



urban
glutamate



Propaganda for an urban lifestyle Xiamen

Urban glutamate by Hans Venhuizen

Besides specifying whether there are traces of nuts in the dishes offered or that preservatives have been used in their preparation, restaurant menus also sometimes indicate whether monosodium glutamate has been added to the dishes. Monosodium glutamate, also known as a flavour enhancer, was discovered by Professor Ikeda at the start of the 20th century in Tokyo. Ikeda was looking for a fifth flavour alongside sweet, sour, bitter and salt, and discovered glutamic acid in seaweed. Glutamate's most important property is that it enhances the typical flavours of food, but it does not have a taste or colour of its own. More specifically, the addition of glutamate to food does not strengthen the flavour, but makes people more sensitive to that taste. In essence, it acts as a lubricant for taste and it whets the appetite; glutamate acts as a mediator between food and its consumer. The consumer will enjoy the food more, because it seems to be more pronounced, fuller and stronger in taste. Glutamate is popular in the oriental kitchen and the shelves in Chinese supermarkets are filled with it, while finding salt, a key ingredient in Western cooking, involves searching with a magnifying glass.

Glutamate is sprinkled as generously in Chinese cities as it is in Chinese cuisine. In other words, things are added to make the function of the building easier to consume. One is immediately struck by the propaganda banners that pop up everywhere in cities and on billboards along the motorways. With slogans such as 'Let us create the most civilized district in the province' or 'Architecture embraces nature. Life becomes art', the State makes propaganda for modern China and propagates urban life there. Almost without exception, the didactic texts are set against a background of enticing urban skylines. The classic red background for this kind of propaganda has practically disappeared and now it is the city itself that serves as the lubricant for post-Communist Chinese society.

Marketing brochure identity

Glutamate also crops up in city marketing and branding. Many Chinese cities try to uncover their characteristic qualities and often end up with a marketing brochure identity that displays many similarities with Folkestone or Milton



Urban Planning Museum, Beijing

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Songjiang new town, Shanghai



Yuandang Lake, Xiamen

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Thames Town Songjiang, Shanghai



The future city of Lingang, Shanghai

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Nan Hui Zui Themepark near Lingang, Shanghai

Keynes: a high standard of living in a pleasant ambiance with the congeniality of a village, but still enjoying plenty of urban amenities and easy access by all modes of transport even though it nestles in the midst of lush nature.

The city of Xiamen in southern China is renowned throughout the People's Republic as the country's cleanest city. This primarily relates to the good air quality: thanks to the city being surrounded by the sea, fresh air wafts in constantly. Xiamen, which is linked to the mainland by a causeway, is happy to thrive on that status, but it needs to do little to keep its air clean. What does make a difference is that the city has banished heavy industry to the mainland and it has not undergone such tumultuous economic development as Shenzhen or Guangzhou. However, Xiamen is currently constructing a very extensive road network. One of the most spectacular extensions is the new coast road right along the oceanfront, which opens up the eastern part of the island – previously poorly accessible – for high-quality urban development. In order to stay true to the theme of the city's clean image and exploit it further, the land bordering this whole stretch of road is being completely re-landscaped. This will create a 25-kilometre-long park along the coast, with beaches, plazas, hedgerows, copses and lavish strips of greenery that will be pruned and trimmed day and night. The hamlets situated along the route were demolished in order to clear the way for the new Central Business District, new residential areas and hotels. The inhabitants of the condemned houses received financial compensation for their homes and were given the opportunity to move into much better but also more expensive homes elsewhere. The residents were pleased with the compensation and their new homes, while the project developers can make money by selling houses and the city grows in size and stature, thus climbing a rung on the ladder of city hierarchy. It also creates plenty of space for new residents and tourists to enjoy this unique place. A win-win-win-win situation, as it were. The task assigned to the visual arts is to bolster and confirm the city's new identities. The new coast road in Xiamen is completed with a wealth of sculptures that celebrate the annual marathon, music as one of the island's desirable qualities or dolphins. Dolphins occasionally surface just off the coast near Xiamen

and are ideally suited to playing a part in the city marketing because of their friendly charisma.

Catching up with the world

In China, too, identity is primarily interpreted as something positive and reduced to employable proportions. Remarkable here is the pattern-book fashion by which this is achieved. Xiamen's qualities were reduced to that of a 'coastal location'. And in the planning process the glutamate is applied to that aspect alone and the planners do not take the slightest bit of notice of the specific history or topography. Xiamen has existed for no more than about 300 years, and in Chinese eyes that hardly constitutes a history. Existing construction was demolished and whole mountains have been levelled in order to provide the perfect building locations. In the environs of Xiamen you can hear the booms of the dynamite being used to level the mountains every day. Today's residential ideals are then projected onto the virgin sites: spacious homes in high densities surrounded by a high-maintenance park landscape.

When we in the Netherlands talk about architecture in an historicizing style it calls to mind historical references being poured over modern architecture like a sauce. In China this sauce is enriched with snapshots of the history of world architecture that have been churned through the mincer. The act of referring to that history has become self-perpetuating. 'China is catching up with the world,' is how a sales manager from the computer industry in Xiamen phrased it. China's centuries of isolation in combination with the overnight economic boom have resulted in this potpourri of architectural references that amounts to appropriating world history and proudly declaring that one is now part of it. In the environs of Shanghai they are even building a series of model cities in European style that take a particular country as their theme. In the English variant, Thames Town, Prince Charles would feel very at home. A number of pleasant English streets have been integrated into the plan of the city centre, with houses that have been directly copied from London, Bath or Cambridge. There is even a square with a church, which will soon be officially opened, and a bronze statue of Churchill to complete the ensemble. All the same, many



Xiamen

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Exhibition Centre Harbour, Beijing



Square Pagoda Park Songjiang, Shanghai

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Spatial Planning Museum, Shanghai

SONGJIANG NEW CITY THE FUTURE OF SHANGHAI

上海的未来看松江



Shanghai

16 17



Beijing

houses in Thames Town will remain empty. This is not because they have not been sold – trade is brisk – but because many of the new owners see the houses primarily as an investment. They buy them, but continue to live in their cheap rented housing. They invest their savings in these houses in the hope that they will later prove to be worth much more and thus sell them again for a hefty profit. These houses wallow in a sea of perfectly manicured greenery. In China, when new houses are sold they are already surrounded by landscaped gardens, mature and brimming with character, in stark contrast with the bare terrain that surrounds newly completed housing developments in the Netherlands. At locations where money is earned by property speculation or the city pins its prestige, the infill of the public space is extravagant. Where that is not the case, the public space is often barren and poorly maintained. Money and prestige are the driving forces of spatial planning.

‘A warm welcome to the demolition crew!’

Until recently, the pre-existing construction played no part in the process of making money, but was essentially an obstacle to the model-like, ideal residential districts. A shift has started to emerge in this methodology in recent times. Since Chinese planners and developers think and work in models there is also a model underlying this shift.

A developer from Singapore acquired the rights to redevelop a large tract of land in the centre of Shanghai. This typical Shanghai neighbourhood, Xin Tian Di, comprised a number of historic streets around the location where the inaugural congress of the Communist Party of China was held in 1921. Instead of demolishing the streets, they were transformed into the focal point of a newly constructed neighbourhood. The houses were restored or completely rebuilt as faithful copies of the original. This zone serves as an area for recreation and entertainment with an abundance of cafés, chic boutiques and restaurants. The district is a roaring success, which means paying the highest price for your home and for your glass of beer. The effect on the surroundings is phenomenal: apartment buildings are shooting up like mushrooms around this historical street.

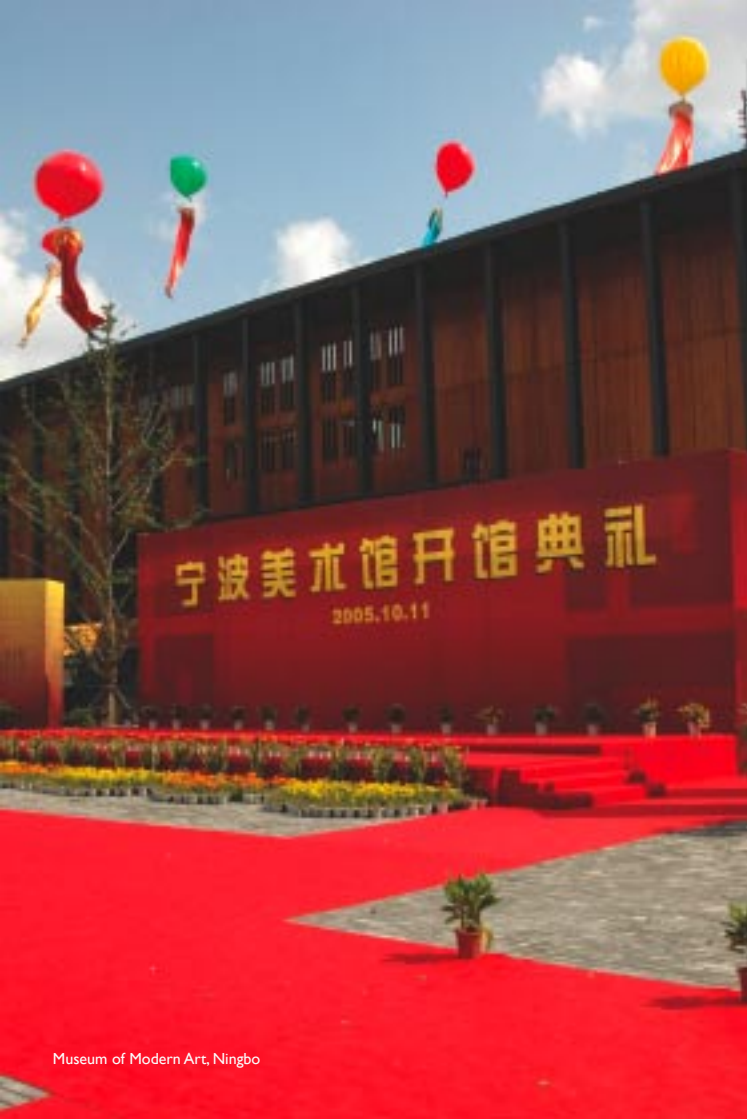
The Xin Tian Di model is being imitated throughout China. In Xiamen they are

now also preserving a few interesting buildings in the midst of the dense urban fabric that is being demolished, giving them a central place in the new context. ‘A warm welcome to the demolition crew’ is one of the texts I encountered on the façade of a condemned building in an historic quarter of Xiamen. The whole district is to make way for a shopping mall, but this one building has been preserved. It is now completely dwarfed by surrounding construction, but the structure that makes the claim of being ‘China’s oldest Christian church’ has been saved and in the new context it will stand in the middle of a square. Xin Tian Di demonstrates how historical elements can increase the value of a new development considerably. And that is an argument that counts, seeing as money is the mainspring of urban development.

The authenticity of fake

In Xiamen, a city with a population of about 1.25 million, at least six new shopping malls were under construction in the city centre in 2006. Each shopping mall will be equal or greater in size to the entire selection of shops in a medium-sized city in the Netherlands. It seems as if all these new malls conducted market research at the same time, and simultaneously discovered a gap in the market. And all this comes on top of the comprehensive supply of existing shops and the shopping malls that are already operational. China has become totally consumption-crazy and the government has contributed to this by establishing special ‘consumption weeks’. The shopping malls are also lavishly sprinkled with glutamate. One mall drew the inspiration for its architecture from the banks of the River Loire and has also been enriched with Ferris wheel and an imitation pirate ship in its central courtyard. Another mall sought its inspiration in Hong Kong, while another employed the colonial character of Xiamen’s original architecture as its source of inspiration. Although no original buildings survived in this latter example, the site’s original aura was preserved, and in Chinese eyes there is nothing fake about that.

In Europe as well as in China, Westerners are astounded by Chinese holidaymakers who often seem to spend more time amassing photographic evidence of their visit than with the actual appreciation of the sights. Collecting evidence of the experience seems more important than the experience itself.

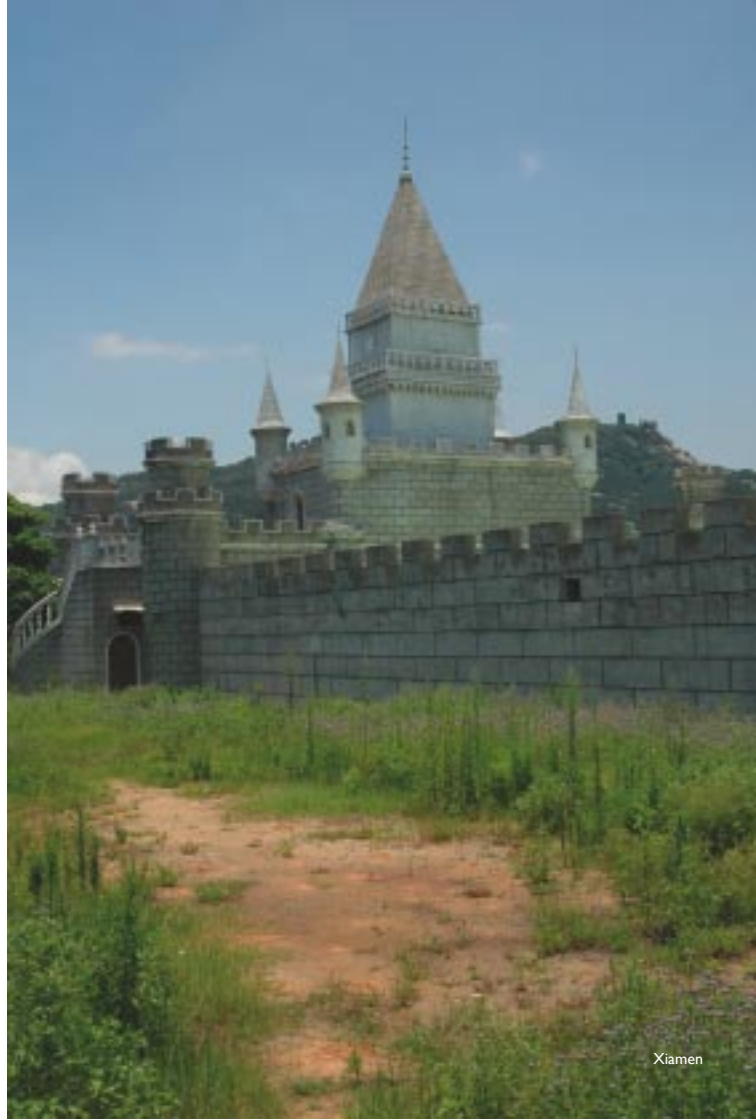


Museum of Modern Art, Ningbo

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The reconstructed historical Bund-district, Ningbo





Shang Li Hill, Xiamen

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Shang Li Hill, Xiamen

It ensures enjoyment afterwards and status for people who have not yet been able to leave the familiar surroundings. In the 'Window of the World' theme park in Shenzhen, all the world's sights have been recreated in scale models. A 'photo opportunity' has been created for each of these models to make a visit to, for example, the Pyramids of Egypt or the Eiffel Tower in Paris, seem extremely real. The fact that the locations are reconstructions does not detract from the experience.

Concrete wood

Whether something is truly old or original makes no difference to the experiential value in Chinese eyes. The degree of authenticity does not determine the intensity of the experience. In public parks in Xiamen, but also at many other spots in China, you can find benches, rubbish bins, pavilions and bridges realized using concrete that is fashioned to look like wood, from bamboo and beech to birch and pine. You can also find stone walls made of polyester panels. Although superbly executed, you can tell these are fake from a distance. It is this skilful craftsmanship, much more labour-intensive than using the authentic material, which makes these treatments original. In China there is indeed a long tradition of ingeniously imitating nature. The notion of 'fake' does not even occur to Chinese people when they encounter it. Even though it is patently obvious that it is not wood, they are prepared to perceive it as such.

The world's footwear and clothing industries have long been complaining about the Chinese copies that flood and spoil the market. Because of stricter controls it is becoming increasingly difficult for Chinese companies to produce exact copies of Western branded products. However, a time will come when the well-known Western brands will nostalgically remember this form of imitation. Even though it costs them turnover, at least the copies contribute to the renown of the brand. You can now find new brands everywhere on the shopping streets, and they are no longer exact copies but have convincingly adopted the spirit and charisma of the original. These brands will eventually cause much greater damage to the well-known brands.

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Chinese sports clothing brands, Xiamen



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Taiwan Folk Park, Xiamen

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Park furniture, Xiamen



Shopping mall under construction, Xiamen

Fake history

Alongside the fake and the copy, the urban glutamate is most evident in the form of occasional events. It is hardly surprising that the ultimate form of temporary spatial glutamate, fireworks, are a Chinese invention that was first documented in the 11th century. Fireworks have colour, noise and form, and they are certainly not colourless or flavourless like glutamate. They are, however, often used for another purpose, in celebration and endorsement, thus serving as an 'experience enhancer'. The Chinese still excel in the art of dressing up occasional events. It matters little whether it is from a feel for show or a fear of boredom. Inflatable red gateways and innumerable flower baskets are used to mark the opening of buildings and businesses. Whole squares are covered in flowers in the form of potted plants. And to add to the lustre of their wedding day, newly married couples are photographically tortured for hours as the photographer cajoles them into strange poses in full public gaze. In Xiamen's Buddhist temple, experience, faith, dexterity and contemplation are bosom friends. Proverbs have been carved into the sloping rocks, and corresponding wishes will come true if you throw coins at the texts. And many feasts, parties and other forms of entertainment are staged in buildings with a fake history. Even though this is patently obvious to all and sundry, the resulting experience is extraordinarily authentic.

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In the design and layout of their cities, the Chinese display a marked proclivity for showy staging and a remarkable determination to avoid the ordinary. Even though it is already imposing in its own right, the skyline of Pudong opposite Shanghai's historic Bund district cannot escape the temporary glutamate of multicoloured festive illuminations that are unleashed on it every evening. Xiamen's most important tourist draw is the island of Gulang, where the foreign business tycoons built their homes in the 19th century, leaving behind a colonial urban landscape with Mediterranean allure. But as with the skyline of Pudong, this historical character is not enough. In the evening, people flock to Xiamen's port in order to see how the historical buildings of Gulang Yu across the water are colourfully illuminated – and not just in a single colour but in a psychedelic disco extravaganza. Even the ferry manages to change colour at least 20 times



Nanputuo Temple, Xiamen

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Gulang Yu shopping centre, Xiamen



Shanghai



Ningbo

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Printemps shopping mall, Xiamen

during the five-minute crossing. Even the most potent urban experience is seemingly impossible without glutamate.

Shaking hands with Chiang Kai-shek

For a fee, Chiang Kai-shek's look-a-like will shake your hand in front of the house where he was born in the little town of Xikou, about 250 kilometres south of Shanghai. If you prefer to shake the hand of a younger version of the former Chinese public enemy, then you can find plenty of other doubles. Chiang Kai-shek is posthumously driving a construction boom in Xikou. China is lending force to its attempts at a rapprochement with Taiwan (under the motto: 'one country, two systems') by rehabilitating the founder of modern Taiwan, the renegade General Chiang Kai-shek. The village of his birth has therefore been transformed into a full-blown tourist attraction. Historical houses, gardens, tombs and gateways have been restored or rebuilt, and the ill-suited buildings constructed over the last 20 years have been demolished. Vendors of fresh fruit sell their wares at the roadside, and it is possible to join boating and cycling trips on and along the river. There is also a large contingency of look-a-likes, who not only shake your hand but are also keen to exchange business cards with you. And in China, business cards are a currency that is even more important than money. Exchanging business cards with both hands has a well-nigh ritualistic function in making someone's acquaintance, and the network you can build up in this way is crucial to the success of your enterprise.

On the surface, Chinese and Western societies now seem to be very similar. China has a formal structure that is comparable with that in a Western country in many ways. Chinese people who grumble about westernized compatriots speak scornfully of 'bananas': yellow on the outside, but white on the inside. However, there is a traditional informal structure in China that is much stronger than in the West. These invisible networks are known as 'Guanxi'. In these circles you seem much more likely to encounter 'eggs', to remain with the foodstuffs metaphor: Chinese people who seem to be white on the outside but are yellow on the inside. It remains to be seen on which part of the egg the urban glutamate will eventually have the greatest effect.

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Coastal road, Xiamen

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Wall under construction, Ningbo



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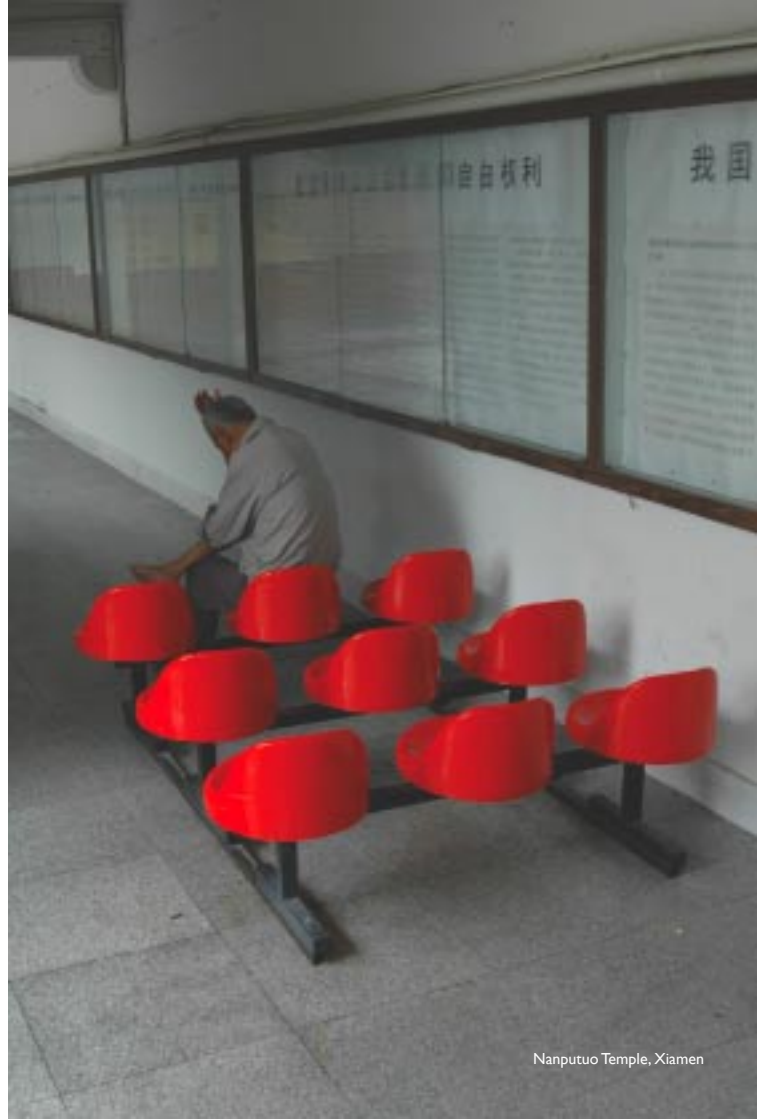






Shanghai

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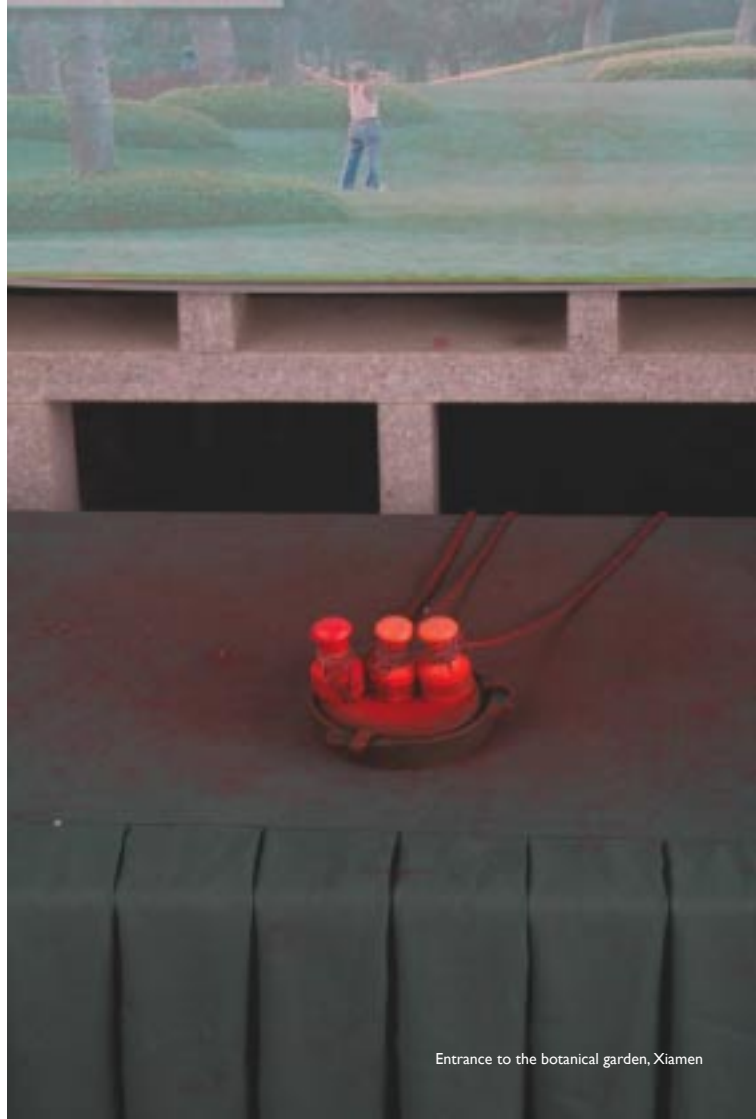


Nanputuo Temple, Xiamen



Xiamen

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Entrance to the botanical garden, Xiamen



Lost in space

by Margit Schuster

Children without space or time

As an urban planner, space for children is just about the last thing to which you pay attention when you go and study the lightning-fast urban developments in China. However, if an urban planner travels to China together with young children, then you are confronted with this immediately. The search for space suitable for children is like looking for a needle in a haystack.

As elsewhere in the world, there is also a multitude of interests at play in Chinese cities, and these often conflict. Traffic is always a priority, because everything has to be easily accessible. There is great demand for comfortable living space, in which to actually reside but also for speculative investments. More and more of the old parts of the neighbourhoods are being replaced by modern housing projects in high densities with courtyards containing plenty of visually attractive greenery closed off from the outside world. Since everyday needs are of great importance, residential buildings almost always stand above a plinth of shops and the shopping malls are never far away. There are many ambitiously designed parks and other greenery for display spread out between them. In Xiamen, the authorities and planners were quick to realize that, besides a higher value for the adjacent real estate, improvement of the living environment brings other economic advantages. Besides plenty of water and art, the parks are furnished with sports fields and fitness apparatus for public use. Tearooms, the traditional meeting place for senior citizens where people play Mah-jong, are also being rediscovered. This whole design repertoire can also be found on a smaller scale in the gated residential areas.

Space for children is not forgotten in this list of amenities, but one rarely encounters it. In the periphery of the public space of city parks, but also in the bigger new residential areas, one often finds a brightly coloured playground with a slide and climbing frame that have come straight from a catalogue. This play equipment is also found in some shopping malls and at branches of Kentucky Fried Chicken and McDonald's. This playground equipment stands in

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sharp contrast to the highly ambitious design of green areas. These facilities seem more like an obligate, standard provision, give proper consideration to children's needs, provided with the sole objective of regimenting the behaviour of children in public space and tailored more to the regulation of the use of space than to fulfilling children's needs. Nowhere is there a 'free' play area for children to build something for themselves or to be active, behaviour that is indulged in enthusiastically on a beach, for example. Most public play facilities are actually more reminiscent of amusement parks. Especially at weekends, big bouncy castles are inflated in all the city parks and a whole diversity of apparatus is magicked from beneath tarpaulin covers. Parents then have to pay for their children to be passively moved up and down against a backdrop of noise and flashing lights. Playing with other children rarely comes into the equation, because children are accompanied to the play areas by both their parents and perhaps even their grandparents, too. The whole family group then attentively supervises and guide a child's every step.

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In itself it is not so strange that there is relatively little attention to children in public space. After all, they are of no immediate economic importance, and they do not contribute to the representative quality of a particular spot at all. Perhaps the authorities and planners simply failed to consider the needs of children in the recent wave of Chinese urban development, because in the past there was no need to give special consideration to children when planning urban developments. Car-free streets and the residential surroundings offered plenty of space and opportunity for children to play in the midst of everyday life. The home and its surroundings were a cohesive and intensively used spatial fabric. The street was the ideal place for children to become familiar with the lives of adults and they could therefore observe and experience step by step what it meant to become a grown-up. This interweaving of space (private as well as public) accessible to children no longer exists in the new residential districts. Moreover, the luxury of one's own room and the dominance of television have made playing outside less and less popular. The well-protected children are kept at home and are transported by car to the places where they attend school, play sport and pursue their hobbies. Instead



of them becoming familiar with their environment at their own pace, step by step, that experience is determined by the mobility of the parents. Contact with other children is also limited, because most children are ferried around by car in this manner; and they are busy with different activities at different times at different places. The space available for playing outside within the gated residential districts also holds little interest for children, because almost nothing happens there during the day. The only people you encounter there are the security personnel and the gardeners.

The great importance and status of children in Chinese society is not at all reflected in their representation in public space. And that is remarkable, all the more because one frequently sees sculptures that depict children at play in public space. In China, depictions of children in art have been seen as bringers of good luck for centuries, because they are the innocent ideal of the human spirit .

58 59 It seems that in the public realm playing children have been replaced by sculptures; a 'frozen' scenery of real activity. 'Many children – great happiness,' says an old Chinese proverb, but this has no obvious bearing on the actual presence of children in public space.

In order to better understand why children are under-represented in Chinese urban space it is necessary to take a closer look at the place of children in society. Is the child a helpless being whose development must be controlled, guided and structured, or are children seen as enterprising and curious people who, based on personal experiences and needs, out of own initiative develop into active, self-reliant and independent individuals? It is hardly surprising that Chinese people are more attached to the former of these two distinct perceptions of childhood.

The Chinese concept of the child

The Chinese idolize their children, but see them as little unfinished adults who must be perfected through precise instruction. The children scarcely have any chance to simply be children. Only as adults do they find room to release



the child within, witness the popularity of karaoke, amusement parks and casinos. And parents accompanying their children to playgrounds and beaches sometimes display such a level of engagement that one might wonder how much of it is 'pedagogic' and how much of it is them using the occasion to let their hair down a bit.

This compensation in adulthood is understandable when you consider that the life of the children is primarily consumed by learning. The most important book in Chinese culture, *The Analects* – the collection of Confucius's sayings compiled by his students – opens with this gem of pedagogic wisdom: 'The Master said: "To learn, and then, in its due season, put what you have learned into practice – isn't that still a great pleasure?"' (*The Analects of Confucius*, trans. David Hinton, 1998)

In the Beginning there was learning

As early as the kindergarten, learning is high on the activity programme, and there is scarcely any leeway for the children to discover things on their own, never mind entertain themselves alone. Every game is pre-ordained and any individual initiative or alterations that might influence the objective of the game are undesirable. The programme is also run through at a frenetic pace. The children barely have time to get into one game before the tables are once more set aside for the next activity. And parents keep a close eye via the webcam on whether their child is receiving maximum stimulation and showing no signs of boredom.

Strict learning and acquisition of knowledge is also central to the school system, and in this sense hinders the development of creativity and self-reliance. There were initiatives to break the yoke of this compulsive learning in China as far back as a century ago. In 1919, the well-known Chinese writer Lu Xun addressed the question by appealing to his compatriots to 'save the children'. For Lu Xun, 'saving' meant shaking off the yoke of Confucian society, in which the children were subject to unconditional obedience within a regime of punishment and worship of their elders. Lu Xun and others called for children no longer to be seen as miniature adults and for their individual needs and gifts to be recognized instead, putting 'discovering what it is to be a child' on the agenda as an independent phase in a person's life. The bringing up of children within the family and in public life should provide adequate room for their natural need for movement and urges to play.

60 61 There is a growing realization that the development of creativity and self-reliance can be of greater significance for international competition than the absorption of great quantities of factual knowledge. Beijing's pedagogic academy, in its new lesson plan for all education phases, is in fact promoting more self-reliance for schoolchildren – less learning by rote and more time and space for individual initiative, in other words.

The interest of the child

Not at least because of the one-child policy, the child has become the absolute centre of the family, around whom everything revolves. In addition, the child is still an important factor in provisions for old age, something that seems hardly superfluous given pessimistic pension prognoses. This Xiao principle of caring for parents can be traced back to Confucius, who consistently asserted that children were bound to care for their parents, out of love, until they died. While parents no longer demand unconditional obedience and complete care from the children, the Xiao principle still makes for close family ties, even in an era of great mobility. Young families are also often dependent on the cooperation of grandparents. It is often they who care for the children, along



with the kindergarten and school, as their parents are preoccupied with their careers. In the communal activities of older people, however, for example in teahouses, the children stand out by their absence.

When you examine the daily programme of children in China you realize that they actually have no time to participate in public life at all, or even to play outside. Almost all of their free time, in addition to school and kindergarten, is centred round achieving better performances. In one-child families the investment in the child's education must find a return in the child's eventual care of the parents. Competition for places at the best schools and universities is merciless, and the resulting pressure put upon the children by their families means that even three-year-olds go through an adult workday: up at six, in the kindergarten until five, with roll call in the morning and English lessons in the afternoon. On top of that, even weekends are not spared various brush-up courses for the optimal development of various skills.

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Three culturally determined ideas in particular – the child as an incomplete adult, learning above developing individual creativity, and pressure to perform – are to blame for the subordinate role of children in public space. Yet in learning, the interest of the child and the development of skills should also provide opportunities to create this room to manoeuvre.

Playing is learning

What you tell me, I forget. What you show me, I remember. What you let me do, I understand. So says Confucius. Learning is in fact something entirely different from training the brain to absorb knowledge. Learning is the lifelong process of constantly integrating observation in one's individual recognition apparatus. This learning occurs automatically as one finds one's way in the world and solves the problems one encounters along the way. The brain is not primarily made to store facts, but to find optimal solutions to problems.

To be able to do something new is pleasurable, and experiencing and sensing new impressions generates a feeling of happiness. This is why children learn



with pleasure and on their own initiative as long as they are not pressured and overloaded by adults. Play is the natural form of learning, unique to childhood, whereby children amass impressions and learn how to behave in their surroundings.

Until the age of three the various connections in the brain are not fully developed, making complex movements still is difficult for children under this age. From three onward many diverse brain cells begin to develop and their mutual connections increase at an explosive rate. The development of this complex system of connections thrives under stimulating and challenging activities. The body also develops certain 'reaction models', reflex-like ways of reacting to typical situations, for example 'being on edge' in complex terrain. The more varied the stimulation and the movement, the broader the growth of the system. This period is also crucial for the development of motor skills, and there is a strong connection between movement and thinking. Research has shown that movement fosters the creation of connections within the brain. This, in turn, is thought to positively influence the development of intelligence. This age group, however, is one faced with the greatest limitations in terms of space. They want to discover as much as they can on their own, but do not yet have the skills to respond to incidents in their environment in the appropriate way.

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Playing is exercise

Health-related behaviour patterns that influence development all the way up to adulthood can be seen in very young children. Good education and medical care alone, however, are no guarantee for problem-free development. The increasing lack of exercise among children leads to many problems, particularly in later life. Children are driven to and from school, they are made to pore over books from early in the morning to late at night and have scarcely any time left over to play outside. This phenomenon, in combination with drastic changes in eating habits, will wield a major impact on public health. Boundless parental affection is expressed primarily through food. Sons, in particular, the pride of every Chinese family, get too much, too rich food,



for well-fed children, after all, have traditionally been seen as a sign of wealth and well-being. More and more children are overweight, and there are now 20 million Chinese diabetics.

Playing is discovery

In a world not made for children, it is vital to create special space for children to play – space that, in its architectural design and use of materials, is tailored to the children’s living environment and therefore offers them opportunities to discover; to try things out and, especially, to develop on their own initiative. The immediate, tactile, visible and mutable is of greater importance in this than things that are further away, come later, are bigger, dearer, more abstract and immutable. Stones that you can throw in the water so it splashed, holes you can stick things in, wobbly pavement slabs, fences you can climb – all these are crucial discoveries and fascinating play equipment.

- 66 67 In addition to appropriate physical space, children should also have the individual playing room to make independent decisions, individual interpretation and actions based on individual initiative. What are the children allowed, can they choose certain activities on their own and to what degree is their need for movement tolerated by adults?

Misunderstandings

To an observer who bears these aspects in mind, the play landscapes, children’s furniture and play equipment used in China and elsewhere prove to give only a limited insight into the world of the child. Instead, they correspond to the conceptions of adults about what the children’s world should be. They aptly visualize to what extent children and their needs are understood and challenged, or ignored and even repressed.

Inspired by children’s behaviour while at play, which is full of imagination, adults tend, for example, to devise many aspects for the children in advance, denying the children the opportunities to turn the situation to their own ends and to project their own meanings onto it. The line between stimulating and directing

the imagination is not always an easy one to draw.

Abstractions are quite often applied, as well, under the presumption that this will stimulate the child's imagination. Yet children have difficulty recognizing abstract forms; they are more interested in details. Painting faces on objects hinders rather than stimulates the child's imagination as well. The same goes for bright colours and strong colour contrasts. This may elicit a strong alertness reaction from the children, but research shows it is not their preference in the long term. In practice children prove to prefer the non-garish and the unspectacular – things they can discover for themselves at the second or third encounter.

Diverse and unfinished

Children live in a world in which everything, really, is far too big. This is why children love detailed design, miniature worlds. Large dimensions and giant playing figurines only reinforce the feeling that they are dwarves in a world of giants. Walking down long streets without much variation is torture for children. They love best going from point to point, from experience to experience. Children's sense of time and space focuses on the here and now and not later, in a while and around the corner. That is why children need details, layers, niches, corners, small height differentials and a multiplicity of forms. Modern urban design, with its large open plazas and long uniform streets, is therefore alienating and unusable. A network of possibilities for play and discovery in the immediate vicinity of their home is ideal for children, from smaller play venues in the neighbourhood to a more specialized selection in city parks. Such places must be safely accessible and are preferably in a protected and natural setting. In this regard, it should be remembered that to children who grow up in densely populated areas, the artificial world is a much more natural and more real environment than the genuine nature they may only know from television.

It actually does not take much to create interesting space for children. It is often the places forgotten by designers that particularly appeal to children. In these places, after all, there is still room for individual initiative and interpretation,

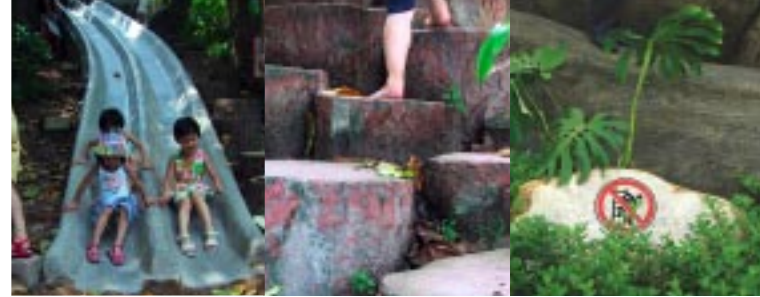


and not all of the potential uses and meanings have been conceived in advance. It is precisely in our technologically perfect world that children feel a need for the 'unfinished'. Unfinished things challenge one to develop them further and carry the potential of being transformed. Children are thus challenged to act and think on their own, and creativity is stimulated.

Playable environments

Of course these observations and considerations imply a European perspective, focused on the individual, which might disqualify them from the Chinese context. Yet in searching for appropriate playing space for my children, I saw that playing is also a basic need for Chinese children – a basic need that cares nothing for cultural differences and social status and even manages to break down extreme language barriers.

The situation in China is comparable to how it was in Europe and in many places still is. However, the rate at which problems are cropping up is much faster in China. Context is another aspect that justifies questioning whether it makes sense to apply common European concepts of play in China. Even if the need for play and the significance it has for the child's development is the same everywhere, this does not mean that the form in which the public space takes shape must be the same everywhere. The Chinese context indubitably presents different and unique opportunities to create space for children. Instead of sculptures of playing children being erected all over the place, art and artists should be asked to create 'playable environments', for instance. Traditional techniques of organizing and decorating public space offer many possibilities for creating play environments that are interesting and challenging to children. The slides in the Xiamen botanical garden are a successful example. These slides, designed according to traditional techniques, make use of the natural decay of the place and blend harmonically into the park design as a whole. Without being bright or high-contrast, they manage to pique the children's interest immediately. Similarly, fine climbing landscapes could be made from the fake rocks that are used everywhere and are almost



indistinguishable from the real thing, so that they would do more than simply please the eye. With these basic concepts, even the most representative green areas in the residential areas of the city could be made 'playable' for children.

Xiamen has set itself the goal of realizing a certain area of public space per capita. The city aims to strengthen both its public facilities and its cultural life. In this regard they are taking account of the many different needs for types of public space. Special amenities are being developed for older people and the blind, for instance. The city could work in cooperation with public-space designers, urban planners and artists, using its own models to organize the public space in a unique way for children, as well. Aside from an improvement in the quality of life, this is also a substantial contribution to the health and development potential of future generations. The development of these special models for children in the public space affords Xiamen the opportunity to further elaborate and confirm its exemplary position as a green and environmentally aware city. This is an ambition that can easily be linked to environmental education, if an effort is made to make nature in all its diversity something to be experienced anew by children, and thereby lay the foundation for a genuine understanding of the environment.

Serious urban design challenge

The trends outlined here make clear that further study of this issue is imperative. With his playgrounds in post-war Amsterdam, Aldo van Eyck showed that the child at play is in fact a serious urban design challenge. In

the short term, to be sure, this costs money, because space has to be set aside that might otherwise have been sold quite dear. Yet in the long term, a better adaptation to the needs of children can rein in the exploding expenditures of the health sector.

It is clear that play and exercise space for children is not superfluous luxury. The most obvious solution is to use standard playgrounds everywhere, yet children actually prefer to play in the street, where things happen. These Playgrounds are really a surrogate for what actually should have a place in everyday life – specifically, in the form of space where children, without running much risk, according to their own insights and without instruction, through their own experience, observations and imitations, can learn how life really works.

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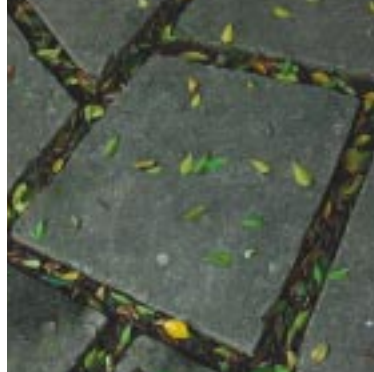




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Please don't wash in the pool. Children should be accompanied by an adult.
Don't play near the pond.
Xiamen Jiashenghaoyuan service center



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Urban Glutamate

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