

Expo in Pudong: Two Years Later

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As volunteers arrived in their droves, cheap hotels were hastily launched and countless countdowns ticked away, pre-Expo Shanghai was abuzz for the months – years, even – ahead of the global event. So much so in fact, that its aftermath – a post-Expo Shanghai – was hard to imagine, for me at least. And then, of course, it kicked off: pavilions, corporate events, *haibao*s, queues... For those six summery months, Expo shone, its passing seemed unreal, perhaps all the more so for the sheer whirlwind of energy it brought with it...

Two years later, CreativeHunt returned to the Pudong Expo grounds to see what has – or hasn't – been happening at the site since it shut its doors in October 2010. We were joined by architect Ansgar Halbfas – he was supervisor of the planning and construction at Germany's national pavilion, and is also the founder of Chinese Architecture Corporation ([CHIARC](#)), undertaking projects across China as well as architectural trips for visiting VIPs. Take it from us: he's quite the post-Expo tour-guide.

Our walk begins at the former entrance gate on Tangzijing Lu. Behind big white fences, we pick out the detritus of Expo: a soldier's green podium, some fire extinguishers and a toppled booth for security guards. Grass tufts up through the paving; a rubbish collector trundles past, trailed by a grubby little one-eyed dog.

To the untrained eye, the scene looks like an eerie, abandoned wreck... but it's not. Ansgar points out missing grates, pipes and balustrades, all sold on for scrap metal. Though cheaply built, there's nonetheless value in the raw materials of Expo.

Perfectly illustrating just that, a bunch of massive chillers are grouped together like elephants under an open-sided shelter. Their tarpaulin wraps have become ragged; tattered ends dance in the wind, exposing the towering gray cubes to the near-sleet of a cold December day. Although now unceremoniously ripped out, these contraptions were once central to Expo's success and green credentials. They are non-electric absorption chillers, powered by natural gas and used to cool the pavilions. The manufacturer is none other than [Broad](#) – the same group behind that [controversial pre-fab skyscraper](#) – and they cost an absolute fortune.

Fixtures and fittings are being whisked away, set aside, and generally recycled. They're potentially being pilfered too: I dissuade Ansgar and photographer, Brandon from trying to carry away Cuba's 'B' and 'A'. Not only are they really heavy, they're also pretty rusty. On with the tour.

As Ansgar explains, the very land we're exploring is one of potentially lucrative value. Well-connected through new subway connections and freshly tarmacked roads, it's also close to the river, and, lest we forget, absolutely massive. For that reason, local government are watching and waiting for the right developers bidding the right price to come along. In short, this area hasn't been abandoned; it's simply biding its time.

At this point, an explanation: there are gaps to be found along these tall white fences, both below and in between. I don't recommend anyone suffer the indignity of trying to squeeze through, but if you do, there's interesting sights to be seen... Technically, it's trespassing, but flash a smile at the bored-looking *boa'ans* and you might just get away with it.

What we conspicuously don't see are the pavilions of Expo's wealthier nations. Germany has been completely razed, and the acrylic rods of the UK's 'Seed Cathedral' long since [auctioned off](#). Most were contractually obliged to hand back the land by April 2011, you see, but it's the countries that opted to ditch their pavilions for organizers to do with as they will that prove a highlight of our visit.

At the time of writing, Mexico has all but succumbed to tall, breezy grasses. It's swamped with the stuff, and those once colorful kites now either felled or sun-faded. Large-format photographs of the North American nation have been cruelly spray-painted over, and inside, canvas banners flutter uselessly... This is the scene I'd secretly expected from post-Expo Expo. Debris, ghosts and depressing has-beens. But, like elsewhere on this massive plot, Mexico is simply biding its time.

Reminding us of just that is the flurry of activity on show over by the Italian pavilion. So far, that includes a Ferrari exhibition, Da Marco's restaurant, and of course, [Centro Marangoni](#), setting up shop in Francois Valentiny's beautifully angular, church-like creation for Luxembourg. Next to all of that, France, meanwhile, is reportedly in the hands of a Chinese developer...

From there, we meander over to Africa. It's largely those nondescript, rented pavilions, and for the most part, they're still there. On our visit, filming is winding up inside the gargantuan Africa Joint Pavilion on China's rendition of MasterChef. Down the road, Tunisia is undergoing a plaster and paint job, but it's their neighbor that's vying for attention.

Chocolate HappyLand (Libya that was) looks poised to be as terrible as it sounds. Not yet open, it's already decked out in candy-colored garishness, and is set to house cocoa replicas of, well, all kinds of stuff. Things are happening here, for sure. On the periphery of Zone C, we spy a soon-to-launch renewable energy theme park, complete with test-drive track for electric vehicles, housed in what was Turkey. Elsewhere, an all-American team is working hard to install an exhibition of [Titanic relics](#) in the former Greece, opened to the public earlier this month.

From there, we move over to the main event: Expo Axis and the area surrounding the China Pavilion. That's now [China Art Palace](#), a sprawlingly massive museum of modern and contemporary works, already proving itself a worthy addition to the Shanghai arts scene. It's also close to the [Mercedes Benz Arena](#), otherwise known as World Expo Cultural Center, all helpfully and newly connected via subway Line 8.

The Axis has always been a thing to behold: built by Stuttgart's [SBA International](#), it's one of the world's largest membrane roofs, spanning some 100 meters and stretching almost one kilometer along the Huangpu. Supporting this really very beautiful structure are six funnels, designed to collect rain water and direct natural light below.

Fast-forward to 2013 and it's now the Riverside Mall. In December, it was a hive of activity: a swarm of migrant workers are everywhere, the place reeks of newness and signage is beginning to appear. Mostly mid-range Chinese brands and eateries, it's probably worth a visit. Art installations are taking over those wonderful, triangulated funnels, and we spied a big, waterless fishtank awaiting its aquatic tenants.

This is by far the busiest area on our tour: hoardings hint at what's to come, whilst insiders suggest a new Hilton, Hyatt and luxury shopping mall by 2015. Mark our words, Shanghai: this will be an integral part of our city, and it's certainly a space to watch.

Winding up a cold winter's day, we wander over to the farthest edge of Zone A. This was the first to be cleared, and, aside from the bafflingly popular and still-open Saudi Arabia pavilion, most have completely disappeared, leaving a huge, razed area where Iraq, Iran, North Korea and co once stood. Before Expo, this was Nan Matou district, a kind of village within Pudong; its next incarnation remains to be seen.

It's a strange place, this post-Expo land, and not exactly what I'd expected. For sure, there's pockets of abandonment, but even there, things of value – Portugal's cork cladding, for example – are being gradually syphoned off, recycled, upcycled and generally put to use. Without the crowds and out of the sunshine, the shoddiness of some of the original workmanship is apparent, even just two years after Expo closed its doors. But, until projects are decided, rents confirmed and developers engaged, why pay for demolition on such a valuable plot of land? In the meantime, temporary projects are popping up – Africa's TV studio; Titanic in Greece; or JZ Festival at Expo Park – whilst elsewhere, these unique, statement buildings are offering fresh possibilities for the likes of Centro Marangoni and China Art Palace. Lengths of screening and temporary walls hide the mainstay of post-Expo construction, and judging by a steady roll of drills, trucks and diggers, there's lots of it.

Far from forgotten and rotting, Expo in Shanghai is once again gearing up to take center stage, and bringing with it lots to look forward to.