

Shanghai Expo 2010 – The Greatest Design Festival on Earth (So Why Weren’t You There?)

BY NGIOM

THE THEME FOR THE WORLD EXPO IN SHANGHAI IN 2010 IS ‘BETTER CITY, BETTER LIFE’, WITH SERIOUS SUB-THEMES LIKE: ‘URBAN CULTURAL DIVERSITY’, ‘URBAN ECONOMIC GROWTH AND PROSPERITY’, ‘INNOVATION IN SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY IN URBAN CONTEXTS’, ‘REMODELLING URBAN COMMUNITIES’, ‘INTERACTION BETWEEN URBAN AND RURAL AREAS’ – ALL OF WHICH NORMALLY ENTAIL SERIOUS ACADEMIC DISCOURSE CENTRED AROUND ARCHITECTURAL ACADEMIES. IT SOUNDS SO GOVERNMENT LED, FOR THE ENVISAGED BETTERMENT OF SOCIETIES. BUT WHAT IF YOU WERE TO OFFER SUCH THEMES TO THE GLOBAL CREATIVE COMMUNITY? THANKFULLY, AS FAR AS THE INTERNATIONAL PAVILIONS ARE CONCERNED, ONLY LIP SERVICE IS GIVEN TO THE THEMES, SOMETIMES BY-PASSED AND OCCASIONALLY, THROWN TO THE WIND. AGREE WITH ALL THE SERIOUS STUFF OF COURSE, BUT WHAT THE CREATIVE COMMUNITY REALLY WANTED TO DO, ON THIS RARE OPPORTUNITY WAS TO THROW AWAY THE INHIBITION AND GET DOWN TO THE BUSINESS OF REAL CREATIVITY. DISCOUNTING THE DUDS IN THE EXPOSITION (THERE ARE QUITE A NUMBER OF THEM), THERE ARE A BEWILDERING (AND QUITE UNEXPECTED) NUMBER OF REAL GEMS. THAT IS WHAT THE GREAT SHANGHAI EXPO WILL BE KNOWN FOR POSTERITY – THE GREATEST ARCHITECTURAL AND DESIGN, AND ELECTRONIC FESTIVAL OF ALL! THIS SEGMENT PICKS ONLY A FEW, THE REST HAVE TO BE EXPERIENCED ON SITE – SO WHAT ARE YOU STILL DOING AT YOUR BACKYARD?



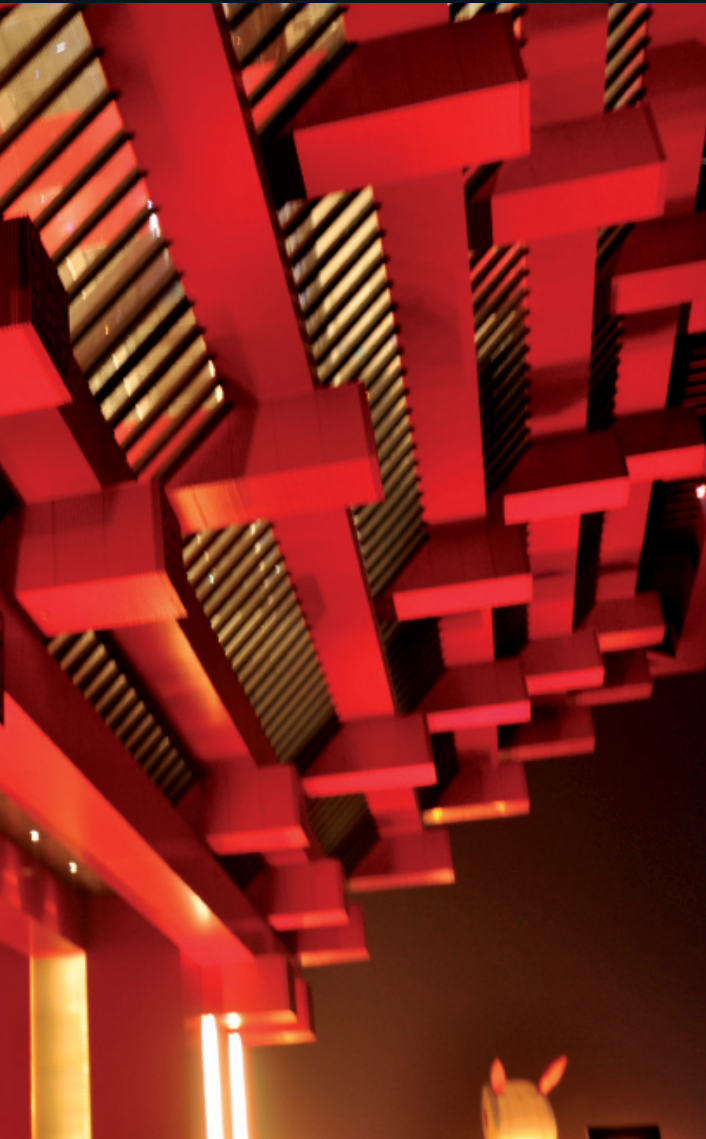
The Great Crystal Palace



China Pavilion

Iconic structures had always been a feature of the great world expositions. The Great Crystal Palace building (92,000 square metres of it), which was built by Joseph Paxton to house the Great Exhibition in London in 1851 is still remembered in architectural folklore as one of the largest iron and glass building built, for the purpose of showcasing industrial products from various parts of the world. The Crystal Palace set the flavour for iconic buildings at this very first world’s fair; however, it was destroyed in a fire in 1936. Another iconic structure that is still with us today is the Eiffel Tower, which was built for the 1889 ‘Exposition Universelle’ in Paris. It was designed by Gustave Eiffel as a temporary building, where its archway at the bottom of the tower was the entrance to the fair. At 824m (equivalent to an 81-story building), it stood as the world’s tallest structure until 1930 when it was eclipsed by the Chrysler Building in New York in 1930. Ironically it was considered by the public as an eyesore when it was first built – now, of course it has since become the signifier for Paris and has been so since the end of that exposition. More than 200,000,000 people had visited the tower since its construction.

The 2010 Shanghai Expo has become a feast of iconic structures, where the China Pavilion stands brazenly above all else, signalling this country’s claim of place within the world’s consciousness at present time, and in reality, it is a surprisingly laudable building despite its simple symbolism - is it intended that it should look like an ancient imperial crown? It appears ancient, and yet it is modern, it seems appropriate in the context of the Expo, where each pavilion tries to be a compression of the country it represents. The architect, He Jingtang, infers as much in an interview with CCTV, saying, “It is difficult to represent China with a single form. We finally found ‘dougong’, an ancient corbel bracket. The inverted shape of the pavilion symbolises the spirit of China’s people against the background of a rising nation”. Although the building is constantly portrayed at a distant, it is much more powerful as a symbol of various narratives when experienced close up. The entrance podium is overwhelming due to the sheer scale of it, made eventful by the hanging multi-level glass escalators that criss-cross one another, filling the arriving onlooker with anticipation. And from the entrance podium, the columns dramatically frame the Expo site. The electronic events inside the building make a memorable electronic fair, with hanging projections, a train ride, walk past a large animated ancient painting of a Song cityscape, linear art galleries, and a rain garden. Little noticed at first, is the way a modern Chinese garden is designed at the back the building, which include various follies that speak with the building. The China Pavilion is best experienced at night



China Pavilion

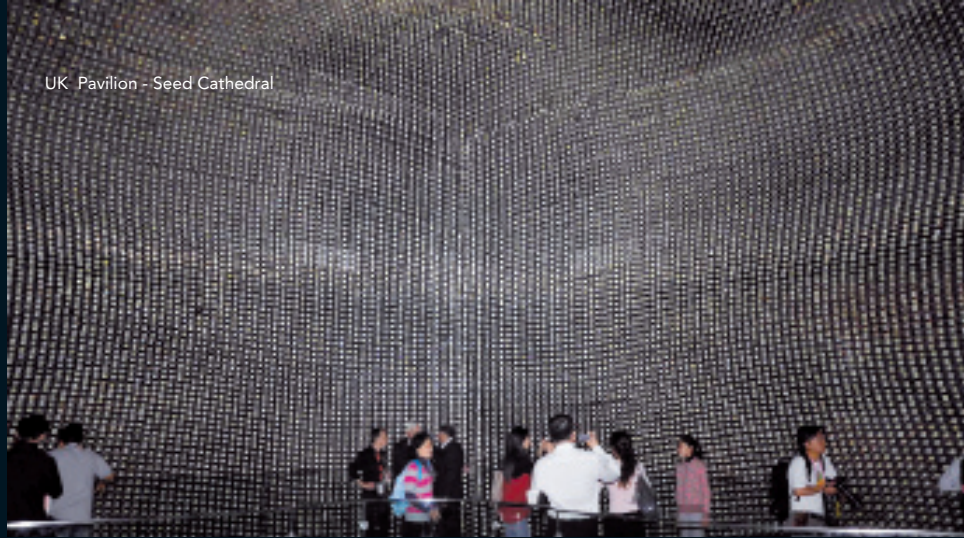


China Pavilion



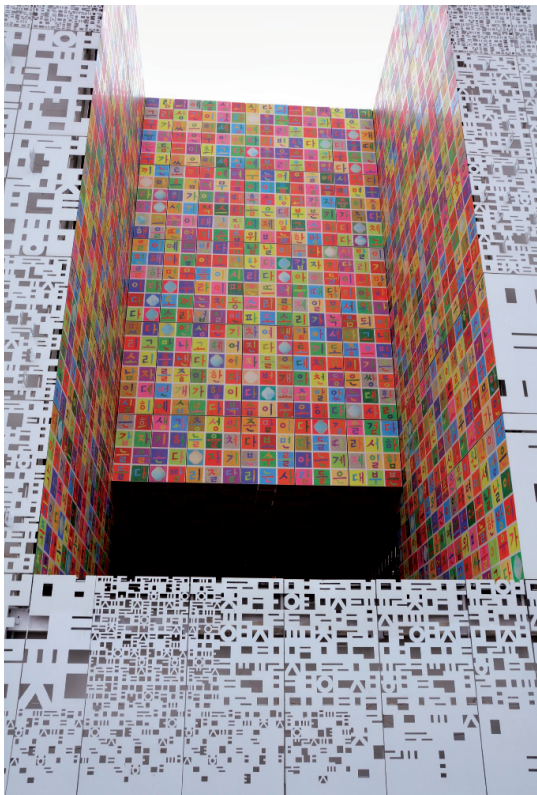
China Pavilion

What sort of message does the UK Pavilion gives then, with its strange-looking, prickly, alien-like blob from a distance? The designer Thomas Heatherwick, who had designed less spectacular spiky sculptures in the past, calls it ‘Seed Cathedral’ in an interview with the China Daily newspaper. It echoes the Millennium Seed Bank project in Kew Gardens in London, which has banked in more than one billion seeds in underground vaults to guard against their extinction. The main pavilion feature is made up of 60,000 seed-bearing acrylic rods, which is lighted by LED lights. During the day, the acrylic rods funnel sunlight into the interior to the tiny room, which purportedly helps to reduce its carbon footprint – this being the message of the design. The artistry of this pavilion is remarkable compared with all the others, which more or less, portraying their attributes in conventional exhibition styles, either through passages and routes or electronically through audio-visual halls. The UK Pavilion is comparatively subtle, in not having to represent a country in a metaphorical or literal manner; but instead as an artistic installation. The acrylic rods are also surprisingly resilient: in gust of winds, the rods sway collectively like waves, giving life to an already lively structure, without the rods breaking away.



What is the intriguing ‘Seed Cathedral’ made out of? Its shell (which could not be seen) is made out of 1metre thick steel and composite structure pierced by 60,000 acrylic filaments, each 20mm square in section, which passes through aluminium sleeves. The construction is guided by 3-D computer modelling data, which is fed into computer-controlled milling machines (ref. auhana.com).

This is not to infer that the others are not as worthy in different ways. The South Korean Pavilion, created by Mass Studies (Minsuk Cho and co), an innovative Korean architectural practice, is a distinguished work of architecture. Being an iconic structure, the shape of the pavilion is derived from the Korean alphabet, Han-geul. Even the plan of the building is derived from the Korean alphabet.



Singapore Pavilion



Spanish Pavilion



The buildings that hem the street seem to defy gravity even more, floating at the edge of the street without vertical supports – they almost seem to want to fly away. The theme offers the message that a good street is made up of different types of buildings, like a house, a shop, a factory, a farm, a petrol station, a sports centre, a garage – comprehensive mix that makes a mythical ‘happy street’. Mostly, the pavilion depicts a democratic condition, where access to the pavilion is intended to be everywhere (although it was eventually reduced to in due to crowd management), and everywhere is visibly accessible.

Even the space seems to have derived from the Korean alphabets, make the building into a semioticians’ discourse. The building is large and ambitious, covering a 6,000 square metre site. The skin of the building is entirely covered with around 40,000 sheets of aluminium panels, where the external panels are made up of Han-geul cut-outs and the internal panels, including the ground floor are in bright colours, which are decorated by the artist Ik-Joong Kang, a case of powerful collaborative results from two artistic fields. The spatial quality of the South Korean Pavilion is most felt when being routed through the spaces and events by some rather amiable and polite ushers.

How about an architecture of delirious fun? Design by architect, John Körmerling, with the help of engineer Rijk Blok, the Netherlands Pavilion is one that is uninhibited, with streets that float in the air, inscribing a figure of eight, in one continuous ramp. The open pavilion happily calls itself ‘Happy Street’.



Vietnam Pavilion

Russian Pavilion



Netherlands Pavilion



Polish Pavilion



Czech Pavilion



France Pavilion



There are too many gems in the exposition to include in this run. The Russian Pavilion is also a standout, and so are the Italian, French, Swiss, German, Swedish, UAE and the Spanish Pavilion is stunning, with stunning crowd queuing to get in, and many, many more. Some of the little pavilions are just as good, like the Danish, Polish, Czech and Asian ones like Indonesian and Vietnam. Among the small ones, the Finland Pavilion has mastery in design narrative. Designed by Teemu Kurkela of JKMM Architects, the pavilion tries to portray Finland in a microcosm, as a miniature city, with the interior telling stories of Finland in space, light and electronically - all metaphorically, ethereally in Northern European sophistication. Like many of the successful little pavilions, this one has its story to tell.

Canada Pavilion





Italian Pavilion



UAE Pavilion



Canada Pavilion



Italian Pavilion

Shaped like a giant ice bowl, the Finland Pavilion is actually covered with recycle plastic and plastic compound to resemble fish scales. The entrance is understated, which opens into a white-light cavity, which ironically blends with the white smoggy Shanghai skyline, blurring all the physical edges. The internal journey around the Teflon skin is like a mystical one of light and changing colours. According to the architect, it tells the story of the times of the ice ages, when the country was covered by several kilometres of thick ice, whose movement shape the coastline, lakes and islands. The ice age also created giant kettles – which are cavities formed in the bedrocks, which is represented by the large cavity at the centre of the pavilion. The pavilion is like an island surrounded by a pool of water, which is part of the architect's narrative, and entry is by a bridge.



Turkey Pavilion



Swiss Pavilion

According to the architect, the purpose of the pavilion is to present the vision of a good life, which are represented by his six pillars: freedom, creativity, innovation, community spirit, health and nature – sounds rather good, and applies equally to some of the best pavilions in the park and an attitude held by the happy, creative community. What needs forgiving about the Finnish Pavilion is its iconism, which to the architect may depict an ice kettle, but to others, it could appear like bowls of all sorts – then this problem applies to every other pavilion in the park; but then, isn't this what a world's fair is about – the compression of all of the countries narrative into a singular icon and the compression of a nation's culture into a journey of 20 minutes to perhaps an hour. But for the designer, what does it matter, for after all, this is a design festival of unimaginable magnitude and incredible opportunity to prod at the outer vestiges of the imagination. ●



German Pavilion



Finland Pavilion



Danish Pavilion



Swedish Pavilion