

Shanghai – the hyper-modern city

By Henrik Valeur, 2011

In an essay from 1863, "Le peintre de la vie moderne" ("The painter of modern life"), the French poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire, defined modernity as "the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent" which characterizes the present, in contrast to the eternal and immutable.

Four years later the first building to celebrate modern lifestyles was erected in Paris. Le Bon Marché was the world's first department store. But this was not the only place to take a stroll. Baudelaire's protagonist, the "flâneur", could also be seen in the new parks and along the new boulevards that Haussmann had cut out of the medieval city.

Georges-Eugène Haussmann was hired in 1852 to modernize Paris. Over the next nearly two decades, he succeeded in clearing over half the city's building stock. His projects were based on Enlightenment ideals, but they were also meant to prevent the riots and revolutions that had dominated Paris since 1789.

Walter Benjamin saw Paris as the hotbed of early modernity and later called it "the 19th Century Capital". At that time, modernity, however, had already moved on.

In 1902 the world's largest department store, Macy's, opened in the heart of New York City.

While New York became more and more modern during the 20th century, Paris felt back to nostalgia. The Eiffel Tower, a monolithic tower representing the belief in technological progress at the World Exhibition in 1889, became a curious tourist attraction.

Hausmann was dead but his reincarnation surfaced in New York.

From the early 1920s to his resignation in 1968 Robert Moses became the undisputed "master builder" of New York. As Hausmann had done in Paris a century earlier, Moses now did in New York. He cleared large parts of the existing buildings in order to create space for new transport corridors (parkways), public housing and recreational facilities.

The modern flâneur no longer *strolled* along Hausmann's boulevards, now he *cruised* on Moses' parkways, while he craved the reality that television and the advertising industry promised him.

The 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center was an attack on the modern world. But even before the twin towers collapsed, modernity had spilled over.

The Super Brand Mall opened in Shanghai in 2002. Here, products from nowhere are sold to people from nowhere. It is located in Shanghai's new international financial district, Lujiazui, where the third of the world's top ten tallest residential buildings is now under construction.

Together this trio of towers constitute a landmark for the hyper-modern city while at the same time marking the displacement of the world's center of gravity. But it has been here before. From the fall of the Roman Empire through the industrialization in the West, China was the mightiest and most advanced country in the world.

As China's "window" to the outside world, Shanghai symbolizes the country's regained strength.

To Mian Mian, known as "the bad girl in Chinese Literature", it is "a young bitch who loves money."

Since the city was given the opportunity to experiment with economic reforms in 1991, millions of its residents have been resettled to make way for the speculative projects of the Market and the Party. Over a ten year period from 1995 – 2004, 35 million m² of housing was cleared.¹

According to Qiu Baoxing, Vice-minister of Construction in China, the life expectancy of Chinese buildings is only 25-30 years as compared to 74 years in the U.S. and 132 years in Britain.²

Today there are nearly 1000 buildings in Shanghai that are more than 100 meters tall.³ Between these towers, at 3-4 stories height, traffic meanders off on elevated highways (here it makes sense to talk about highways!), but the hyper-modern flâneur no longer *strolls* or *cruises* around the city, she is *zapping* through distinct worlds on her mobile media platform.

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Notes

¹ *Shanghai Pudong: urban development in an era of global-local interaction*; Yawei Chen; 2007

² http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-08/07/content_11113982.htm

³ http://www.china.org.cn/china/2010-11/16/content_21354928_2.htm