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Cities of the Future

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The future is by definition modern – Carol Willis

Modern means Shanghai – then and now – Ben Wood

At the Skyscraper Museum in Battery Park, where lower Manhattan meets the water’s edge, Shanghai is currently on display. Though the museum only occupies a small space, the design by architectural firm SOM gives the illusion of height, and the show is packed with content (including maps, floor-to-ceiling photographs, architectural models, video, and a 20-minute floating streetscape by Shanghai-based photographer Jakob Montrasio).

For those who can’t make the trip to New York, much of this material is now available online at the museum’s superb website. In the coming months, this should be supplemented by recordings of a fall lecture series on the Shanghai skyline, which features architectural talks from many of the most notable firms working in the city (Portman, Gensler, SOM, KPF etc).

The exhibit is designed as an introduction to the urban landscape of contemporary Shanghai. Yet, there is much of interest here even for those deeply familiar with the city.

Near the entrance, where the vastness and intensity of China’s current wave of urbanization is documented by a series of diagrams and maps, Shanghai’s contemporary transformation is introduced through ‘3 forms of urban planning and design.’

The first, the ‘patchwork model,’ is found mainly in Puxi, where modern tower blocks are set amongst more traditional architecture and street life. The second model consists of the supertowers of Lujiazui, and the third, again mostly in Puxi, is the trend towards architectural preservation, which began with the now somewhat controversial development of Xintiandi. (The museum’s display on Xintiandi includes a fascinating sketch by architect Ben Wood, who has scrawled across the bottom of the page: ‘What is Chinese? A question that demands an answer every day.’)

The focus here, however, is on skyscrapers, and much attention is given to the city’s most well-known towers, ‘Tomorrow Square’, Jinmao and the SWFC.

However, the show also features some of the city’s still incomplete supertowers. Visitors learn, for example, of the White Magnolia Plaza, a cluster of high rises designed by SOM that promises to be one of the defining features of the new construction along the North Bund.

The exhibit also provides one of most detailed glimpses – through models, photographs and video – of the newly emerging 128-story Shanghai Tower. This astonishing construction consists of a ‘building within a building,’ in which a double-glass curtain wall spirals round a concrete outer frame, which creates eight stacked 15-story segments divided by nine sky-garden atriums.

On a curators’ tour, Carol Willis, the founder of the museum, presented Pudong’s trio of towers as the past, present and future of the city – with Jinmao’s pagoda alluding to the past, the modernity of the SWFC representing the present and the ‘green construction’ of the Shanghai Center pointing to the future. (It’s worth noting that the idea that skyscrapers are models of sustainability is hardly new. Modernists like Frank Lloyd Wright, Corbusier and Soleri believed from the start that high-density highrisers would lead to a greener city. The skyscraper museum has explored the sustainability of skyscrapers in a previous exhibition.)
The most fascinating aspect of the current exhibit on Shanghai, however, is the show’s framing thesis. China Prophecy: Shanghai is the final show in the three-part exhibition entitled ‘Future City: 20/21,’ which began with the show ‘New York Modern,’ and also included an exhibit and symposium on ‘Vertical Cities: Hong Kong.’

Presented in this way, ‘China Prophecy’ invites viewers to compare the near future of Shanghai with the past futurism of New York. This collision of time and space is suggested right at the start of the exhibition through twin blow-ups of Google maps, which illustrate the uncanny mirroring of Lujiazui and lower Manhattan, with their almost identical waterfronts, clusters of skyscrapers, and intense urban density.

As a city of skyscrapers, Shanghai has echoed Manhattan from the start. The Park Hotel, the city’s tallest tower until 1983, was built only after Shanghai’s great architect Laszlo Hudec returned from America. Hudec’s design for the Park Hotel was based on his sketches of Raymond Hood’s Radiator Building, which is located on West 40th Street, Manhattan.

In an in-depth 5 part lecture series that opens Future City 20/21 and serves as the “expansion, footnotes and embroidery of the ideas in the exhibition,” curator Carol Willis discusses this and other of Hood’s work alongside American architects and illustrators like Hugh Ferris and Harvey Wiley Corbett.

Together the talks and exhibit explore the New York of the 1920s and ‘30s as the ‘city of the future,’ in order to present an alternative vision of modernism that is, according to Willis, not the ‘one you normally find in the textbooks.’

The idea, briefly put, is that in the early 1920s, before the International Style of Le Corbusier and Mies Van der Rohe were widely accepted as the definition of modernism, there arose a specifically American form of modern architecture and urban planning that was born out of the problems of the
contemporary city. Taking New York as their inspiration and site of exploration, these architects, theorists and illustrators designed a metropolis of the future – a city of skyscrapers, bridges and overpasses that was grounded in the present but was oriented towards that which was yet to come.

If New York was the 20th century’s city of the future, the question posed by ‘China Prophecy’ and stated explicitly in the show’s opening video is: ‘Is Shanghai the New York of the 21st century?’

This pairing of futurist visions of New York with contemporary Shanghai is hinted at throughout the exhibit. Illustrations from Hugh Ferris’ retro-futurist masterpiece ‘Metropolis of Tomorrow’ are placed alongside the photographs of Shanghai’s towers of today. The KPF-designed complex on Nanjing Lu is displayed next to a model of Rockefeller Center (arguably Manhattan’s most successful example of modern architecture).

Most intriguingly, Shanghai’s coming World Expo, which itself can often seem an exuberant celebration of an outdated futurism, is paired with New York’s 1939 World Expo (which was themed ‘Building the World of Tomorrow’). On the museum’s website a twinned video screen shows clips from General Motors’ hugely popular ‘Futurama’ pavilion at the 1939 fair alongside shots of the skyscrapers and elevated highways of contemporary Shanghai.

Propelled by modernization and urbanization, which Willis identifies as the ‘impulse of the future,’ Shanghai today is facing familiar problems of mass migration, traffic congestion and the inevitable chaos that accompanies high-speed growth. In seeking solutions to these urban dynamics by imagining, planning, building and debating the metropolis of the future, Shanghai, the show suggests, is reanimating the modernist project of 20th century New York, thereby reviving yesterday’s dreams of tomorrow.

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