better cities and better lives aren't caused by throwing tens of thousands of people out of their homes, or by 'civilisation' campaigns aimed at the uncouth proletariat. Architecturally, too, it's more rigorous than most, its pleasures and surprises discovered through exploration and circulation rather than in an instant hit, a sight-bite.

After this, it's pretty much *all* about the sight-bite. Some of these are great, some quite diverting (such as Mexico's giant bloody great multicoloured mushrooms), some forgettable, some awful in either a good or a bad way. I only covered Europe and Central/South America, aside from brief peeks at Australia (Parametric, of the bulgy organic variety) and Thailand (Disney Orientalism). As

has been pointed out, there are two common threads to the Expo's eclecticism – a folksy doilyecture, and the inevitable Parametricism. Even great sworn historical enemies are united in their love for the doily. The Cossacky wobbly hetman hats of the Russian Federation face the more successful doily style of Poland, which in this case is combined with another fetish, the Deleuzian Fold. Much (even?) less interesting was Romania, although there was perhaps a reminisce or several here of earlier Expo buildings, with the effect resembling Bucky Fuller designing one of those wildly popular Eastern European green-glass malls. It was also the most authentically tacky, the one which realised that this was a theme park. Nothing serious.

The unserious was however best represented by the Netherlands. There has been a curious change in the political and architectural perception of the Netherlands from the UK in the last couple of years – from bastion of tolerance to centre of anti-Muslim racism, and from centre of modernist rectitude to apostle of the bumptious new pomo. It was hard to conjure up even a vulgar Marxist explanation for this congruence, as the new Dutch postmodernism is so far from being comforting, classical and Volkish, so clearly poking fun at any hint of Heideggerian notions of eternal dwelling. The Dutch Pavilion, by John Kormeling, is called Happy Street. It combines two big silly ideas – a giant flower and an airborne 'street' of typically Dutch houses (where De Stijl goes next to the gabled) – where one would have been more than enough. There are actually some quite interesting things in the sheer complexity of the structure, its winding stairs, stilts and walkways, making it seem as much MC Esher as MC Hammer; but there is still something grating; perhaps it's because the irony in Happy Street is laid on pretty bloody thick. The ATMs are in a part of the Happy Street called Happy Money.



Its obverse is the British Pavilion, a surprisingly successful ‘seed cathedral’, with one idea which it carries out with relative aplomb. Its simplicity is equally impressive in the face of something like the Swiss Pavilion, where greenwash is expressed via the green roof and photovoltaic lights which constantly switch themselves on and off. The thuggery of its concrete pillars was a bit of a surprise, though, a rare bit of visible construction, and a reminder of the Expo’s spectacular unsustainability.



Aside from Venezuela, the Pavilion which showed real ideas, a viable future, a way out, was the Spanish Pavilion, by Bendetta Tagliabue of EMBT. Described schematically, it is as pat as any – the façade is pieced together out of wicker baskets, which is a Reference to local craft; and the aesthetic of wood and organicism is usually rather tired. The difference, the distinction, is not at the level of the conceptual imaginary, but the tectonic physicality, the corporal force; the way the bits of wicker are assembled, the way they bulge forth, and the way that the wicker gives a bristling, uncanny force to the whole construction – if this plays with metaphors of the ‘natural’ then it’s a monstrous nature, suggesting strange and beautiful creatures that we haven’t yet imagined. It’s a *bestial* architecture, at the same time as being clearly the most cleverly detailed and fastidious construction here. I didn’t go inside; by some accounts, the interior is less successful; but of all the Pavilions, it is unexpected to find that the one made



out of baskets is the one which (in architectural, if not, unlike Venezuela, social, terms) really suggests possible new paths for architecture – which is, after all, surely the architectural point of an Expo in the first place. If the retro-futurist conjuring trick is successful, and Shanghai 2010 really *does* come to be remembered like London 1851, Paris 1889, 1925 and 1937, New York

1939, Brussels 1958, Montreal 1967 and Osaka 1970, then this will undoubtedly

be one of the structures whose dismantling we will mourn.

There are a few things in the Expo which will not be dismantled. The China Pavilion, a futurist-traditionalist red pagoda, which features on all the branding; the Expo auditorium next to it, the walkways and bridges, the Metro line; and, more interestingly, a ‘wetlands park’ in the marshes along the Huangpu. This really is a remarkable creation, mainly because of the suddenness of the transition – one moment you’re in a massive crush of people either wandering, photographing or queuing, the next there’s almost nobody else to be seen, and given the ‘civilising’ obliteration of portside river traffic, it is extremely quiet. It has the feel of a place already forgotten, and has a magnificent view of the world’s largest concrete suspension bridge, just in case it all starts to feel too pastoral. Small, rickety-feeling constructions are the main architectural intervention into the park. There’s nothing to *see* here, and hence the frankly astonishing unpopularity – you wonder whether surely at least a few people might make it here to catch their breath after one of the crushing crowds or the endless queues, but seemingly not. Its values are too different to those of the rest of the Expo.



At this point it starts to get dark, and the blue neon switches on, as do the little lights behind the lego squares of the Serbian Pavilion (which ‘derives specific code out of multitude’), leaving the Spanish Pavilion dark and darkling alongside; and it’s time to cross the river to the other side of the Expo, for the delights of Oil, General Motors, the Pavilion of Footprint, Urban Best Practices, and The Future.

5. Expo (Corporate)

It might sound counter-intuitive or perverse, but to really get the feel of futurism, delirium, pseudo-science and spectacle that should accompany any Great Exposition, you had to cross the river to get to the Puxi side of the Expo, or as everyone seemed to be calling it, the ‘corporate side’ – the part that is a



reminder that an Expo is, and always has been, one level little more than a glorified Trade Fair. Perhaps I thought that this was the area of true metropolitan thrills mainly because I got there as the lights switched on. When you emerge from the Metro line that gets you from one side of the river to the other, the first thing you see is the aforementioned concrete suspension bridge illuminated in different colours (purple, but in a second it’ll be red, then yellow, then blue...) and, in the foreground, the sight of the turnstiles that process (some of) the millions of visitors. This is the Edutainment side of the river, a series of promotional and would-be-educational pavilions which may well be quite prosaic in the humid light of day, but which at night easily match their fancy-foreign-architect-designed equivalents on the other side of the river.



It's also here that the contradictions of the Expo's 'Green agenda' are most easily visible. Much attention has been paid to (e.g.) the sheer waste of the Expo (from its opponents) or to the use of electric buses as transport (from its supporters). On the Puxi side is the part of the site that indulges in some adaptive re-use. This was the industrial area of the city, and as its functions are hived off to the exurban pandemonium of the Yangtze River Delta, it is freed up as another brown-field site, like any other in Northern Europe. As well as containing various shipyards, dock sheds and a power station, it was apparently also the site of the much older Shanghai Arsenal, the cradle of the Chinese industrial revolution – none of which has been preserved. Above is the Pavilion of Footprint, which has instructive material on the carbon footprint. It sits opposite OIL.



OIL is one of the most fabulous architectural objects in the entire expo, its polygonal form constantly pulsating with polychromatic electric colour, with Alsopian wonky pilotis underneath, similarly vivid. If there's one serious evident architectural innovation in this place, then it's the total fearlessness about using electric light in its most aggressive, least 'tasteful' manner, with extreme garishness and maximum effect. If you tried to do something like this in most European cities various excuses would be offered to prevent it – crassness, tastelessness, commercialism, 'light pollution'...or perhaps more convincingly, a massive drain on scarce energy resources. Yet these things are already lit up at night, so you don't bump into them. It's surely at least in part a continuation of Lenin's old equation socialism = soviet power + electrification, only with the first

part of the equation forgotten. But it reminds of how Mayakovsky, when he wrote on Paris, scorned how the bourgeoisie, after inventing electric light, preferred to eat by candlelight. The enduring affect of Shanghai as I remember it was a feeling of oppressiveness and difficulty interspersed with sudden moments of euphoria. Almost all those moments of euphoria entailed staring at neon lights.

You see this approach to lighting in all manner of places, and it need not even signify ‘futurism’ or the metropolis – in Nanjing’s historic centre, the ancient capital outlines its undulating and spiking roofs in contrasting strips of multicoloured neon. By way of comparison, imagine what would occur if there were a proposal to do the same to the dreaming spires of Oxford. Yet obviously there *are* certain unpleasant resonances, particularly in the case of OIL, which cannot be denied. The faceted end of it here is enlivened by a video showing oil derricks at work, which, like the skin of the building itself, is constantly changing. Inside, and hence the large queues, is one of those ‘4D films’; underneath, in English and Chinese, is a warning against pregnant women or those with heart problems entering the Pavilion.



Similarly vivid is the Chinese Railways Pavilion, where the grid of the railways is the object of illuminated abstraction. If Expos are where an epoch dreams its successor, then the libidinal force applied here to the furtherance of public transport is somewhat more impressive than OIL; although here as ever there is never any sense that all these things can’t happily coexist, no matter how antagonistic they might appear to intrinsically be. Again, it represents the ideal

rather than the real, which in this case is the so-so mediocrity (in design, if not functional terms) of the Shanghai Metro.



Yet fittingly, given the central role of containerisation and shipping in China's rise to the world's second economic power, the thing here that is really special is the China Shipping Pavilion; here, containerisation chooses the best architects, perhaps in acknowledgement that it's a process which would have enraptured any Constructivist. This is another piece of adaptive re-use, this time of a shipyard, and the approach here – interestingly, given that it's there to represent such a closed and securitised system – is strikingly open. Piranesi comparisons are overdone, but there really is something sublimely carceral about these elevated walkways under the steel frame of the roof, all of them lit up for maximum noir effect. It gives container shipping *son et lumiere*. And you can just walk up and wander round here. No queues. There is an entrance at the side to the actual exhibits, but for the most part this is a permeable structure, which you can wander through at will, to your heart's content, although when I did so I can't say it educated me in any way about the activities of China Shipping. What it did do was offer a vivid sliver of Fun Palace openness and changeability, in a place which is otherwise based on a completely closed architecture. A city like the Expo would be nightmarish, largely because there's no courtyards, no indeterminate or communal spaces between – save for that lonely wetlands park.

The aforementioned closed architectures do throw up some fairly breathtaking moments, here very much by accident. What is mediocre blobitecture in daylight



becomes something much more exciting when lit up, like strange neon grubs or larvae. This is a mere preamble to the corporate side's least popular, and for anyone expecting contemporary China to offer a viable vision of the future, most interesting Pavilion – the Pavilion of Future, heralded by a giant, illuminated chimney-cum-thermometer. It's housed in a power station, just as it would be anywhere else, although they struggle to manage to fill the enormous space. Perhaps the reason why the queues are so short here (about 10 minute, less even than the queue for Venezuela) is actually because this place doesn't get full easily. The Future Pavilion doesn't have any freebies, but it does have a pile of giant books at its centre. In that stack you can find a litany of urban utopias – Campanella, Plato, Francis Bacon, Fourier, More, Mumford, Wright, and the proverbial curveball, David Harvey's *Spaces of Hope*, sandwiched in just underneath *The New Atlantis*. The explanation for this collection is found on the opposite wall: 'in yesterday's utopia we find today's reality'.

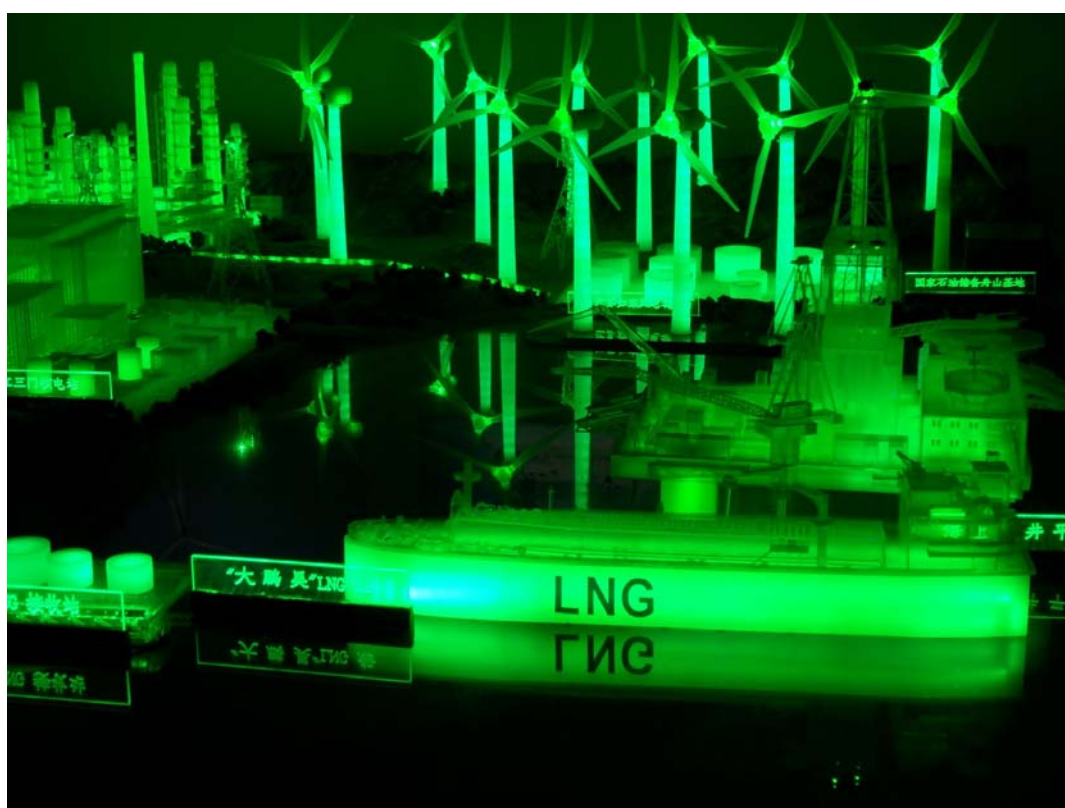


Yes, they really are saying that contemporary Shanghai is the fulfilment of the hopes of the generations, that they come to fruition here, in some manner; but this is not meant as a statement of complacency, far from it. In the room with the stack of books, there are various urban utopias, from Archigram's Walking City to the Ville Radieuse. There's a wonderful moment in the exhibit on Le Corbusier where, while in Europe or the USA you'd find the usual hand-wringing denunciation of all the evils he wreaked on the innocent slums, there's the line 'sadly, Le Corbusier's ideas were never fully appreciated in his lifetime'.

Proposals are sometimes set against each other, but arbitrarily. On a screen, a 'Space City' is proposed by the Lifeboat Foundation, a Libertarian eschatological think tank, which, in a piece of impressive synchronicity, includes the historian of the 1939 World's Fair, David Gelernter, among its members. The organisation was started after September 11, and its aim is to preserve the human race, and the entirely unashamed telos of their plan for our survival is to colonise outer space. These really are people who think it's easier – and more desirable – to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Look closely to read the simple explanation of how their space city will work. Next to it is Eco City, which essentially appears to propose a 'sustainable' Industrial Revolution. 'We need to reinvent everything' is a criteria of Eco City. Near to that is Water City, which proposes that we grow artificial gills. And 'the views would be great'. The future cities in the Future Pavilion rest on certain major assumptions, some more debatable than others. The first is that cities cannot remain as they are; the second is that they will face enormous challenges due to drastic global warming; and the third is that all ideas are of equal value, and that there is no need to set up an opposition between Space City and Eco City. Everything is equally valid – the barest hint of a contradiction and you suspect they'd start worrying they'd end up with a Cultural Revolution on their hands.



So in the corner, not far away from the underwater aquatic city, is a model that sums up the sheer idleness of this, the idiocy of pretending that all contradictions can be resolved. It's a marquette of a gigantic energy-generating complex, and oil refineries go next to wind turbines go next to oil tankers go next to a cubic power station which goes next to pylons which go next to serried cooling towers, just like those lining the charred landscape of the Yangtze River Delta. There isn't the slightest hint that this energy-generating complex in its lurid, apocalyptic, radioactive green, or OIL, or Space City, or the Expo itself, might lead to the situation described so cheerfully in *Water City*. Evolution, presumably, will decide for itself. Outside is one of the entrances, its turnstiles strikingly empty. It's late, and soon the pulsating lights will be switched off.



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