

exhibition review

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Vertiginous Metamorphosis: The Shanghai Expo and China's Love Affair with the City

China fetishizes cities: that much is evident in the motto of Expo 2010 Shanghai. Not the English-language motto, which reads “Better City, Better Life,” but in the subtly different Chinese motto “*chengshi, rang shenghuo geng meihao* 城市,让生活更美好,” which would more accurately translate into “Cities make life better.” What has been lost in translation is the essence of the Chinese urban-rural paradigm in which the aspirational compass points almost unwaveringly towards the metropole. To escape the country and obtain an urban household registration is known in China as the *chengshi meng* 城市梦, or “city dream”. According to a speech by Tongji University professor Zhang Renbiao on the Expo's theme, “to become a city person is the common aspiration of virtually every villager.”



The Shanghai Expo. Photograph © Mark Frank

In Henan Province, one Grandpa Zhao realized the city dream. He left the country as a young man and established himself with an urban *hukou* 户口 registration in the city of Zhengzhou by getting a college education. At the Shanghai Expo, a single poignant moment of his life is witnessed by thousands of people every day, preserved in wax: he is sitting in his living room dressed in a fine silk



The Urbanian. Photograph © Mark Frank

Tang suit. He is surrounded by three generations of his descendants, all born in the city. His grandson is lighting his birthday cake.

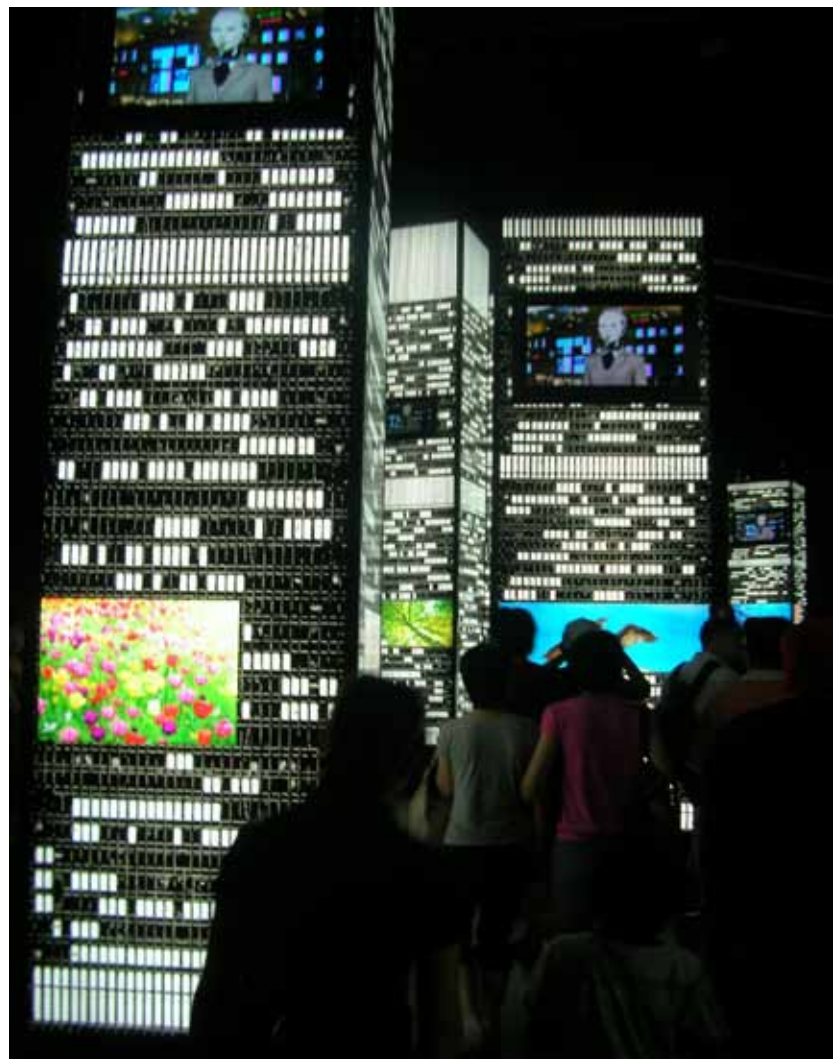
This scene is part of *The Urbanian*, one of the five “theme pavilions” at the Expo meant to embody its motto. *The Urbanian* takes a line from Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* as its point of departure, posted prominently in the entrance — “What is a city, but the people?” — and opens with series of wax sculptures depicting six families from around the world. On the opposite end of the room from the Zhaos, the Reid family of Houston is pushing a shopping cart full of cereal and potato chips out of a Safeway grocery store. Mr. and

Mrs. Santos are having a cookout with their five children in Sao Paulo. Clothing designer Karim Erja of Rotterdam sits alone with his computer and cell phone, apparently married to his work. In the room that follows we see the families go through the rituals of daily life on camera. The similarities between the families are far more impressive than the differences, implying that through their citizens, twenty-first-century cities around the world may have more in common with each other than they do with their former selves. Ancient cities are the focus of Footprint, a standalone theme pavilion on the west side of the Expo. Among the impressive artifacts on display in its twenty thousand square meters are Shang bronzes, pieces of the Ishtar Gate and Athenian marble busts. One video projection allows viewers to watch artist renderings of Constantinople transform into Istanbul in a matter of minutes, while another memorializes the marital union of Chinese princess Wencheng and Tibetan King Srongtsen Gampo during the Tang Dynasty. The final hall of Footprint, titled "Urban Wisdom", makes use of video to laud New York, London and Shanghai for innovation in the post-industrial era. A mechanized statue of Charlie Chaplin playing the banjo in the corner of the room is a reference to "Modern Times", Chaplin's cautionary satire on the industrial revolution.

The documentary-style tour of world cities past and present offered by The Urbanian and Footprint affirm the idea that "cities make life better," but other exhibits are more skeptical. Confounding the city dream are city ills, known colloquially as *chengshi bing* 城市病, a term that subsumes problems like pollution, overcrowding and traffic jams that put a damper on dreams of urban utopia.

Through a clever double meaning the Chinese motto of the Expo acknowledges this paradox. The comma in *chengshi, rang shenghuo geng meihao* creates an ambiguity between a declarative sense (Cities make life better) and an imperative one (Cities, [please] make life better). Likewise, some of the Expo's theme pavilions such as *The Urbanian* and *Footprint* serve a declarative function, others present an imperative: the city must serve the good of the people.

This imperative is largely envi-



*Pavillion of the Future.* Photograph © Mark Frank

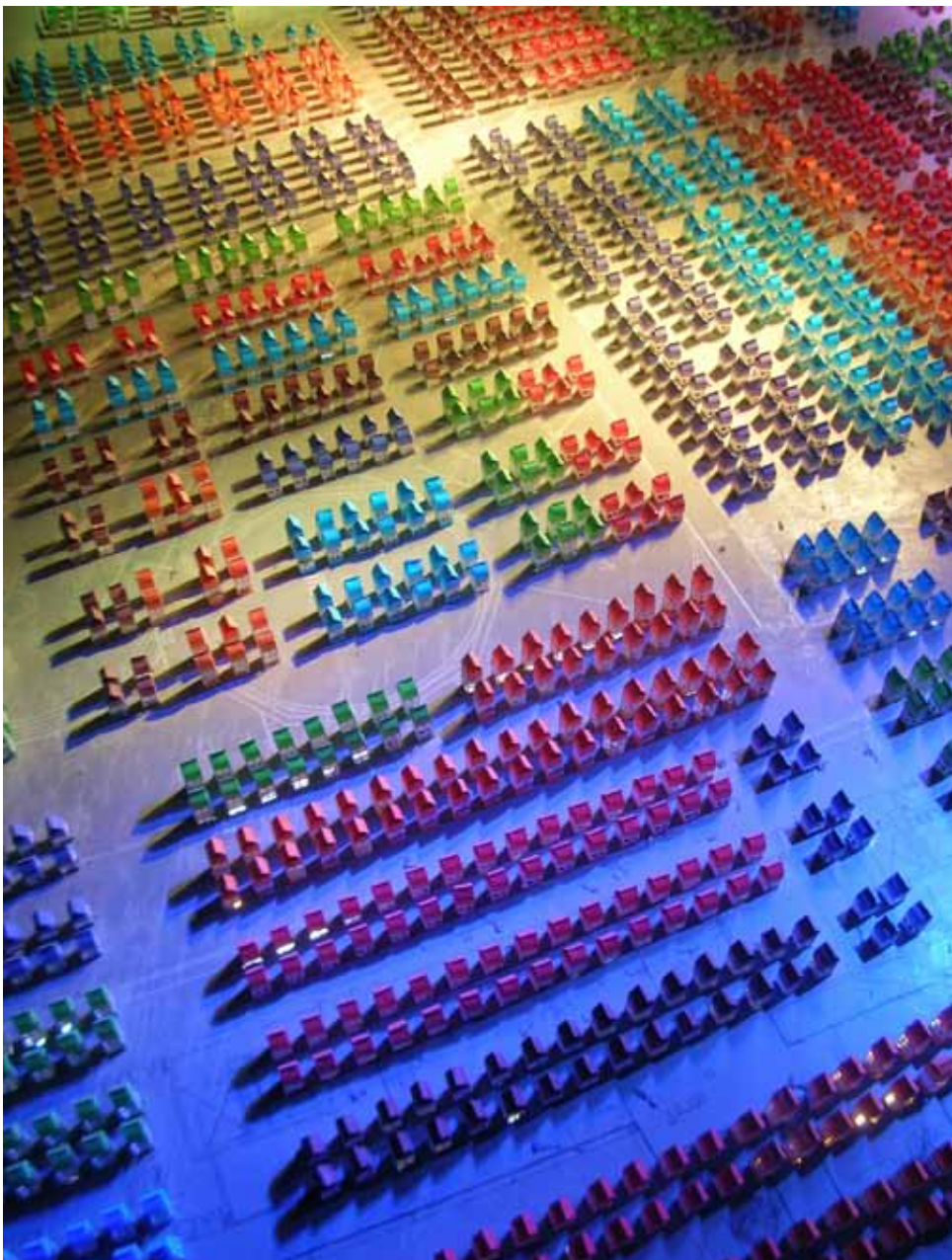
ronmental. Adjacent to *The Urbanian*, the pavilion *Urban Planet* opens with photographs of eleven children alongside text describing their aspirations. Joshua from England hopes to live in a city without traffic jams, while Gabriella from smog-shrouded Mexico City dreams of a city with more trees. In the next few rooms, *Urban Planet* plunges into a series of doomsday scenarios largely based on the depletion of water resources, an issue of special urgency in China. A video projection depicts a wasteland of parched soil and dry pipes. The words “No water, no Earth,” and “Death” fade in and out. Five giant pendulums and the ominous sound of a chiming grandfather clock accompany interpretive text describing humankind’s abuses of nature in terms of the five elements.

*Urban Planet* concludes with a hopeful installation that offers potential solutions to our abuses. Some, such as putting more solar panels in the Sahara, are practical. Others are less so. One amusing illustration depicts Ross Lovegrove’s solar-powered *Car on a Stick*, a round car that doubles as a street lamp after dark. Another proposes an unmanned sea vessel that would spray water into

the air to counteract global warming. Ultimately, *Urban Planet* leans more heavily towards entertainment than education, emphasizing the innovative whimsy of corporate-sponsored urban planning pornography that tantalizes the imagination while obfuscating reality.

*City Being*, the third hall in the Theme Pavilion building, adopts a supra-human scope. We are asked to view the various components of a city as organs whose functions are analogous to the metabolism and circulation of a biological organism in maintaining homeostasis. A complex network of underground pipes is meant to represent the infrastructure of a modern city, while an LCD screen tracks real-time

*Cartons*. Photograph © Mark Frank



data from the world's largest cities, including finance, transportation and shipping.

In a modified factory building in Zone E on the west side of the Huangpu River, the theme pavilion Future continues to envision the city as a living being. Text on a wall quotes the French Surrealist writer Julien Gracq: "The shape of a city, as we all know, changes more rapidly than the heart of a mortal." The pavilion proceeds to examine how the evolution of the city (or "vertiginous metamorphosis", as Gracq describes it) can be steered to benefit humankind.

Most of the displays in Future consist of art that alludes to exciting ideas. One such mural depicts residents of a city linked through beams of light to a spaceship-like central hub that appears to be floating in the air. The accompanying placard makes reference to "Smart Cities," a research project pioneered by William J. Mitchell, the recently deceased former dean of MIT's School of Architecture and Planning. We are told that through improvements in information technology and creative urban development, the neighborhoods of a city may some day interact like an integrated neural network, creating cities that function like benign sentient beings.

A sculpture in the same pavilion titled *Huanying Chengshi* 幻影城市 (Illusion City) depicts another kind of city. It in fact is a heap of discarded computer parts, led pipes and other garbage suspended from the ceiling whose shadow on a nearby wall takes the shape of an attractive urban skyline. Interpretive text explains that "as we make great accomplishments in technology and production, we are also destroying our own living space," implying a causal relationship between *chengshi meng* (the city dream) and *chengshi bing* (city ill).

It is refreshing to discover that even the most macroscopic of the exhibits in the theme pavilions maintain an anthropocentric line of sight. From *Footprint to Future*, the Expo's five theme pavilions offer a compelling narrative about human beings coming together for a better life and creating new entities, or "city beings", that are more than the sum of their parts. But mixed in with the urban gospel is a healthy dose of environmental fire and brimstone: if we are not careful, cities may just be the end of us.

To appreciate the timeliness of the Expo's focus on cities, it is important to note certain facts: China's current rural-urban migration has been called the largest migration in human history, and cities like Beihai in Guangxi province are exploding at an unprecedented rate. Shanghai's Pudong district itself sprung up out of farmland in the 1990s and within fifteen years had attained an internationally recognizable skyline. Within the next five years China is expected to reach a majority urban population (it is currently above 46%). Unfortunately, it has also overtaken the United States as the world's top emitter of carbon dioxide. It may be difficult for a European or American observer to understand China's urban fetish; urbanization has generally long since climaxed in developed countries. But in China it is peaking, and the struggle between *chengshi meng* and *chengshi bing* is raging.