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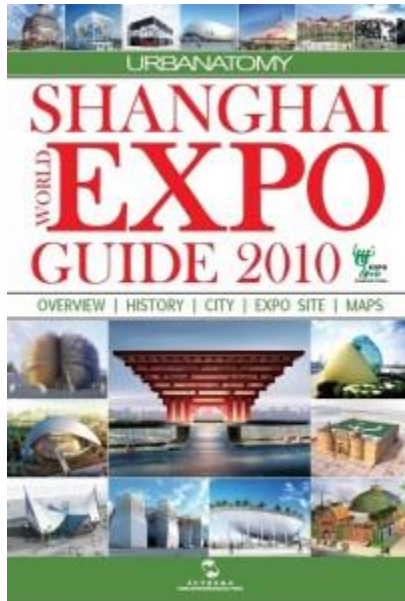
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Book Review: *Shanghai World Expo Guide 2010*

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By Adam D. Frank



On first blush, one would think that reviewing Nick Land's *Shanghai World Expo Guidebook 2010* would be an exercise akin to reviewing a movie poster for *Avatar*—a kind of 2-D portrait of a 3-D experience.

But Land's guidebook, it turns out, has more in common with the grand tradition of literary travel writing than it does with, say, an American Automobile Association treatment of an interstate highway tour. Like the Expo itself, its style is both substantive and sensual, nineteenth century in its way, yet thoroughly "modern" in its central theme of Shanghai's shifting, baroque, and often unique interpretations of modernity. Lafcadio Hearn's work comes to mind, but so does Paul Theroux's.

Land's opening paragraph foreshadows the combination of intellectual carnival ride and useful information about to come:

Modern Shanghai and the World Expo were born within a single decade, over 150 years ago. Since then, the twin histories of the world's most iconic modern city and the greatest festival of modern civilization have unfolded in parallel, with frequent cross-fertilizations, through dizzy ascents and calamitous plunges that tracked the rise, fall, and renaissance of the modernist spirit. Through all these vicissitudes, each has reflected in large measure the trials, tempests, and triumphs of worldwide industrial modernity, defining its promise, nourishing its achievements, and sharing in its setbacks. At World Expo 2010 Shanghai, these parallel tracks melt together, into the largest discrete event in world history.

The guide is organized for both readability and practicality. "Part I: Overview" places the six-month-long Shanghai World Expo in the context of the two-week-long 2008 Beijing Olympics, historical economics of world expositions ("exponomics"), the philosophy of the world exposition movement as exemplified by the Bureau of International Expos (BIE), thematic shifts in recent world expos, and the highlights of the Shanghai Expo's unique innovations. It is here, for example, where we first learn of the Shanghai Expo's central theme—"Better City, Better Life," and its five sub-themes: Blending of Diverse Cultures in the City, Economic Prosperity in the City, Innovation of Science and Technology in the City, Remodeling of Communities in the City, and Interactions between Urban and Rural Areas. We learn that "World Expo Shanghai 2010 shatters Expo records" for site size (528 hectares, including the Puxi and Pudong sides of the Huangpu River that splits the city in two); projected visitor numbers (70 million, a figure Expo officials expect to reach by October 31, 2010, the official end date of the event);

number of participating nations (240 plus); unique innovations of a special Urban Best Practice area with large-scale models of city life around the world, the Online Expo Shanghai (www.expo.cn), and numerous techno enhancements to ease the visitor's experience.

"Part II: History" brings Land's somewhat furtive project for the guide (hey, isn't this supposed to be a tourist guide?!), as well as his formidable literary skills, into full view. "The modern world arose unexpectedly and has always perplexed itself," he writes as his opening salvo in this section:

Modernity's ceaseless, cumulative change defies every pre-existing pattern, abandoning stability without embracing the higher order of a great cycle or the simple destination of an eschatological conclusion. Although establishing something like a new normality, it departs decisively from any sort of steady state. It displays waves and rhythms, but it subsumes such cycles, rather than succumbing to them. Whilst nourishing apocalyptic speculation, it continuously complicates anticipations of an end time. It engenders a previously unanticipated mode of time and history, characterized by ever-accelerated directional transformation, whose indices are quantitative growth and qualitative innovation. The worldwide consolidation of modernity only deepens its fundamental mystery.

Were in not for its context within a healthy supply of practical information about ticket prices, useful maps, and blow-by-blow accounts of Expo pavilions, such intellectual waxing poetic might come off as rather standard, perhaps even somewhat overblown, cultural studies fare. But as an introduction to and means of reflecting upon the powerfully sensual experience that is the actual Shanghai World Expo, Land's ruminations of modernity make sense and, indeed, will illuminate the Expo tourist's experience.

In his history of the Expo movement, Land takes us on a temporal tour from London's 1851 Crystal Palace, through the birth of the Eiffel Tower at the 1889 Universal Exposition in Paris, to the Wild West-esque American coming out party of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago (which perhaps deserves to be seen as America's nineteenth century equivalent of the Shanghai Expo in terms of brashness and splashiness—though Philadelphia did hold the country's first World's Fair seventeen years before earlier in 1876), to the science fictiony embrace of "the future" that became the hallmark of twentieth century expos, the existentialist disillusionment with modernity that marks the slow decline of the preeminence of expos on the world stage, and, finally, to China's unabashed re-embrace of techno-charged future visions at the Shanghai event. Particularly noteworthy in this section is Land's sociocybernetics-tinged discussion of "Modernity 2.0", citing neomarxist sociologist Ulrich Beck's notion of "second modernity" and Carlos Escudé's and Agnes Heller's defense of "the restoration of core modernist themes, as well as a fairly detailed discussion of "neomodernist" architecture as a response to the perceived "sterility" of a postmodernist style.

Heady stuff for the business traveler blowing off an afternoon in Shanghai with a trip to the Expo, but wonderfully relevant for those willing to take a tour through Shanghai's architectural history and the not unexpected variety of zany/innovative architectural choices that world expo pavilions are famous for (in other terms, "modern" Crystal Palaces and Eiffel Towers giving way to new modernities in Shanghai). "Part III: The City" actually spotlights these features of Shanghai's urban landscape, addressing Shanghai's distinct early twentieth-century rejection of a modernist International Style and embrace of Art Deco, a tendency toward a "luscious cosmopolitan style," Land points out, "perfectly adapted to the Shanghai of the early 20th century." He brings us up to date, by the end of the chapter, on Expo-related urban design projects, including new transportation hubs and upgrades in power, water, and communication networks.

This latter section of Part III is perhaps the only section of the guide where Land opens himself up to accusations of adopting the apologist role for the Party. While he notes frustrations among Shanghai people regarding chaotic construction over the last decade, he leaves unaddressed the displacement of whole neighborhoods from the Expo site and the continuing complaints of unfair compensation from residents of many of those neighborhoods. While such governmental muscling out of the locals in the name of "the public good" is not unique to China (happens right here in Conway, Arkansas, US of A, as a matter of fact), the magnitude of the displacement in Shanghai results in "better city, better life" for Party officials, real estate moguls, and construction companies (often in the same person), far less so for the average worker. Land, of course, would have little choice in whether or not to address such

issues here. The kind of abstract intellectualism (and, by association, abstract political discussion) that Land engages in throughout the guide passes muster among the censors these days in China, but for something so public, international, and riddled with security issues as the Expo, any overt political critique, even one that Party officials support, like “anti-corruption,” could not appear in the guide if it were to have any reasonable chance of publication. This is, after all, still a guidebook, isn’t it?

“Part IV: The Expo Site” really is a guidebook in terms of providing us with the lowdown on several of the national pavilions (still in the design and construction phase when the guide was published), followed by several useful maps and a detailed index.

Aside from the guide’s simultaneous utility as a treatise on modernity *and* as a tool for tourists, *Shanghai World Expo Guide 2010* is pleasingly designed, with color and black and white photos and drawings on almost every page. Though much of the guide is devoted to advertising space, ads are relatively unobtrusive and notably include information about hospitals, activities for families with children, etc.

Though he achieves them with substantially more panache and aplomb than one would expect, Land’s goals in *Shanghai World Expo Guide 2010* appear properly humble for a guidebook: to provide a readable, practical, yet intellectually challenging account of the Expo. That the guide does so while offering a serious dose of cultural critique not only makes for a surprisingly stimulating read but also serves double duty as a serious effort to document the biggest coming out party the world has ever seen.

Adam D. Frank is Assistant Professor (Asian Studies and Anthropology) in the Honors College of the University of Central Arkansas. He is the author of [Taijiquan and the Search for the Little Old Chinese Man: Understanding Identity through Martial Arts](#).

Read two excerpts from Nick Land’s Expo guide [here](#).

Tags: Nick Land, Shanghai Expo 2010