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## Shanghai, air and other stories

### *Casual dissemination for a biological transformation*

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**Abstract.** *Two years ago I lived for 11 months in the 17<sup>th</sup> floor of a high-rise building in Shanghai. My bedroom had a small bow window, a privileged observatory; wherefrom everyday I looked at the city. From there, there wasn't architecture anymore, there wasn't social life; there was just a big pattern. On the contrary when I was walking on the street, Shanghai appeared to me a crowded city full of signs, people, messages and objects: a tremendous chaos. Looking from my window every thing was appearing differently: it was calm and diffuse. My glance was wondering in front of that view that every morning was changing. Every morning the city was more or less suspended, it was wrapped in a thinner or thicker layer of haze. This opacity made the city lighter, impalpable, almost fragile in front of my eyes. This aesthetic quality won me; I was every day inside a fairy-tale. I connected my visual experience with the "Air" of Shanghai. Here it started "Shanghai, Air and other stories".*

**Keywords:** *air, opacity, third landscape, dissemination, garden, promenade*

"Let's imagine that all of Shanghai's citizens suddenly became the funambulist gardeners of forsaken gardens in Shanghai."

Why should we imagine that?

The reason is that Shanghai decides to face a problem; a common problem, which belongs to everyone and can be seen everywhere. Shanghai decides that it should no longer to be taken for granted. It also decides to attach a sense of importance to a privilege, which has until now been a privilege of ingenuity. This is the potential to breathe the atmosphere that embraces us. Now the air asks to be felt."

### Shanghai is in the air

Shanghai is more and more in the Air, due to its verticality. The density and the constant growth of its towers dominate the visual voyage on its cityscape. New shiny edges of skyscrapers were born every morning under the soft sun of Shanghai, their design and their construction happen very fast, so fast that we simply remain gazing at this metamorphosis.

Shanghai as a "Generic city" described by Rem Koolhaas is passing from a horizontal to a vertical condition. "The skyscraper seems to be as the last typology. It has swallowed everything." (Koolhaas, 2006). The verticality of Shanghai towers is not only the answer for the tremendous growth of the population, but it's also the answer to the atavistic need of the man to touch the sky and to be in the sky. The vertical trip, the ascent, is a symbol of power and freedom. (Bachelard, 2007)

Shanghai appears in the Air not only through the verticality of its towers, but also because every day it is wrapped in a thinner or thicker layer of haze. This haze often imbues the city

with a particular sense of lightness, suspension, and fragility. The hardness of the towers softens inside this fog. Thanks to this opacity we don't see the single elements that constitute the city anymore, but we perceive it in its ensemble, as a "2D-3D texture". The city gains visual and architectural qualities; the light of the sunbeams penetrates this foggy layer, giving the city a magic and fairy-tale color. A "generic" city without this layer of fog would be visually unbearable, almost paralyzing in front of its view.

### *Air's explicitness and privatization*

However, this "magical" haze is harmful. It is smog, air pollution.

The knowledge we have about air is absolutely intuitive; it belongs to an instinctive gesture: the breath. It's a biological activity that we can't control, that we can't rationalize. "*Our thrown in the world* corresponds to be in the air and in the breath." (Sloterdijk, 2006) We are as vulnerable as the environment that is around us. It is the medium through which our existence in the world is possible. We are in the air but we want "our" air.

For this reason we try to manipulate and control it. The air starts to become private. But air conditioning has a cost, it isn't for free, and following what Koolhaas says, all the conditioned spaces become Junkspaces. This condition is visible in the facades of the buildings in Shanghai. In a new layer: small white plastic boxes coming out of the building creating a regular bumping texture. In front of this picture we are scared, we realize the numbers of this privatization. We start to feel that this private construction of "immunity" is endangered by the presence of too many constructions of immune bubbles, "*which are presented against each other and destroy each other.*" (Koolhaas, 2006). The density of the cities in terms of buildings, people, objects, signs start to provoke in the people themselves anxiety and fear. We feel compressed inside these overcrowded spaces. We feel suffocating. As if there isn't enough space, as if there isn't enough air for us. On one side the feeling of suffocation, of no-breath, to the other side the fear of the unknown, of the invisible. Which is and will be our relationship to the air? What sort of air do we breathe inside and outside of our spaces?

### *The magic haze of Shanghai*

When you are in Shanghai, walking through its big boulevards, strolling into the small lanes, driving on its system of highways it is impossible not to feel the enormous transformation the city is encountering. Shanghai is currently one of the fastest growing economies in the world. The city is in a constant tizzy. It's like a complex machine always in motion, an engine that is never been turned off, a snake that every morning changes its skin. It's vibrant and it doesn't stop. It keeps on growing. Its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) tripled between 2000 and 2008. The strong and constant growth of the city reveals also its fragility. A fragility that we can expect, that we can imagine, but that we can't see. Some days we can clearly feel it, some others less. It's in the air. It concerns the air. In two words it is air pollution. Air pollution is a threat for the city of Shanghai as it is for many other big cities in China.

What is it really about the Air pollution? Is it an Environmental problem?

The air pollution and the consequent broader environmental problems of Shanghai and the Mainland have been caused by its explosive growth, an increased number of households, increased urbanization, increased affluence and consumption, lack of public awareness. We can, therefore understand how the problem isn't an environmental problem (that is just the effect), rather an economical and political one, based on the prioritization of economic growth over sustainability. Looking at that, will the technologies and the investments made be enough to face this conflict? What are still missing are not the technological and scientific tools. These exist already, probably along with the money necessary to support them. What is missing are the will and different values. "*It requires a change of perspective-literally, an*

*about face-which takes the environment, and not the human demands on the environment, as the starting point for the reflection.” (Zardini, 2006).*

Where can we find this about-face? The answer is in a paradise of weeds.

## Funambulist gardeners

Shanghai’s citizens become funambulist gardeners, who symbolically walk in the urban fabric disseminating seeds and contributing to the creation of the undecided gardens (garden of the *laissez faire*) following the theory of the *Planetary Garden* and *The Third Landscape* of Gilles Clément, in support of a biological evolution versus an economical one. They are in-volved, symbolically and practically in this cut from an economic system to a biological one and becoming active participants of this process. The origin of the word funambulist derives from the Latin word funambulus (from funis “rope” + ambulare “to walk”). Everyday they walk inside the opacity, to reach different areas of the city, following the explicit-implicit “promenade aereo-vegetational”; they start to be aware of the scenario around them. They start to feel the air and the latent and more and more explicit “atmo-terrorism”. (A kind of terror that has a clear target: the air, the climate, the atmosphere and the environment in which is immersed, as in a shell, the body of the human being. Sloterdijk, 2006). The promenade is their rope; it’s in the air, thanks the verticality of the towers, the footbridges that will link different building and gardens, and the aerial feature of the forsaken gardens. The picture of the funambulist reminds us on an idea of height, suspension, uncertainty, instability and vulnerability. As high and suspended as the skyscrapers wrapped in the magic haze, as uncertain and instable as the features of the III landscape and as vulnerable as our condition as human beings inside the “atmosphere” of Shanghai. The funambulist gardeners are vulnerable. They are gardeners referring to the theory of the planetary garden of Gilles Clément, which presupposes the finitude of the earth’s ecosystem harking back to the German roots of the world “Garten” in the idea of “enclosure” and as Clément remember in his book (Clément, 2004). The citizens of Shanghai are called to take their responsibility as the planetary gardeners of Clément to maintain and protect their habitat. They follow the example of the “wise gardener” (Clément, 2004) using the “*observation as the ideal mode of gardening for tomorrow.*” (Clément, 2004) The funambulist gardeners walk and observe inside the city with a new glance and a new rhythm, because these are the tools of knowledge, of discovery and of maintenance. While they are wandering in the city, following the promenades, they are spreading seeds in the air as poppies under the wind, in a process of “casual dissemination”. This gesture is symbolic and real at the same time, creating and recreating a bond between them and the nature. These seeds are the offset of the future forsaken gardens. Through this spreading they participate in the first step of the city’s transformation into a biological one. They are aware and happy for their role inside this new mutation. They accept their “*weak*”<sup>1</sup> (Branzi, 2006) figure, to go with and not against the nature. Following the principle of the “*Jardin en Mouvement*” they will “*make as much as possible with, the least possible against*” (Clément). They observe. And observing what they have sown that finds its visual expression inside the gardens of the *laissez faire*, they find a precise idea of happiness. As a tool of knowledge and respect the observation makes them understand that they are just one element of the nature and not something external or above the nature itself. They recognize the biological system as their own: “*where development and growth are synonymous of transformation*”. (Clément, 2005)

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1. Branzi defines the world weak as something reversible and temporary.

### *Promenade aereo vegetational*

The funambulist gardeners walk on the city light and uncertain, through, between, above-below, inside, outside, the urban fabric of Shanghai. They walk in the interstices, in the meanders, in places of the privilege and in places inaccessible before. They encounter the path of everyday life, the streets, the sidewalks, the footbridges, the lifts, the escalators, etc. They aren't anymore led as everyday by what they know, but they follow what they see. The existing paths have been implemented by some new small links, between new territories present in the city, between buildings, to facilitate the gardener to reach the new territories, to make them more visible. Joining together these elements (everyday paths, new links, new glance and new rhythm) infinite and subjective walking paths are possible, infinite experience of the city. While they are walking, they realize that they are immersed in the urban landscape, in its magical haze and in its transformation. They are part of this transformation.



Figure 1. Shanghai's maquette, chemical glass bottles and graphics elements

### *Casual dissemination and capillary garden system*

They stop and they look. No, they observe. They walk again and as poppies under the wind they are spreading seeds in the air. They walk and they sow, creating and re-creating with this gesture (symbolic and real) a bond between themselves and nature.

The seeds transported by the air, the wind and the natural helpers (insects and birds) find undecided territories where to fall and lay. In order to allow the seeds to spread into the air and find their territories, it is needed to create voids, in a process of "deconcretization" of the city of Shanghai. It requires the creation of a different organization of the urban territory through loose and permeable meshes. In order to support them process of casual dissemination, a capillary system of spaces, added or subtracted to and from the present morphology of the city will be planned and created. Thanks to the process of casual dissemination these voids will become the gardens of the "*laissez faire*" (III landscape).

The dissemination is defined as casual; because it doesn't want to follow any particular determined organization that we usually used when it was about the relationship between the building and the greening inside the city. There has always been a master plan, decided by politicians and experts, who defined a rational understanding of the territory, which zones were assigned to buildings and infrastructures and which were dedicate to the greening. The gardens have been thought, albeit in a utopian view, utilizing the strengths and the limits

offered by the city. The gardens will use air spaces created by the buildings and the buildings themselves as a structural support to become territories ready to receipt seeds. We will find gardens suspended between buildings, taking advantage of the height of the towers and spaces created between them, as an architectural moment to be in between. It will be possible to reach these gardens through light footbridges. Gardens as an extension of the apartments, as parasite elements attached to the facades, in a process of “balconization” of the towers (parasite garden). Implementing the number of the existing rooftops inside the city (roof garden). And where the structure of the buildings doesn’t allow the presence of a garden, a green cage around the building will be created (cage garden). The air becomes in this terms landscape to be crossed and to be lived, above all observed and felt. Where the spaces are narrow and don’t provide enough spaces for horizontal surfaces. These gardens are mysterious and powerful; their observation provokes fascination and enchantment in the eyes of the funambulist gardeners. This feeling reminds us on the social or solitary contemplation that characterized the Chinese (Scholar’s) Garden. The design of the Chinese gardens (build and not planted) was to provide a spiritual utopia for one to connect with the nature, to come back to ancient idealism, according to the Chinese philosophy (Taoism), in which all elements in nature are in balance and harmony with each other. This *laissez-faire* creates a new harmony in which indecision and lack of productivity become positive values. We can imagine that this story is the story of many other cities in the world. The funambulist gardener could walk from Shanghai to Milan spreading its seeds and expanding the biological transformation.

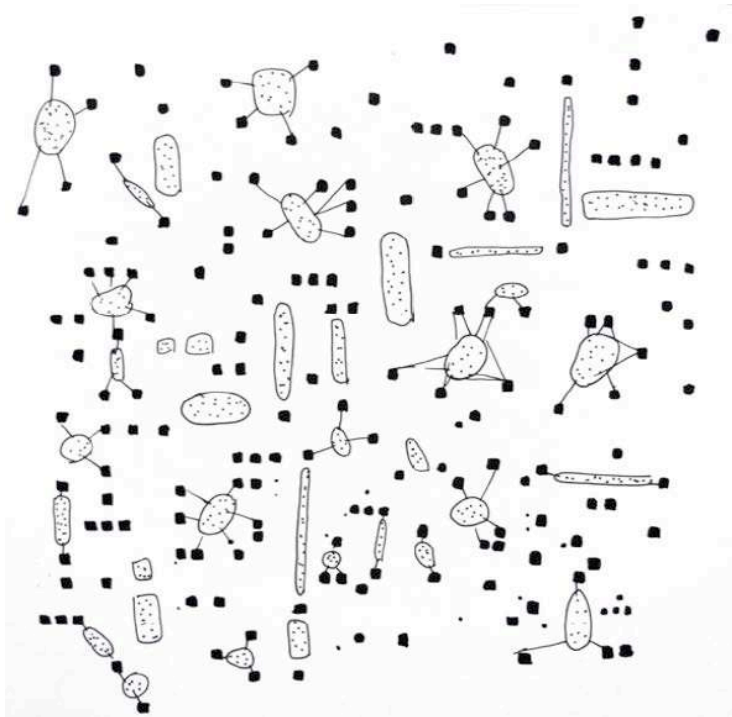


Figure 2. Territories of “third landscape”, sketch

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