

ATMOSPHERES OF SHANGHAI: SCENARIOS OF ASCENT, FADING, AND TRANSITION

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ATMOSPHERE

URBAN LANDSCAPE

PERCEPTION

DOCUMENTATION

SHANGHAI

Shanghai's urban landscape reveals a complex interplay between material transformation and sensory perception. This study explores how the notion of atmosphere—understood as a dynamic configuration of material, social, and emotional elements—can serve as a lens for interpreting contemporary urban experience. Through theoretical references to Zumthor, Böhme, Pallasmaa, and Griffero, the paper situates atmosphere as both a perceptual and cultural phenomenon. The methodology is articulated through five analytical frames—Atmospheres of Ascent, Atmospheres in Fading, Atmospheres in Transition, The City

of Toys, and The Play of Shadows—each addressing a specific condition of Shanghai's evolving urban fabric. Writing, photography, and video are employed as analytical tools to capture ephemeral transitions between public and private, physical and digital, collective and individual realms. The results reveal how urban atmospheres embody both continuity and change, mediating between memory and innovation. Ultimately, the research suggests that atmosphere can act as a bridge between perception and design, offering new perspectives on how to inhabit, document, and reimagine the contemporary city.

INTRODUCTION

The study investigates how the concept of atmosphere can reveal new meanings within Shanghai's rapidly transforming urban landscape. By integrating theoretical and empirical approaches, it explores the emotional and sensory dimensions of urban space as both cultural and perceptual constructs. The research draws on cross-disciplinary references and field documentation to examine how everyday practices, light, and materiality contribute to the formation of distinctive urban atmospheres.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The contemporary urban landscape can be described as a living organism in accelerated transformation, shaped by overlapping processes that merge material and immaterial dimensions. Unlike previous phases of urban evolution, today's transformations unfold simultaneously across physical and digital environments, altering not only the morphology of cities but also the sensory and emotional ways in which they are experienced. Within this condition, the concept of *atmosphere* emerges as a strategic tool for interpreting how urban and architectural scales interweave through perceptual, cultural, and social transitions (Figure 1).

In the architectural research front, Peter Zumthor's work in his book *Atmospheres* (Zumthor, 2006) proves fundamental. The author, exploring various angles of great interest, argues that the essence or *aura* of space, transformed into place, emerges not only from its physical characteristics but also through the presence of intangible elements that shape each individual's experience. According to Zumthor's meticulous observation, what he defines as 'atmospheres' is the emotional and sensory quality derived from the complex interplay of materials, light, and, most importantly, human interaction within space. He also emphasises the importance



Fig. 1 John Latto, *Life's Treasures* (2024), Shanghai. Objects of daily life reflecting material intimacy and the poetic depth of the domestic realm.
Image source: Authors' own, 2024.

of the visual and, even more so, the tactile value of the architecture itself, considering them as strategic and fundamental components in a globalised world of standardised architectural language, thus contributing to the originality of the work or the construction of its *aura* (Benjamin, 2008).

Zumthor also defines *the sound* of space, dictated by its material composition (Figure 2), as a crucial element in the narrative construction of the 'atmosphere', which significantly impacts the sensation of well-being and comfort of the user, often unjustly underestimated. In his descriptions, likely emerging from a process of 'learning by doing' as in his masterpieces, he details, among other things, the interaction between light and material, creating material intensity, directions of textures, and shadows, thus generating emotional components of the space.

If Zumthor is a clear reference for space at the architectural scale, the understanding of urban space and its emotional

transition between different scales is equally interesting. Françoise Choay, in *Espacements: Figures of Urban Spaces Over Time* examines the evolution of urban space through a historical and philosophical lens (Choay, 2003). The French author studies the transformation processes of urban space through different epochs and how they accumulate numerous layers of meaning, which today can be better defined through the set of atmospheres. Choay draws on Henri Bergson's concept of *durée* – “the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and swells as it advances” (Bergson, 1944, p. 7) – to emphasise how lived time shapes the morphology and psychology of urban spaces. This temporal perception resonates with the layered atmospheres of Shanghai, where historical and contemporary conditions coexist and interpenetrate. This reading opens the way for a broader theoretical reflection on the notion of atmosphere, whose meanings have been developed across different disciplinary traditions.

Following this line of thought, Peter Zumthor (2006) considers atmospheres as emerging from the material and sensory qualities that give architectural spaces their emotional presence. Gernot Böhme (1993) conceives *atmosphere* as a *tuned space* – the perceptual medium through which subjects and objects co-exist, generating affective intensities that are neither purely material nor purely mental. Juhani Pallasmaa (2014) emphasises the embodied and multisensory dimension of architectural perception, arguing that the experience of space is rooted in the reciprocity between body and environment. Tonino Griffiero (2014) further expands this notion by framing *atmosphere* as an *aesthetic and ontological field* in which emotions, spatial qualities, and cultural meanings converge.

These overlapping perspectives provide the theoretical ground for this study: atmospheres are understood here as dynamic configurations of material, sensory, and social elements that reveal how Shanghai's urban transformations are both physical and experiential. With awareness of the contemporary academic debate, which often opposes sometimes subjective definitions, perhaps it is worthwhile to incorporate into

this introduction the concept of UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage, thereby further enriching the discussion (Kurin, 2003). She further explores the interaction between collective memory and urban spaces, suggesting that memory acts as a filter through which spaces are perceived and evaluated. This interaction is crucial in forming the unique atmospheres of urban environments, as historical and cultural contexts continuously reshape them. This heritage includes traditions, oral expressions, social practices, rituals, and festivals, all crucial elements in forming the specific cultural atmospheres of a community or a city like Shanghai, as analysed in this study. These aspects not only deepen our understanding of urban atmospheres but also highlight how daily perceptions and interactions contribute to the ongoing redefinition of urban identity (Figure 3).

Through the examination of these theoretical approaches, the article aims to explore how the concept of *atmosphere* can help redefine our relationship with urban spaces, proposing Shanghai as a vibrant example of how urban atmospheres can be understood, experienced, and managed in a dynamic metropolitan context. This leads us to a detailed exploration of Shanghai's urban landscape through five distinct yet interconnected frames, each representing a unique aspect of the city's atmospheric evolution in response to its rapid cultural, technological, and social transformations. The articulation of the five frames follows a progressive logic that moves from the individual to the collective, from the material to the symbolic, and from perception to representation. Each frame isolates a specific atmospheric condition while remaining connected to the others through shared spatial and sensory dynamics. *Atmospheres of Ascent* explores the collective spectacle of light and elevation; *Atmospheres in Fading* focuses on domestic gestures that extend the home into the street; *Atmospheres in Transition – Staging Faces and Masks* investigates the performative construction of identity; *The City of Toys* examines the hybridisation of digital and physical realms; and *The Play of Shadows* concludes with the persistence of traditional practices that mediate comfort and protection.



Fig. 2 John Latto, *Cubist Killing Machine* (2024), Shanghai. Light is a symbolic force of collective ascent within Shanghai's illuminated skyline. Image source: Authors' own, 2024.

The order of these frames therefore reflects an experiential gradient – from public celebration to intimate withdrawal, from visibility to concealment – mirroring the oscillation between exposure and retreat that characterises Shanghai's contemporary atmospheres.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Importance of Documentation

Positioned between the theoretical framework and the five analytical frames, this section acts as a methodological bridge. The act of documentation – through writing, photography, and video – becomes the means of capturing the transitions that the frames later interpret. Rather than a neutral record, it is an anticipatory gesture that frames perception, guiding the reader toward the experiential analysis that follows.

Methodological Approach: Visual and Analytical Tools

Each photograph and drawing included in this study functions as an analytical fragment, capturing an atmospheric transition rather than depicting a fixed scene. The images were selected according to their capacity to reveal material, sensory, and social conditions that embody the theoretical principles discussed above. In this sense, the iconographic corpus acts as both record and interpretation: it visualises the ephemeral relations between people, light, surfaces, and movement that constitute Shanghai's everyday urban atmospheres.

RESULTS

Five Frames of an Urban Landscape in Fading, Ascent, and Transition

The following five frames illustrate the results of the analytical process, translating theoretical and sensory reflections into spatial observations within Shanghai's urban context.

Frame One - Atmospheres in Fading

The City as Home

Shanghai has long been a city with fluid and porous boundaries between public and private life. The city's streets, sidewalks, and courtyards are thoroughfares and extensions of the domestic realm. These spaces become settings for daily rituals, from social gatherings to work activities, reinforcing the idea of the city as home. However, with rapid urbanisation and modernisation, these informal and intimate uses of public space are being reshaped, prompting new ways of understanding urban atmospheres.

One of the most distinctive features of Shanghai's urban life is the presence of activities that transcend traditional public-private divides (Figure 3, 4). As Gehl (2011) highlights, public spaces are integral to social sustainability, providing settings for interaction and communal activities. Elderly residents sit on sidewalks or within communal courtyards, engaging in conversations, playing *Mahjong*, or observing passers-by. Small-scale vendors set up temporary stalls, creating micro-economies contributing to the city's vibrancy (Zukin, 1995). Barbers offer haircuts in makeshift outdoor salons, and fortune tellers position themselves at busy intersections, turning the street into a place of informal labour and interaction.

The threshold concept is key to understanding how Shanghai's urban dwellers navigate space. As Bhabha (2004, p. 162) argues, hybridity challenges fixed binaries of cultural authority, revealing an "ambivalent turn" where meanings are constantly renegotiated rather than resolved. This "in-between" condition resonates with Shanghai's urban fabric, where thresholds between public and private, local and global, material and digital, operate as spaces of translation rather than separation.

In Shanghai, this process manifests in the everyday use of thresholds – doorways, courtyards, and sidewalks – as flexible extensions of domestic life. Similar conditions can be observed in other contexts, though with different intensities. For example, as Jacobs (1961) observed in New York's

neighbourhoods, the “sidewalk ballet” reflects a porous relationship between home and street, yet in Shanghai, this permeability is amplified, turning transitional spaces into active sites of social and economic interaction.

The threshold is not simply a transition zone but an active space accommodating social, economic, and domestic functions. Shops and eateries blur the line between inside and outside, with wide-open facades that transform window ledges into seating areas, merging commercial and social spheres (Jacobs, 1961). The parapet of a storefront may double as a bench, while open-air counters invite interactions between customers and passers-by. In narrow alleys, residents bring chairs from their homes, extending their private realm into the street and forming semi-public micro-environments (Alexander et al., 1977).

A particularly vivid example of this phenomenon is found in the adaptation of residential buildings. Windows become hybrid spaces, equipped with added grilles and shelves extending outwards, serving as storage areas and as places for social engagement. In *lilong* neighbourhoods – historical

Fig. 3 Sandro Rolla, *City as a Living Room* (2022), Shanghai. Everyday sociability extends domestic gestures into public thresholds and shared urban interiors. Image source: Authors' own, 2022.





Fig. 4 Juan Carlos Dall'Asta, *Street Hair Saloon, Under the Manifesto* (2017), Shanghai. Street as workspace and meeting place – fluid boundaries between labour, intimacy, and spectacle. Image source: Authors' own, 2017.

residential alleys – the shared courtyards act as collective thresholds, spaces where domestic life spills into the public realm. These thresholds serve as dynamic interfaces, constantly negotiated and reconfigured according to the needs of their users (Lefebvre, 1992).

While modernisation reshapes traditional notions of public and private life, digitalisation introduces new forms of urban intimacy. Social media platforms have become an extension

of public space, enabling interactions that transcend physical boundaries (Mitchell, 1996). In Shanghai, digital spaces often mirror the fluidity of the city's physical environment, creating a hybrid urban experience where the distinction between on-line and offline life is increasingly blurred.

This phenomenon is clearly seen in how residents document and share their lives, from livestreaming street performances to reviewing eateries and engaging in online community forums, enhancing connections and forging a collective identity. The rise of digital platforms allows for innovative reinterpretations of urban spaces, maintaining social vitality amidst physical changes.

Rather than seeing changes in Shanghai's public *atmosphere* as losses, it's vital to recognise the opportunities they present. The city's adaptability in redefining both physical and digital spaces highlights its dynamic and resilient nature. Urban planners and architects are encouraged to create adaptable, flexible urban spaces that preserve the rich spontaneity of public life. By maintaining the fluid boundaries between public and private realms, Shanghai can continue to be a modern, efficient, and culturally vibrant home for all, balancing development with the preservation of its unique atmospheric depth.

Frame Two - Atmospheres of Ascent

Heaven on Earth

The phenomenon of artificial lighting, which we might even describe as invasive due to its scale, has the capacity to transform the city in its nocturnal guise into a place of perpetual festivity, outlining a seemingly endless phenomenon (Figure 5). In Western culture, while not directly comparable, similar occurrences manifest during holiday periods towards the end of the year, varying across different regions in Europe and America. It is intriguing to note that at the root of the phenomenon in Chinese cities, particularly pronounced in Shanghai, there are no religious celebrations involved, making it all the more fascinating to uncover the origins of

Fig. 5 Juan Carlos Dall'Asta, *Cyclopean Visions* (2023), Shanghai. Reflections and screens merge human presence and architecture into a hybrid perceptual field. Image source: Authors' own, 2023.



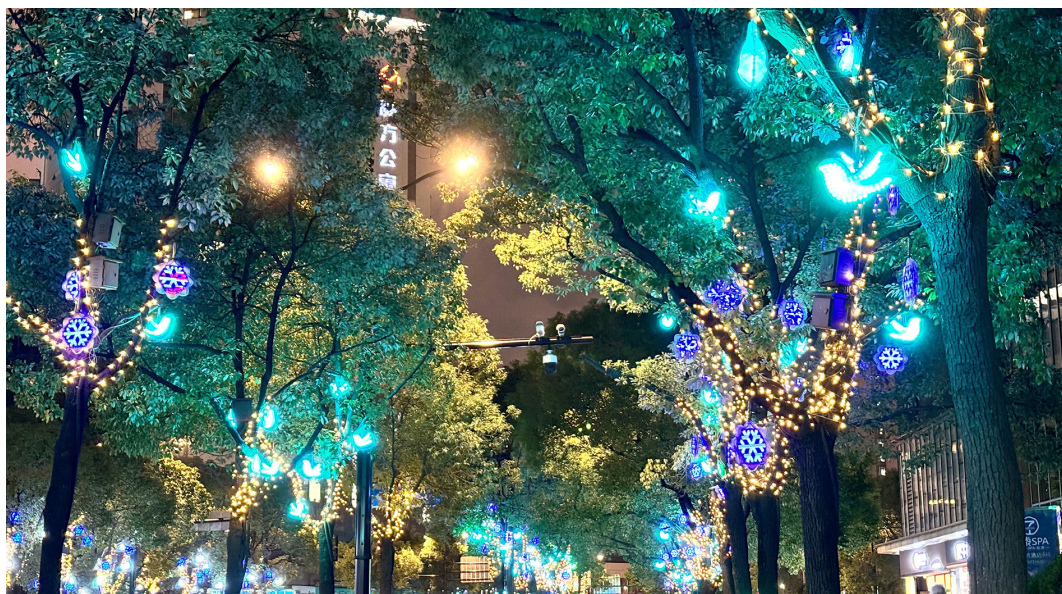
this phenomenon. The intensity of the decoration processes, which extend beyond technically necessary lighting, ranges from traditional iconic signs of cities in the Far East to the illumination of infrastructures, bridges, plants, trees, parks, and luminous gardens up to iconic buildings and skyscrapers of the urban landscape. This phenomenon contrasts with the impossibility of observing the natural starry sky in an urban context, somehow reconstructing an artificial firmament, almost as if summoning heavenly light on earth. This collective phenomenon, which garners consensus in the local public opinion through deep investigation, therefore appears not only as a phenomenon with aesthetic purposes but also finds its roots in millennia-old practices like the Lantern Festival (Figure 6), which helps us interpret the significance of light in its profound historical and traditional image (Davis, 2001).

Taking a step back, historically, the significance of light in Chinese culture, not very different from other cultures, is seen as a symbol of hope, renewal, and a guide towards various future paths. The traditional *Lantern Festival*, for example, through decorated lanterns that sometimes reach urban proportions, serves as a guide for lost spirits and, at the same time, celebrates the ongoing vitality of souls. This almost

theatrical representation not only responds to the tradition of the Chinese collective imagination but also generates profound joy and collective memory. In contemporary Shanghai, this tradition, usually observed as a punctual event, is reinterpreted through a modern and highly innovative interpretation, continuous throughout the year. The city's skyline, illuminated by a sea of lights, is a direct descendant of these ancestral traditions as well as a response to the city's futuristic ambitions (Lin & Dadi, 2024).

The urban memory associated with these lights is complex. For some, the bright lights symbolise progress and the high-tech future Shanghai aspires to, embodying the city's rapid technological and cultural ascent. For others, they evoke nostalgia for communal celebrations and public gatherings, reminiscent of historical festivities but now experienced through the lens of modernity. This dual narrative is essential for understanding the atmospheric layer that light adds to the urban fabric of Shanghai. It's an *atmosphere* of celebration, almost childlike in its wonder, merging cutting-edge architectural lighting technologies found in a few

Fig. 6 Sandro Rolla, *365 Days a Year Lighting* (2024), Shanghai. Image source: Authors' own, 2024. Year-round decorative illumination extends festive atmospheres into everyday urban nights, 2024.



other cities with a reinterpretation of urban memory centred around these illuminations.

Shanghai's lighting transcends mere illumination, serving as a symbol of hope, serenity, and fortune, continually reshaping the city's atmosphere. This creates a festive and whimsical ambience through advanced lighting technologies and a deep-rooted urban memory of illumination. While its exact impact on hope, tranquillity, or luck remains uncertain, it profoundly affects how people experience and interact with the city's glowing environment.

Frame Three - Atmospheres in Transition

The City of Toys

The complexities of the socio-political, structural and spatial interactions of the metropolis may draw a critical analogy to that of the story of Pinocchio in Land of Toys. It is here that the philosophical resemblance highlights and illustrates our hypothesis. Pinocchio symbolises our individual desire to seek identity and a sense of being in the city.

The Land of Toys, also known as “Paese dei Balocchi” in Carlo Collodi's *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (1882), is a fantastical place where children are lured with the promise of endless fun and no responsibilities. In this land, there are no schools, rules, or adults to enforce discipline – just constant play and amusement. However, it is ultimately a trap. The children who go there are eventually transformed into donkeys through a curse as a consequence of their laziness and indulgence. Pinocchio, tempted by the mischievous Fox and Cat, visits the Land of Toys and suffers the same fate, growing donkey ears and a tail.

This desire of Pinocchio to become a real boy and succumbing to temptation serves as a moral lesson reflecting the challenges experienced within the contemporary City, whereby distinguishing reality from illusion is confused by the constant exposure to the physical and virtual experience and streams of data. This story reminds us of the importance of discernment and critical awareness, not as a call to recover



Fig. 7 Sandro Rolla, *Washroom* (2024), Shanghai. A utilitarian threshold becomes a micro-stage of self-presentation within the city's daily routines. Image source: Authors' own, 2024.

an impossible notion of the “real”, but as an invitation to recognise the hybrid and mediated nature of contemporary urban experience. The fusion of the digital and the physical in Shanghai does not erase authenticity; rather, it reshapes how we perceive and inhabit the city. For designers, this condition raises the question of how to create meaningful and embodied spaces that nurture emotional and sensory engagement, addressing human needs beyond mere aesthetics or function. (Figure 7).

Frame Four - Atmospheres in Transition

The Play of Shadows

Shadow in China holds a profound cultural value beyond its role in traditional shadow theatre, renowned worldwide for its beauty and elegance. It is not merely a transition

between light and darkness during scorching summers but represents a way of life deeply intertwined with social, political, and environmental dynamics. Gernot Böhme (1993) argues that atmospheres emerge from the interaction between ecological qualities and human sensibilities, and the shadow in Shanghai exemplifies this interplay. One of the key elements in shaping this transitional *atmosphere* is the city's subtropical climate, characterised by marked seasonal changes. The sweltering summers and cold, humid winters require search for shaded and sunlit spaces, fundamental aspects of daily life (Figure 8).

The tree-lined streets of the French Concession are a prime example: designed to improve summer livability, they have become an integral part of the city's urban identity. Residents care for the trees and accept their less practical aspects, such as uneven sidewalks and falling leaves in autumn, viewing them as living elements of the urban fabric. This approach reflects an ecological and cultural sensitivity beyond mere functionality, resonating with Tim Ingold's view that "there can be no organism without an environment, and no environment without an organism" (Ingold, 2000, p. 19). This reciprocal relationship dissolves the dualism between subject and world, situating human perception within an ongoing process of dwelling and co-evolution with the surroundings.

However, shadows are not created solely by vegetation but also by the imposing road and rail infrastructures that crisscross the city like an arterial network. In recent years, Shanghai has regenerated these spaces, transforming them into hubs for social gatherings and specialised activities: sports areas, recycling and waste sorting spaces, recreational zones, restaurants, and markets. Shadow thus becomes a key element in urban design and regeneration, illustrating how architecture mediates between functionality and atmosphere. This approach recalls Marc Augé's (2009) concept of liminal space, where transitional places acquire profound cultural and social significance.

The relationship with sunlight reflects social hierarchies tied to skin colour. Traditionally, a fair complexion signifies a higher status, privileging those who avoid outdoor work. This is manifested in daily use of sun protection like sunscreen, umbrellas, and hats, contributing to a distinct urban aesthetic. Yet, this practice can cause vitamin deficiencies from limited sun exposure, illustrating the complex interplay between cultural attitudes and public health.

While shadow becomes a refuge in summer, it is often avoided in winter in favour of seeking sunlight. Yet, there are spaces where shadow takes centre stage in a contemplative experience: urban micro-gardens. Scattered throughout the city, sometimes connected to public restrooms, these small environments offer moments of relaxation and protection from metropolitan chaos, blending natural elements such as water, wood, and vegetation into an intimate and welcoming atmosphere. These spaces evoke Gilles Clément's (2020)

Fig. 8 John Latto, *Light and Shadows* (2024), Shanghai. Ephemeral vegetation and shadows redefining marginal spaces as breathing intervals in the dense city. Image source: Authors' own, 2024.





Fig. 9 Sandro Rolla, *Riverscape Shades* (2024), Shanghai. Linear canopies and riparian planting create thermal comfort and contemplative respite along the waterfront. Image source: Authors' own, 2024.

concept of the third landscape, where fragments of nature become places of resistance and contemplation within the urban context.

In all its forms, Shadow is a key element of Shanghai's urban experience. From its symbolic and social meanings to its role in architecture and public space design, it represents a thread connecting tradition, transformation, comfort, and social stratification. Observing these dynamics offers a complex and fascinating reading of the city's transitional atmospheres, revealing how the interplay of shadows continues to shape how residents live and perceive their urban environment. Tonino Griffero (2014) suggests that atmospheres always result from a negotiation between space, body, and culture, and Shanghai vividly exemplifies this (Figure 9).

Frame Five - Atmospheres in Transition

Masks and Makeup: Negotiating Identity in an Urban Landscape

In Shanghai, a city where rapid modernisation and cultural hybridity shape daily interactions, visual presentation plays a crucial role in navigating social expectations. Masks

and makeup, often seen as tools of self-expression, also serve as precious commodities for managing identity in an increasingly image-conscious society. Drawing on Erving Goffman's (1959) concept of the 'presentation of self', individuals use these visual modifications to align with expectations tied to gender, class, and professional roles. In China's consumer-driven society, makeup is more than an aesthetic choice; it is a performance shaped by global beauty standards and social and economic pressures.

The widespread use of medical masks, initially a public health measure dealing with pollution and later a necessity during the pandemic, has evolved into something more than just a protective layer. Masks have become a social accessory, signalling compliance, preserving anonymity, or even serving as a statement of individuality. This shift reflects deeper cultural undercurrents in China (Figure 10), where Confucian ideals of harmony and propriety continue to shape social decorum. The concept of *mianzi* (face) remains central to social interactions, reinforcing the importance of controlled self-presentation (Ho, 1976).

In a city like Shanghai, where public spaces such as the Bund or Xintiandi are sites of both commerce and self-display, the interplay between masks and makeup highlights the tensions between personal expression and social conformity. The ability to manage one's appearance becomes both a form of adaptation and a means of negotiating status. These evolving aesthetics reveal broader cultural shifts as Shanghai's residents constantly refine their self-image in response to economic demands, shifting beauty ideals, and the performative nature of urban life.

Beyond personal appearance, the city's built environment also plays a role in shaping identity. Bernard Tschumi (1994) argues that spaces are activated through human interactions, and in the same way, the visual self-presentation of individuals is shaped by Shanghai's urban landscape. This aligns with Michel de Certeau's (1984) idea that everyday practices subtly resist or conform to dominant structures,



Fig. 10 Juan Carlos Dall'Asta, *Traditional Kunqu Street Opera* (2017), Shanghai. Cultural memory embodied in open-air performance – continuity between ritual, stage, and everyday life. Image source: Authors' own, 2017.

showing how residents navigate modernity while remaining anchored in tradition.

Ultimately, masks and makeup in Shanghai are more than just cosmetic choices – they are tools for social negotiation in a city where identity is constantly in flux. Whether concealing or revealing, these visual markers reflect the delicate balance between individuality and collective belonging in one of the world's most dynamic urban centres (Figure 11).

Results - Capturing Change

The rapid urban transformation of cities like Shanghai presents a pressing challenge: capturing fleeting atmospheres and shifting scenarios as they evolve. This study is not only about preserving a static image of the present but also about anchoring the fluid narrative of urban change in constant motion. In documenting these ephemeral urban atmospheres, whether ascending, fading, or transforming,



Fig. 11 Sandro Rolla, *Faces* (2023), Shanghai. Negotiating identity in public through cosmetics and accessories – between self-expression and social conformity. Image source: Authors' own, 2023.

this study effectively solidifies urban memory for future generations. Documentation serves as a crucial tool in this context, not only to fix the present about the past and future but also to ensure that future scholars and residents can understand and evaluate the historical and cultural contexts in which their predecessors lived. The objective goes beyond creating a mere archival record. It is about laying down a foundation for both qualitative and quantitative interpretations of urban life. Such studies might involve, for instance, quantifying the amount of artificial night lighting or analysing the extent of social media interactions and the time people invest in virtual platforms. These metrics can provide tangible insights into the atmospheric shifts driven by technological and social changes.

Yet, this study is rooted in a deeper, more subjective interpretation of *atmosphere* as an essential component of urban identity. By compiling narratives through literature reviews,

conducting interviews, and gathering photographic, sketch, and video testimonies, this documentation effort seeks to capture a complex, layered reality. Each layer of the city's atmosphere, whether it is on the rise, in decline, or in flux, tells a story of its own, a story that is vital for understanding the broader narrative of urban transformation.

The exploration of urban atmospheres is about more than mere record-keeping. It is about providing a comprehensive platform that supports future research and policy-making, guiding efforts to design and manage urban spaces that truly reflect the dynamic nature of cities like Shanghai (Figure 12).

DISCUSSION

Fig. 12 Sandro Rolla, *Urban-Domestic Life* (2024), Shanghai. Domestic gestures spill into shared courtyards, documenting the “city-as-home” condition. Image source: Authors' own, 2024.

Practical and Theoretical Implications

The way we experience urban and architectural spaces goes far beyond their physical form: sensory impressions, emotions, and social interactions all contribute to shaping this experience.



These elements create an atmosphere that influences how we feel and behave in a given environment. Understanding these subtle but powerful qualities allows designers to craft spaces that are not just functional but also welcoming, inclusive, and deeply connected to human needs (Figure 13).

Juhani Pallasmaa (2014) emphasised the importance of multisensory engagement, arguing that architecture should be felt, not just seen. Similarly, Gernot Böhme (2017) explores how spaces carry an emotional charge, shaping our moods and perceptions. Their insights challenge traditional urban design approaches that prioritise form and function, advocating instead for a more experiential perspective – one that considers how spaces truly resonate with people.

Key aspects of creating an engaging and human-centred environment include careful material choices, appropriately stimulating spatial arrangements, lighting, acoustics, and opportunities for social interaction (Zumthor, 2006). Natural materials, for instance, can bring warmth and a sense of familiarity, while variations in spatial scale influence whether a place feels intimate or expansive. Thoughtful design elements, such as accessible pathways and sensory cues, can also make public spaces more inclusive and welcoming for diverse communities (Gehl, 2011).

Importantly, urban atmospheres aren't static; they shift with time, activity, and environmental changes. Engaging local communities in the design process and tailoring spaces to their unique character can lead to more meaningful and livable cities. By focusing on the atmosphere rather than just form and structure, urban design can move beyond pure functionality, creating spaces that not only serve a purpose but also enrich daily life in a positive way.

CONCLUSIONS

The urban atmospheres of Shanghai resist any single definition. Like intertwined threads of an ever-evolving tapestry,

they emerge from the interaction of materials and perceptions, rituals and transformations, historical continuities and future projections. The idea of the threshold, which recurs throughout this study, reveals itself as a point of convergence between public and private, tradition and innovation, the physical and the digital. It is in this condition of transition that Shanghai manifests itself: a city that never allows itself to be fixed in a static image but constantly redefines its atmospheric fabric.

If the lights that redraw the city at night seem to overpower natural darkness, generating an artificial firmament that replaces the sky, this is not merely a matter of aesthetics or urban spectacle. This phenomenon, rooted in ancient traditions and ritual practices, reflects a deeper desire for belonging and collective representation – a way of transforming urban space into a shared theatre where self-perception intertwines with the city's narrative. Yet, this luminous construction is not just a sign of progress and technological ambition; it also signifies a dissolution of once-clear boundaries – between day and night, between home and street, between intimacy and public life.

Similarly, the city's material thresholds – window ledges, sidewalks, courtyards – become extensions of the domestic sphere, interfaces between the individual and the urban context. But this expansion of the home into public space now finds its parallel in the digitalisation of experience: whereas physical barriers and social customs once defined the boundary between inside and outside, it has now become fluid, a passage between physical presence and virtual projection. Social media transforms urban identity into a simultaneously individual and collective narrative, where the city's atmospheres stretch into a hybrid space constantly reshaped by digital interactions.

Yet, this very transition is not without tensions. The “City of Toys”, with its irresistible allure of play and consumption, carries the risk of dissolving reality into a simulacrum. Suppose the use of masks and makeup has long been part of a

Fig. 13 John Latto, *Threshold* (2024), Shanghai. Filtered light and partial enclosures mediate between protection, exposure, and urban intimacy. Image source: Authors' own, 2024.



tradition of self-transformation and identity reinvention today. In that case, it assumes new meaning in a society dominated by performance and image.

The play of shadows, long employed as a storytelling and theatrical device, continues to serve as a powerful metaphor for the construction of appearances and the ambiguity between what is visible and what remains concealed.

These observations raise urgent questions about the future of urban atmospheres. What are the consequences of the progressive dematerialisation of public space? How can design respond to these emerging conditions without reducing the city to a surface devoid of sensory depth? If the

threshold between the physical and the digital is increasingly permeable, how can authentic experiences of place and belonging be preserved?

The challenge for urbanists and architects will not only be to adapt space to new social and technological conditions but to keep alive the atmospheric richness that defines a city's identity.

This means thinking of architecture that embraces mutability without losing continuity – designing flexible and welcoming spaces that remain rooted in context. Projects such as the regeneration of spaces beneath Shanghai's elevated roads, where infrastructure becomes social ground, exemplify this approach: environments where diverse experiences can overlap without erasing memory.

In this sense, Shanghai is not just a case study but a laboratory for understanding contemporary urban transformations. The five atmospheric frames explored here do not exhaust the complexity of the city but open glimpses into a future where the boundary between the tangible and the intangible, between the past and the possible, will become increasingly blurred. As in Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1978), Shanghai continuously rewrites itself over time, defying any attempt to fix it in a single definition. The task of those who study, design, and inhabit it will be to continue reading and interpreting its atmospheres, keeping open the possibility of a new narrative.

In this perspective, atmosphere becomes not only a perceptual condition but also a design tool capable of inspiring more responsive and humane urban environments.

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