



Sir Terry Farrell's new regular column. Here he says it will be fascinating to look back in 20 years to see if Shanghai got things right.

# Shanghai, city of the 21st Century

The character of cities is often fixed by the periods in which they have grown and changed rapidly. London is a great Victorian city, New York is art deco, and Shanghai is a city of the new century.

**Over the summer** I went to the Shanghai Expo as a keynote speaker and guest of UKTI and the RIBA. I and our Hong Kong office also participated in a series of workshops and charrettes held by the RIBA. At the same time I launched the Chinese version of my book *Shaping London*, which is selling very well in China. I think there is enormous respect for and interest in British town planning and architecture – and indeed London – and it is gratifying to see the enthusiasm with which a book that might be regarded as a little esoteric is being received in China.

The trip to Expo was really very interesting in that the exhibition itself was as if sited on an enormous airfield, a huge expanse of tarmac, with highly attention-seeking pavilions having been dropped from a height more or less at random. In other words, the whole event was entirely about the buildings as objects; a wonderful exemplar of non-planning and a complete disregard for the spaces between these. The public realm was virtually non-existent – this was an architectural zoo.

One of the most extraordinary aspects of the Shanghai expo was the sheer quantity of people and the queuing in cattle pens in 40 degree heat, but one couldn't help but be moved by the sheer enthusiasm and pride of the Chinese people who were often queuing for several hours for their own pavilion, but also some of the other major ones.

My favourite pavilion was the South African



pavilion which in Robert Venturi's terms is a simple but large decorated shed surrounded by peculiar and interesting shapes or 'ducks', as Venturi would have called them. But however good they are, after the Expo has gone pavilions will not leave much of an enduring legacy. I think London's Olympics, if it does manage to create the high quality parks, streets, squares, gardens, river valleys and so on, as it looks like it will, London itself will be the star of 2012.

I was reminded of my visit to Lisbon Expo in 1998, which was a complete contrast from this

point of view. All the effort had gone into public realm (though there were wonderful pavilions too). The gardens, fountains, walks, children's play areas, leisure areas and wonderful outdoor public entertainment and outdoor events were the real star of the show. If Shanghai needs anything, it is high quality public realm and more considered town planning. It is growing at an extremely rapid pace, driven by new infrastructure rather than a place-making approach.

On my final night, at a restaurant on the 30th floor, I looked across the river at Pudong and the Bund and reflected on the 15 years I've been going to Shanghai and how it was becoming a mega city in such a short space of time. It is following the path of Hong Kong in the 1990s, New York in the 1920s and London more than one hundred years ago. It is a booming city. It reminded me that the character of cities is often fixed by the periods in which they have grown and changed rapidly. London is a great Victorian city, New York is art deco, and Shanghai is a city of the new century. It will be fascinating to look back in 20 years to see if they got things right. ■

