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C The French Pavilion Adventure  
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There's a bit of everything in a world expo: a lot of pavilions are designed like exhibition stands, others as tourist attractions or even giant sculptures. It's rare to find a pavilion that is designed to be an architectural prototype. This is clearly the aim of the French pavilion. The architectural design originates in the pavilion's theme - the sensual city - a theme that was defined during the design competition. The design of the interior exhibition spaces is indivisible from the development of the architectural project. The firm designed the container and its content as a single entity. It's only rarely that an architect gets to do this and it let me push my research and my ideas from the past few years further, in a coherent way. With Hypergreen and Concept Office I had designed «concept buildings»; projects that, although virtual, allowed me to tackle themes of architecture for sustainable living and go further than just energy performance. Aside from the frugal use of materials and energy, the two projects highlighted a new relationship with the city and new ways of using space in buildings. The French pavilion is in some ways a «built» research project, a building prototype that elaborates upon these earlier themes, like the place and the role of the landscape in urban architecture. It gives these themes physical form so that a large audience can experience them during the six month period - ten million visitors have already visited the building and taken the multi-sensory tour. Compared to other pavilions, this project is highly original because its goal is to give visitors a real architectural experience - an experience in which the content and the container are integral parts of a single universe.

When we discovered the design competition's programme, with Pauline Marchetti, we devised the content as a proposal about what the new urban landscape might look like in Chinese, Indian and Latin American cities - where agglomerations have recently developed in an exponential and disproportionate way, to reach sizes nobody has ever seen before. In light of these very real concerns, the Shanghai Expo's overall theme required a response that went beyond simple speculation on large cities and sustainable development. In the 21st century, hundreds of millions of inhabitants are going to live in an urban universe which will be the only universe they ever know. An artificial universe in which technology is omnipresent and has become the *raison d'être*. In this stage of hyper-urban humanity we can no longer plan cities using a geometric urban plan that privileges infrastructures and zoning. The Modernist city spreads banal, international architecture to the four corners of the globe and mass-produces lacklustre urban environments. With the sensual city our intention is to demonstrate an alternative approach. An approach in which technology is not an ends in itself and is not obtrusive. On the contrary, as technology is perfected it becomes invisible and disappears so that humans can live in cities that are built landscapes offering a full sensory experience. A city that doesn't just perform highly in terms of sustainable development, but which is a place where there is pleasure in living together which traces back to the city's historical origins as the founder of civilisation. A city that, to achieve this, is rooted in culture, climate and geography. In this city the clichés of international architecture have been reappraised in light of contextual urban design. This is the vision that the pavilion encapsulates

S and presents to the throngs of expo visitors. The challenge was to convey  
C a strong message to the public using real content that was adapted to the  
S expo's overall theme. We didn't want to present a collection of products that  
were «Made in France» and we didn't want to create a series of fairground  
attractions. The record number of visitors just proves that quality, despite  
what we would be had to believe, is always attractive, and so is the pleasure  
of discovery.

It was Yves Desuant who presented the programme to us and warned us about the  
particularities of a world expo: an extraordinary number of visitors compared  
to a museum and short-visiting times - because, like in a theme park, visitors  
want to see a maximum number of pavilions in a day. In addition, a pavilion's  
success is determined during the opening week (like a play or a film) based  
on visitors' word of mouth. Our role as designers of an exhibition experience  
was blended with that of director. As a result, we have designed a single  
narrative that unravels continuously from the pavilion entrance to the exit,  
without any obstacles or breaks in the visit. The use of a ramp, like the one  
Frank Lloyd Wright designed for the Guggenheim in New York, was particularly  
suited to our purposes. We came up with the idea of a double escalator capable  
of transporting 10,000 persons per hour that would take the public up to the  
top level of the pavilion. Then we added a gently sloping ramp so that the  
exhibition experience unfolded in a continuous manner. The short length of the  
tour didn't stop us from creating an exciting and memorable experience. During  
our research the ramp was the first thing that appeared in the scale models.  
It was the point of departure for the design and the central thread between  
content and container. This initial choice was the key to the pavilion's  
success - 100,000 people are now rushing to see it every day.

The ramp is suspended over a pool of water and encircles a wide central  
courtyard designed to resemble a theatre of plant life. The idea of the  
sensual city is perhaps materialised most clearly in the garden designed  
by Michel Hoessler and Agence Ter. The garden is the fruit of several  
discussions, during which we became convinced that future cities had to  
eradicate the boundaries between the landscape and architecture. The vertical  
garden «à la française» is a spectacular example of our desire to place  
nature at the heart of architecture and to envisage the pavilion as a garden  
as much as a building. It's clear that Le Nôtre's (French landscape designer  
of Versailles) landscape design, based on abstract geometry, was a visionary  
demonstration of how an «artificial» universe can play with different  
«natural» atmospheres: smells, the movement of the wind, and the changing  
seasons are all living materials set in an urban layout grid. Visitors arrive  
in the vertical garden before they enter the pavilion's interior space. The  
interior garden is astonishing and this is emphasised by the pool of water  
underneath the pavilion which makes it seem to float. It offers visitors a  
break from the overheated and bustling boulevards around the exhibition site.  
The floating pavilion and the presence of water in the shadows is enhanced  
by a light breeze that refreshes the courtyard area, created by natural  
convection. The garden bends over onto a terrace creating a dimension that is  
lacking in other pavilions: an inhabited roof/park where you can have lunch,  
have a cool drink and enjoy the panoramic view of the exhibition grounds and  
the city. From the paths of the exhibition ground I really love to admire the  
outlines of people and sun umbrellas that fill the pavilion's roof: it's a  
comforting sign that the pavilion isn't just a machine to suck in the public,  
but also an inhabited building.

S Every time that Jean-Marc Weill has been involved in one of the firm's  
C projects, his role has been decisive. The pavilion had to appear to be mineral  
S and weightless at the same time, floating over the basin and allowing visitors  
to catch a glimpse of the vertical garden at the heart of the project. We  
decided together to use a structure of cross bracing on the exterior of the  
building so that the interior space contained only vertical beams. It's a  
loft-style space without any cross wall system, which means dividing walls and  
façades can be moved around freely. The building's mesh-like structure covers  
the building and creates a filter façade with a pattern that has become the  
pavilion's hallmark at the expo. It drapes softly over the building like mesh,  
but is made entirely out of straight-edged elements. It was made by covering  
the building with a structural steel framework clad in glassfibre reinforced  
concrete (GRC). The hybrid mesh looks like delicate concrete lace that holds  
the pavilion in the air over the body of water. The juxtaposed exterior  
structure and the translucent, white plastic façade create a play on depth and  
reflection - an aesthetic of permeability that never obstructs our view.

The exhibition was designed with an emphasis on multisensory experience.  
We wanted to evoke the six senses. The five traditional senses - sight,  
smell, touch, taste, and hearing - are present in the exhibition tour.  
The 6th sense, which can be described as balance/movement, exists in many  
societies, including China. It is present in the pavilion's architecture, a  
sloping ramp suspended over a pool of water. The continuity of the exhibition  
experience is based on two constants: the presence of the garden which is  
seen in reverse during the exhibition tour (and filters views of the central  
courtyard) accompanied by the presence of natural light. In front of the  
visitor is a film about the sensual city split into thirty sequences. We  
wrote the screenplay with Pauline Marchetti, and structured it with sequences  
about things like «the city and the sky», «the city and movement», «the city  
and water», etc. We wanted to show how the city is a landscape with its own  
qualities which responds to the time of day, the climate and the crowds that  
populate it. This might seem obvious but it's an approach that goes against  
the grain of geometric urbanism that designs cities in a repetitive and  
out of touch way. What we see in these films, which were shot in Paris and  
Marseilles, is how cities can build a skyline that is truly their own: how to  
blend outlines, styles and buildings to create a singular identity and how a  
river, the sea, or trees give a city its shape and make it unique. We need  
to allow variation in our cities and not pursue a policy of tabula rasa. The  
new digital modelling tools allow us to precisely recreate every aspect of  
sites in 3D. This is going to create profound changes in the way we produce  
our urban projects. Urban projects will be able to be subtle and contextual as  
well as efficient and operational.

Smell is featured on the exhibition tour through a succession of different  
city perfumes. There is also a discovery area designed with the generous help  
of Jean-Claude Ellena, one of the most famous «noses» in the world. This area  
lets you try and identify a range of city smells, pleasant and unpleasant,  
contained in reflective cylinders that hang from the ceiling. The exhibition's  
sound design is particularly impressive. It's like a soundtrack that  
accentuates the dramatic impact of the film sequences. Original tracks were  
composed by Loïc Dury which transform our spatial experience of the pavilion.  
Loïc Dury was in charge of programming for Radio Nova for a long time but  
now he composes film soundtracks, for Cédric Klapisch in particular. He has  
designed a universe of sound that accompanies visitors from the moment they  
enter the courtyard and during all of the film sequences on the sensual city.

S People ask us if they can go and see the sensual city film somewhere else  
C or watch it on DVD, but the way that we designed the film means that it is  
S inseparable from the space it was created for. It's actually more of an  
installation than a simple projection. There are long mirrors on the floor  
and the ceiling next to the screen reproducing the images to infinity. The  
mirrors play a large part in our perception of the images and the public  
is comfortable enough to lean on the mirrors and mix their image in with  
the projected images. The enthusiasm of the public and the fact that they  
have been incorporated into the exhibition's design is what make the French  
pavilion so memorable. Just like a performance, it's a temporary work that can  
only be experienced in the here and now.

