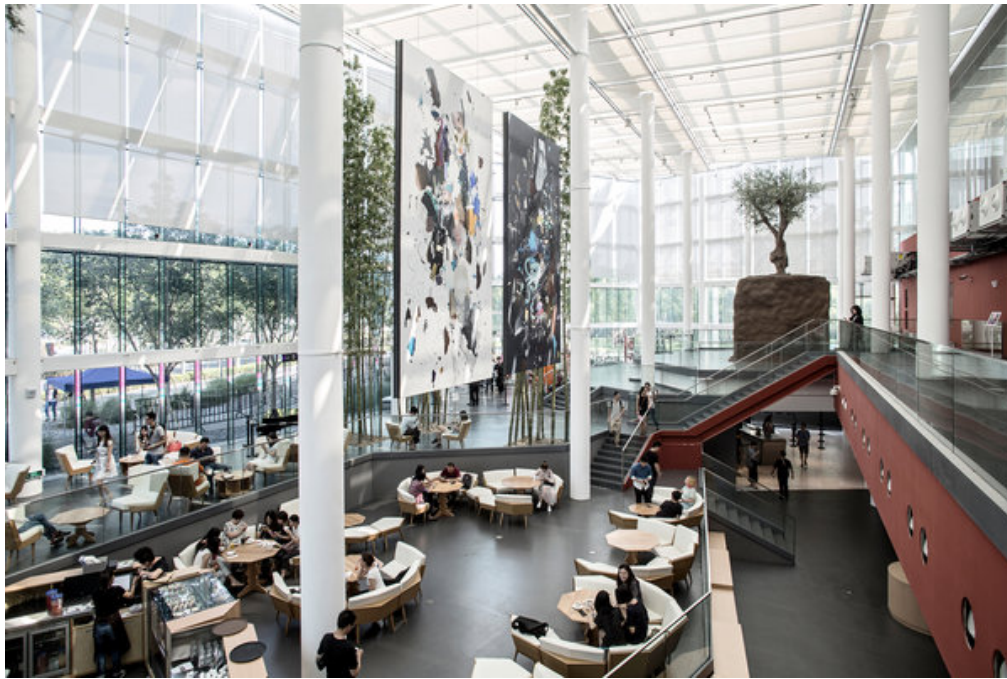


An Arts Explosion Takes Shanghai

In [Shanghai](#), the historic Bund grabs much of the spotlight — the stretch of former banks and trading houses along the Huangpu River, built a century ago in a kaleidoscope of architectural styles, is a monument to the grandeur of another era. It can also be downright suffocating on weekends, with tourists jostling for selfie positions.

For congestion-weary residents, another part of the riverfront now known as the West Bund has become a far more appealing place to spend the weekend. Here, a once-forsaken industrial area known for aircraft manufacturing has been transformed into a lush green corridor where Shanghainese come to ride bikes and skateboards, scale outdoor rock-climbing walls and, a rarity in this city, enjoy picnics on the grassy riverbank.

And in the last two years, museums and galleries have also started popping up as part of the city's plan to turn the West Bund into a world-class arts and culture hub, Shanghai's answer to Museum Mile in New York or South Bank in London.



The atrium at the Yuz Museum. Credit Qilai Shen for The New York Times

On one end of the waterfront area, two massive industrial buildings have been repurposed and transformed into the [West Bund Art Center](#), site of a new annual art fair, and the [Yuz Museum](#), focusing on contemporary works. On the other end is another institution exhibiting a mix of classical antiquities and modern Chinese art, the [Long Museum West Bund](#). And coming soon is the star attraction: DreamWorks' \$2.5 billion Shanghai [DreamCenter](#), the headquarters for the company's new Chinese joint venture animation studio, Oriental DreamWorks, as well as a sprawling entertainment complex with performance venues, an IMAX theater, a Legoland Discovery Center, restaurants, shops and bars.

It's an ambitious endeavor, but not for a city as driven as Shanghai. Under a national five-year plan to promote culture by building more museums, Shanghai has set out to transform itself from a flashy commercial center known mostly for its spectacular skyline and luxury shopping into a cultural heavyweight superior to its local rivals Beijing and Hong Kong and perhaps someday in the same league as the major art centers in the West.

To achieve this, the city has gone on a museum building spree in recent years, resulting in a plethora of gorgeous, state-of-the-art institutions. They include the [Shanghai Natural History Museum](#), designed by the American architects Perkins & Will to resemble the spiral shape of a nautilus shell, and the [Power Station of Art](#), a Tate Modern-inspired, state-run contemporary art museum in a former power plant that has hosted the Shanghai Biennale and a show of the Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang's [gunpowder drawings](#) and installation works.

Across the river, two former pavilions from the 2010 World Expo have also been repurposed as museums — the oversize (even by Chinese standards) glossy-red former China Pavilion is the new home of the [China Art Museum](#), while the old French Pavilion reopened late last year as the [Shanghai 21st Century Minsheng Art Museum](#).

It's a far cry from just 15 years ago when a group of artists took over the abandoned warehouses of a former textile mill on Moganshan Road to establish an arts colony. "There weren't many art museums in Shanghai. Nobody came to Shanghai for art," said Lorenz Helbling, the Swiss founder of ShanghART, one of China's oldest and most-respected galleries, which moved to Moganshan Road in the early 2000s. "This was for a long time the only place ... but it's a small place and this is a big city."

This could perhaps explain Shanghai's desire to establish a more outsize arts district at West Bund, a costly and logistically complex endeavor that only the government could pull off. "Usually an art zone is started spontaneously by artists themselves," said [Zhou Tiehai](#), a well-known Chinese artist who was brought on to spearhead a new annual art fair in the cultural corridor. "But West Bund is totally from the government."

Indeed, the project may never have gotten off the ground if the local government in Shanghai's Xuhui district hadn't persuaded Mr. Zhou and several major collectors to take a chance on this 1.5-mile stretch of waterfront that had been neglected since the closing of factories and the local airport years ago.

When Mr. Zhou was first approached by the state-owned West Bund Development Group to organize an art fair in a 92,000-square-foot abandoned airplane factory in the early days of the project, however, he didn't blanch at the enormity of the building — or at the task of cleaning it up.

"I turned down a lot of art fairs, but once I saw this building, I knew I could make something special out of it," said Mr. Zhou, who gained fame in China for his "Joe Camel" portraits and for not actually picking up a paintbrush himself (he delegates the actual art work to his staff).

It had potential but desperately needed refurbishing and a paint job. To bring in more light, two walls were torn down and replaced with glass. The back of the building was lopped off to build a road to the nearest metro station and a second-floor exhibition space was added. This kind of renovation could take years in most other cities, not to mention the time needed to organize a major art fair. "It only took us eight months," Mr. Zhou said matter of factly, just in time for the inaugural West Bund Art & Design fair in September 2014.

Around the same time, local leaders persuaded the Chinese-Indonesian tycoon [Budi Tek](#) to move in. A former poultry magnate, Mr. Tek had spent a considerable chunk of his fortune collecting Chinese art over the last decade and was looking to build his own museum in China, preferably in Shanghai, his wife's hometown. "When I first committed to this place, there was no West Bund," Mr. Tek said. It was still, he added, "a vision." Soon after, he found a former airplane hangar and hired the Japanese architect

Sou Fujimoto to renovate it.

Mr. Tek's Yuz Museum opened in May 2014 with a statement piece in its striking, glass-covered atrium: a live olive tree planted in a giant block of dried earth, a work by the Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan. Inside were more innovative installations, many owned by Mr. Tek, that could fit only inside a hangar, such as Xu Bing's "Tobacco Project," an assemblage of more than 600,000 cigarettes resembling a tiger skin rug; and "Freedom" by Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, a giant metal tank with a high-pressure hose inside that comes to life every hour, spraying the portholes with frightening jolts of water to the squeals of camera-snapping crowds.

Few museums in China open with such a bang — and then maintain the momentum over the long haul. Yuz has managed to do so thus far, in part because Mr. Tek's art-world connections have helped the museum deliver varied, quality programs.

Showing until Dec. 31 is one of Yuz's latest acquisitions, [Random International's "Rain Room,"](#) an interactive water installation that drew long lines when it was shown two years ago at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Then, two blockbuster exhibitions will follow: the first China solo show of Alberto Giacometti's sculptures in collaboration with the Giacometti Foundation (March 2016), and an exhibition in conjunction with the Picasso Museum in Paris (2017).

"I call myself a start-up museum," Mr. Tek said. "To make a statement to the world that we are a serious museum, we want to do very exciting programs. ... Museums are not for ants, birds — they're for people to come, as many people as you can."

This philosophy is shared by the Chinese collectors [Wang Wei and her husband, Liu Yiqian](#), a taxi-driver-turned-multimillionaire-financier, who have also made names for themselves with eye-catching art purchases in recent years. Last year, they shattered two international auction records in Hong Kong: In April, Mr. Liu paid \$36 million for a Ming dynasty porcelain cup, nicknamed the chicken cup, which at the time was the most ever spent on Chinese porcelain at auction. Months later, he paid \$45 million for a [600-year-old embroidered silk tapestry](#), a record at the time for any Chinese artwork sold at auction.

After building a sizable collection, Mr. Liu and his wife began looking for space to build museums in Shanghai to exhibit their purchases. Again, the Xuhui district government came through with a plum spot on the West Bund riverfront, a wharf where coal was unloaded from barges throughout much of the 20th century. A 1950s-era concrete bridge that was used to transport coal to train hoppers was preserved, and the Shanghai architecture firm Atelier Deshaus constructed a new museum around it with a similarly stark, concrete design.

The Long Museum West Bund also opened in early 2014, displaying many pieces from the couple's nearly 1,900-piece personal collection. Earlier this year, the ["chicken cup" was](#) exhibited for a brief time in a darkened room, lit dramatically from above, with two guards posted at the doors.

Importing art can be extremely costly for collectors like Mr. Liu, who must pay a 17 percent [value-added tax](#) and, in some cases, 6 percent customs duty on works they bring into China. But in what is seen as yet another boost to Shanghai's art scene, a new bonded art warehouse partly opened at West Bund last year, allowing collectors and museums to store art tax-free and take pieces out for up to six months at a time for exhibitions.

The warehouse, called Le Freeport West Bund, has been a game-changer for Mr. Zhou's West Bund Art & Design Fair, which has attracted a number of top international and Chinese galleries since its inception, including White Cube, Hauser & Wirth, Pace Gallery and Ota Fine Arts.

The fair now looks likely to emerge as a successor to the SH Contemporary, once Shanghai's premier art fair, which has struggled mightily with mismanagement and financial losses since it began in 2007. At last year's SH Contemporary, many works were held up at customs, leaving the walls in some booths bare for the start of the fair. This year's fair was canceled.

“I’ve spent the last number of years really searching around, actually in the whole region, for an appropriate kind of setting that we could properly show. And this really is by far and away, after [Art Basel Hong Kong](#), the only one that fits the bill,” said Simon Kirby, the East Asia affiliate for the Victoria Miro gallery in London, which exhibited at the West Bund fair in September, its first time at a mainland art fair.

With the district now taking off, more galleries are joining Yuz and Long on the waterfront. In May, the Hong Kong-born, Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist Liu Heung Shing opened the [Shanghai Center of Photography](#) (SCoP), the first museum in the city focusing solely on photography.

Mr. Liu said opening a gallery was never in his plans. But he was drawn to West Bund by the prospect of bringing contemporary photography to a Chinese audience that hasn’t had much exposure to it. “I think the best way to really let China be part of this global conversation about photography is to show it,” he said.

Construction also began earlier this year on the Shanghai DreamCenter, with the entire project scheduled for completion by late 2017. There will be elements of industrial reuse in the design here, as well, with a 3,000-seat, Broadway-style theater planned for a former concrete mixing building, to be called the Dream Dome. In a separate project, Qiao Zhibing, a Karaoke club owner and art collector, plans to convert five oil tanks into an art park with galleries and possibly performance spaces in the next several years.

ShanghART has also decided to open a new gallery next to the West Bund Art Center, designed to resemble stacked shipping containers. After a soft opening in September, the space was closed until the spring to finish construction on the upper floors and rooftop terrace.

Mr. Helbling said launching a new space is a risk, but when he looks out at the barges floating by on the tree-lined river, he knows it’s one worth taking. “It’s quite a unique place,” he said. “You can actually walk, you can get out. You can go for the weekend, stay half a day, a day there. It’s not full of buildings. I think it could give Shanghai a different identity.”

IF YOU GO

The ideal seasons to visit Shanghai are spring and fall when the temperatures are mild.

Getting there

The West Bund art district is best seen by bike. [Giant](#) bike shops rent bicycles for 50 renminbi per day (about \$8, at 6.15 renminbi to the dollar).

If biking isn’t your thing, the nearest subway stations are **Middle Longhua Road** on line 7 (closest to Long Museum), and **Yunjin Road Station** on line 11 (Yuz Museum).

Museums

Long Museum, 3398 Longteng Avenue, thelongmuseum.org/en. Admission, 50 renminbi.

Yuz Museum, 35 Fenggu Road, www.yuzmshanghai.org. Admission, 60 renminbi. (Rain Room exhibit, 150 renminbi)

Shanghai Center of Photography, 2555 Longteng Avenue. Admission, 40 renminbi.

ShanghART West Bund, 2555 Longteng Avenue, Building 10, china.shanghartgallery.com. Admission is free.

West Bund Art Center, 2555 Longteng Avenue, westbundshanghai.com/index.php/English.

