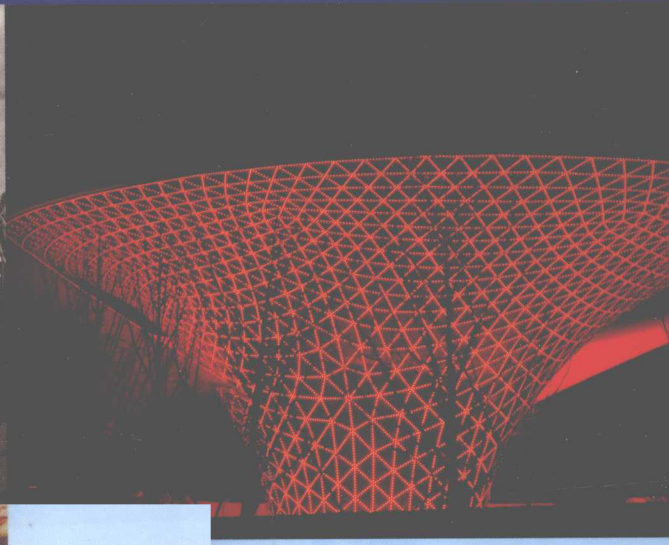


Jon Burris

SHANGHAI



DAYS



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Jon Burris

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Shanghai's Uniqueness

On so many levels it is impossible to compare Shanghai to virtually any other city; even given its proverbial identification as the "Paris of the East", I think it is unfair. Shanghai has a unique identity, so much so that I wonder why other seemingly modern cities throughout the world are not often referred to as the "Shanghai of the West"!





I consider myself fortunate to have spent the greater part of my career as a fine arts consultant working with artists and collectors. In addition to providing me with a reason to be surrounded by art, it has afforded me the opportunity to deal with two other serious pursuits in my life, photography and travel. Over the past fifteen years, I have been lucky to have had a reason to travel to China often and I'm frequently asked where I spend the most amount of time when I'm there. My answer is always, Beijing and Shanghai. Then the question is invariably, "Which city do you prefer?" I never hesitate to say that I enjoy each for different reasons. On so many levels though, it is impossible to compare Shanghai to virtually any other city; even given its proverbial identification as the "Paris of the East", I think it is unfair. Shanghai has a unique identity. It possesses a character all its own with a rhythm and pace and vibrancy unlike any other city I have ever experienced in my travels. For decades it has been considered by foreigners to be China's most cosmopolitan city and like New York, something of a cultural melting pot adding to its diversity. But undoubtedly, it has acquired part of its reputation based on a past that conjures up exotic images of opium dens that flourished in the late 1800's, or international traders, smugglers, and spies who entered its ports at the turn of the century, and of course the raucous jazz clubs and backroom gambling parlors run supposedly by



gangsters in the 1920's and 30's and brought to attention again in a series of films released throughout the 1990's by Chinese directors like Zhang Yimou and Chen Yifei. Shanghai has also been recognized over time as one of the most fashionable, glamorous, even decadent cities in the world due to its attraction to an international mix of artists, authors and expats; so much so that I wonder why other seemingly modern cities throughout the world are not often referred to as the "Shanghai of the West"!

To me, the city's character is today defined by an innate desire to move exponentially into the future. It is where Deng Xiaoping, in 1991, gave his last public address as the then leader of China, mandating that Shanghai should become Asia's center of commerce. As a result, over the past nineteen years it has transformed itself into the most prosperous of all Chinese cities, and at the same time, the largest with a population inching past 20 million. It has positioned itself as the hub of banking and finance, and the very center of an unparalleled industrial complex that is developing high-tech industries at an astonishing rate. Since 2005, Shanghai has remained the largest cargo port in the world and it handles over 28 percent of China's import and export volume. It stands as a testament to the benefits of economic reform and development.

Because it is my business to notice such things, I can also say that Shanghai has, at the same unwavering pace, updated its museums and cultural centers creating state-of-the-art facilities and is steadily building

the greatest number of private museums in all of China; not to overlook a growing number of galleries and fine arts districts that compete on a level only with Beijing. As perhaps the most appropriate indication of its challenger status for “City of the Future”, Shanghai has spent tens of billions of dollars preparing to host a World Expo between May 1 and October 31, 2010, inviting well over 240 countries and international organizations to



Huxinting Teahouse

take part. Occupying a 3.2-square-mile area on the Pudong (east side) and a little less on the Puxi (west side) and bordering both banks of the Huangpu River, world pavilions will vie for most unusual architecture incorporating state-of-the-art construction materials and futuristic design concepts. It seems to me most appropriate that this should be taking place in Shanghai.

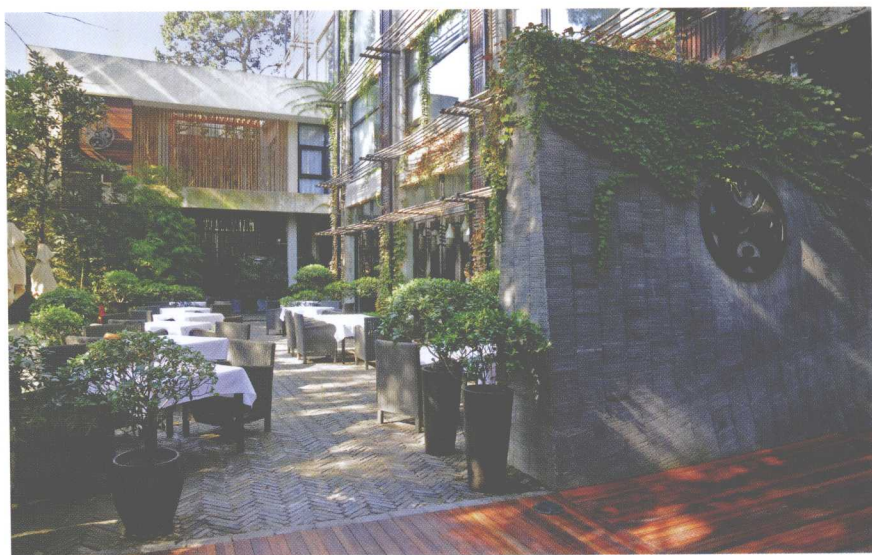
I would hazard to say that like most of the estimated 6 million foreigners who inhabit the city on any given day (or the 70 million who are expected to attend the Expo), I first came to Shanghai unaware of the real contrasts it has to offer; Westerners especially tend to think in clichéd terms. Did I find the traditional Oriental gardens, the ancient tea houses, or the antique



A street corner in the French Concession of the bygone days

markets I expected? Yes, sort of, but I also found a neighborhood in the former French Concession that felt as much like a neighborhood in Paris as any I had ever experienced in Paris, complete with apartments echoing the same French architecture and with the same street corner boulangeries. I found an integration of not one, but many cultures within a single city.

Strolling from one neighborhood to another, European architecture blended with British colonial, that gave way to Japanese modern, and moved back to traditional Shanghai *shikumen* residential architecture, all within a morning's walking distance, leaving the impression that I was in some real-life version of Disney World, only with substance. Located in what is more precisely identified as the Fuxing and Huaihai districts, the former French



Urbn Hotel

Concession has long impressed both foreigners and Shanghainese as a desirable place to live, with its tree-lined streets and foreign-style villas. The revolutionary and much-respected leader Sun Yat-sen once lived here as for a time did Zhou Enlai, first premier of the People's Republic of China. Both of their former residences are preserved as historical sites.

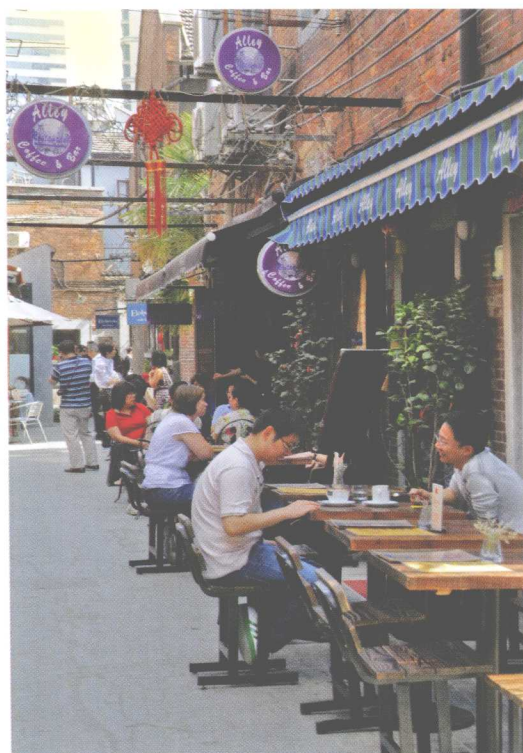
Today, a number of boutique hotels like Urbn, the first carbon neutral “green” hotel in China, occupy what were once small factories scattered throughout Fuxing/Huaihai. The area also has numerous coffee houses and cafes, all feeling very European and intimate and it’s not uncommon to see a new generation of Shanghainese sitting in the courtyards of such places, sipping wine and surfing the Internet, taking advantage of a greater degree of leisure time accorded by the prosperity that is evident in Shanghai.



An upscale restaurant in Xintiandi

Over the past fifteen years of visiting the city, I have witnessed the transformation and modernization of other districts like Xintiandi (aptly meaning “New Heaven and Earth”) centered around a greatly restructured shikumen neighborhood that is now home to dozens of upscale restaurants

and boutiques like the famous Shanghai Tang, the first trendy Chinese design label. While this chiefly European development is pleasant, but fairly commercial, the “work-in-progress” area of Tianzifang Art Street just off Taikang Road has managed to retain the character and appearance of most classical shikumen neighborhoods with its narrow alleyways and cobbled paths. Besides the tailor shops, souvenir stores and bistros at street-level, it is home to a number of advertising, design, and photographic studios hidden away on second stories in larger adjoining buildings that were once textile mills. It is the heart of a more casual neighborhood with a less hectic pace; no department stores, no quick-food chains here.



A Tianzifang cafe

Unless I'm traveling to the far corners of the city to visit an artist or a gallery, I always enjoy walking when I'm in Shanghai, which of course is the best way to explore it as a photographer. On a particularly beautiful fall morning recently, I started the day in People's Park on the northern side of People's Square or the Renmin Guangchang district.

This wonderfully re-landscaped area covers the site of a once-famous racecourse. In the pleasant surroundings of the Park, I found mostly locals practicing Taijiquan, taking dance lessons, or exercising to music. On the western edge of People's Park, housed in a five-story colonial-period building that served as the 1930's Jockey Club, is the Shanghai Art Museum containing the city's best and most expansive contemporary art collection. There is a great restaurant on the attic story of the building, Kathleen's 5 situated under an enormous clock tower, and the



Museum of Contemporary Art

views from this vantage point are some of the best in central Shanghai. As the contemporary art scene has heated up over the last ten years, the exhibitions at the Shanghai Art Museum have large solo shows featuring



the top contemporary Chinese artists.

Within a short distance, and also situated within People's Park, is the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) housed in a cleverly converted greenhouse. It is the first non-profit, independently operated contemporary art institution in Shanghai, the mission of which is to show not only Chinese, but also international contemporary art. Its programming is more cuttingedge than that of any other art museum in Shanghai.



Shanghai Museum

To the south side of People's Square sits the elegantly designed Shanghai Museum. Architecturally, it is quite modern with a round top and square base symbolizing Chinese philosophy that the square earth is under the



Shanghai Grand Theater

round sky (it has also been compared to the Temple of Heaven in Beijing or a clay cooking pot with handles). The museum's collection and galleries are stunning, containing over 120,000 ancient artifacts presented in high-tech settings; walk close to a display and a nearly invisible didactic lights up explaining the art. It is truly one of the great, not-to-be missed museums of the world and I rarely go to Shanghai without visiting it.

Located across the street south of People's Square, is the magnificent Shanghai Grand Theater, an ultra-modern glass and steel structure with the most interesting feature being its giant convex roof. In the daylight you notice the colorful flower beds leading up to it and how it stands out rather prominently against surrounding buildings, but at night when it is lighted from inside, you cannot help but compare it to an alien space ship that has landed in the middle of the metropolis.

Moving east away from People's Square, through several blocks of the 5th Ave, like shopping streets (adjacent to the most well-known Nanjing Road, the busiest of all shopping districts) you approach the Bund. Easily the single most-enduring symbol of Shanghai for over a hundred years, it was the absolute center of all activity in colonial days and is currently one of the city's busiest thoroughfares. Stretching for a mile along the Huangpu River, the Bund (an Anglo-Indian word



Nanjing Road

for "embankment") takes in an impressive view east across the river to the truly futuristic-looking Pudong district and is bordered on the west by 52 European-style buildings originally occupied by banks and trading houses, foreign consulates, and the Shanghai Club and Peace Hotel, both infamous locations in the 1920's jazz era. Over the past ten years, these buildings have been renovated by world-class architects and now house high-end boutiques and stores like Gucci, Armani, Zegna, and Cartier along with a wide assortment of designer bars, five-star restaurants, and art galleries. Nearly as iconic a landmark as Beijing's Tiananmen Square, the Bund represents an important part of Shanghai's history that has not been