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The ambiance of aspiration: sensory spectacle and the production of publicness along Shanghai's Huangpu River

A Ambiência de Aspiração: espetáculo sensorial e a produção de publicidade ao longo do Rio Huangpu de Xangai

La Atmósfera de Aspiración: espectáculo sensorial y la producción de lo público a lo largo del Río Huangpu de Shanghái

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Resumo

Este artigo examina criticamente o desenvolvimento da orla do Rio Huangpu em Xangai como um caso paradigmático de produção de ambiência dentro do urbanismo neoliberal. Através de observação de campo e análise espacial do projeto de conexão da orla de 45 quilômetros concluído entre 2017 e 2021, esta pesquisa interroga como as estratégias de design sensorial fabricam consenso enquanto mascaram contradições mais profundas no desenvolvimento urbano chinês contemporâneo. O artigo argumenta que a orla de Xangai representa não meramente um retorno do rio às pessoas—como as narrativas oficiais sugerem—mas sim uma produção sofisticada do que pode ser denominado "ambiências aspiracionais": ambientes sensoriais cuidadosamente coreografados que servem simultaneamente como motores econômicos, dispositivos de marca e mecanismos de controle social. Baseando-se em teorias de design atmosférico, publicidade espacial e urbanismo crítico, este estudo revela como as explorações sensoriais do espaço urbano se tornam instrumentos de exclusão disfarçados como gestos democráticos. Os resultados sugerem que em contextos de rápida urbanização e governança autoritária, a ambiência em si se torna uma forma de tecnologia política.

Palavras-chave: Ambiências urbanas. Orla de Xangai. Urbanismo sensorial. Publicidade. Espaço neoliberal.

Abstract

This paper critically examines the Huangpu River waterfront development in Shanghai as a paradigmatic case of ambiance production within neoliberal urbanism. Through fieldwork observation and spatial analysis of the 45-kilometer waterfront connection project completed between 2017 and 2021, this research interrogates how sensory design strategies manufacture consensus while masking deeper contradictions in contemporary Chinese urban development. The paper argues that Shanghai's waterfront represents not merely a return of the river to the people—as official narratives suggest—but rather a sophisticated production of what might be termed "aspirational ambiances": carefully choreographed sensory environments that serve simultaneously as economic engines, branding devices, and mechanisms of social control. Drawing on theories of atmospheric design, spatial publicness, and critical urbanism, this study reveals how sensory explorations of urban space become instruments of exclusion disguised as democratic gestures. The research contributes to debates on ambiances in changing worlds by demonstrating how atmospheric qualities are weaponized to naturalize inequality and sanitize historical violence. The findings suggest that in contexts of rapid urbanization and authoritarian governance, ambiance itself becomes a form of political technology—producing not just sensory experiences, but specifically calibrated subjectivities aligned with state-capitalist agendas of global city-making.

Keywords: Urban ambiances. Shanghai waterfront. Sensory urbanism. Publicness. Neoliberal space.

Resumen

Este artículo examina críticamente el desarrollo del malecón del río Huangpu en Shanghai como un caso paradigmático de producción de ambiente dentro del urbanismo neoliberal. A través de observación de campo y análisis espacial del proyecto de conexión del malecón de 45 kilómetros completado entre 2017 y 2021, esta investigación interroga cómo las estrategias de diseño sensorial fabrican consenso mientras enmascaran contradicciones más profundas en el desarrollo urbano chino contemporáneo. El artículo argumenta que el malecón de Shanghai representa no meramente un retorno del río a las personas—como sugieren las narrativas oficiales—sino más bien una producción sofisticada de lo que podría denominarse "ambientes aspiracionales": entornos sensoriales cuidadosamente coreografiados que sirven simultáneamente como motores económicos, dispositivos de marca y mecanismos de control social. Basándose en teorías de diseño atmosférico, lo público espacial y urbanismo crítico, este estudio revela cómo las exploraciones sensoriales del espacio urbano se convierten en instrumentos de exclusión disfrazados como gestos democráticos. Los hallazgos sugieren que en contextos de rápida urbanización y gobernanza autoritaria, el ambiente mismo se convierte en una forma de tecnología política.

Palabras clave: Ambientes urbanos. Malecón de Shanghai. Urbanismo sensorial. Lo público. Espacio neoliberal.

Introduction

There is something deeply unsettling about perfect public space. Walking along Shanghai's Huangpu River waterfront today, one encounters precisely this kind of perfection: forty-five kilometers of immaculately paved promenades, carefully calibrated lighting, strategically positioned benches facing spectacular skyline views, and an endless procession of joggers, tourists, and selfie-takers performing their roles in what appears to be a flawlessly choreographed urban theater. The ambiance is undeniable—light bounces off the water in precisely calculated ways, breezes are channeled through designated corridors, sounds are modulated by acoustic landscaping. Yet this very perfection demands interrogation. When ambiance becomes this controlled, this intentional, this successful at producing exactly the sensory experiences it promises, we must ask: what is being obscured beneath the surface of these atmospheric effects?

This paper examines Shanghai's Huangpu River waterfront development not as a triumph of people-oriented urbanism—as both municipal authorities and international design awards would have us believe—but as a paradigmatic case of what I term aspirational ambiance: the production of carefully managed sensory environments that simultaneously serve economic speculation, state legitimization, and social engineering. The waterfront project, completed in phases between 2017 and 2021 and celebrated for "returning the river to the people" after two centuries of industrial closure, offers a critical site for examining how ambiances function in contexts where democracy is absent yet its aesthetic signifiers proliferate.

The relationship between sensory design and political power is not new. Yet in contemporary China, and particularly in Shanghai's ambition to become what municipal planning documents call an "excellent global city," we witness ambiance deployed with unprecedented sophistication as both spectacle and control mechanism. The waterfront's atmospheric qualities—its light, sound, texture, rhythm—are not incidental byproducts of design but rather constitute its primary ideological work. Through fieldwork conducted between 2023 and 2024, including phenomenological observation, spatial mapping, and analysis of planning documents, this research reveals how the production of publicness through sensory experience masks the evacuation of genuine public agency.

FIGURE 1 – Sensory Spectacle along Shanghai's Huangpu River.

Sources: Author, 2025.



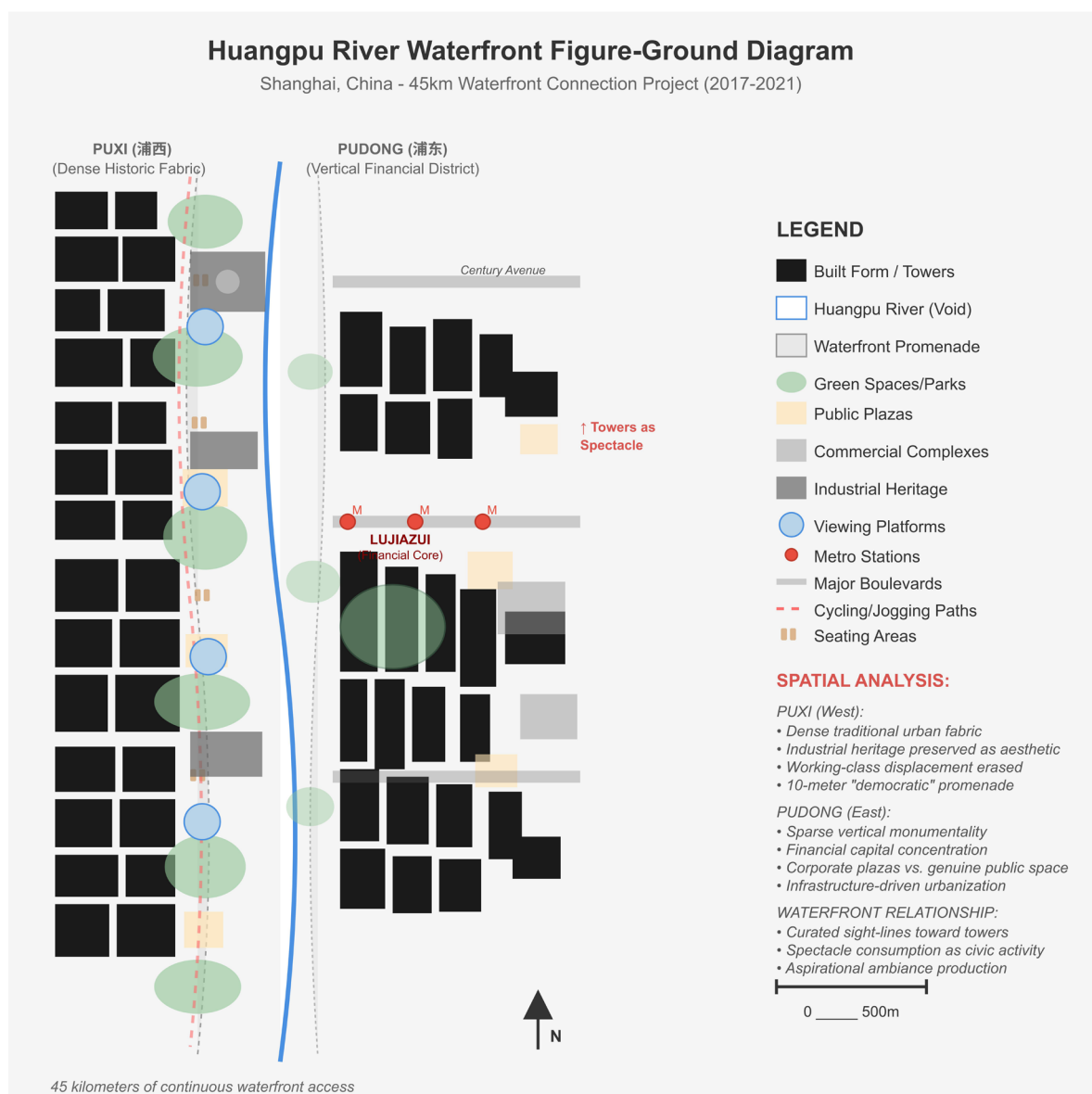
The Waterfront as Ideological Apparatus

To understand the Huangpu waterfront, one must first grasp what it replaced. For nearly two hundred years, this crucial riparian territory served Shanghai's transformation into colonial entrepôt, revolutionary industrial center, and capitalist manufacturing hub. Docks, warehouses, shipyards, and factories occupied every meter, rendering the waterfront entirely inaccessible to residents. The river was not merely hidden; it was actively hostile—polluted, dangerous, redolent with industrial waste and working-class labor. This historical condition is essential because the waterfront's current incarnation depends upon a particular narrative of redemption: the benevolent state liberating citizens from their alienation from nature and heritage.

Yet this narrative performs ideological work that becomes legible only when we attend to what the new ambiance systematically excludes. The waterfront's sensory regime—its emphasis on visual consumption, leisurely strolling, and photographic documentation—produces a very specific kind of subject: the middle-class consumer-

FIGURE 2 – Huangpu River Waterfront Figure-Ground Diagram.

Sources: Author, 2025.



citizen whose relationship to the city is mediated through spectacular experience rather than productive engagement. Gone are the sounds of labor, the smells of industry, the textures of working waterfront. In their place: the gentle lapping of sanitized water, the whisper of expensive landscaping, the click of smartphone cameras.

The planning strategy, developed through partnership with Danish firm Gehl Architects and implemented across ten of Shanghai's seventeen districts, explicitly frames itself as "people-oriented." The very phrase should give us pause. In whose interest is it to constantly assert that something is "for the people"? The ambiance produced along the waterfront—with its ten-meter-wide pedestrian zones, coordinated wayfinding, "high-quality paving," and integration with public transit—reads as a catalog of contemporary urban design best practices. One could place this project alongside any number of waterfront developments in Copenhagen, New York, or Toronto and find remarkable similarities in both formal language and atmospheric affect.

This is precisely the problem. The waterfront's ambiance speaks the international dialect of global city-making, a sensory esperanto that facilitates Shanghai's integration into circuits of capital, tourism, and real estate speculation. The specific sensory qualities produced here—the calibrated openness, the curated views of capitalist verticality across the river in Pudong, the implicit codes of appropriate behavior inscribed in spatial organization—constitute what might be called an ambiance of equivalence. Shanghai can now offer investors and tourists the same atmospheric experiences available in any aspirational global city, rendering it legible and desirable within international competitions for capital and prestige.

Ambiance and the Violence of Displacement

But atmospheres carry memories, even when those memories are actively suppressed. Walking the Yangpu waterfront section, one encounters the preserved shell of the former Yangshupu Power Plant, built by British colonizers in 1913 and operational until 2010. The 105-meter chimney, the cranes, the coal channels—all carefully retained as picturesque ruins within the new development. Here the ambiance turns complex, almost schizophrenic. The industrial artifacts are meant to signify heritage, authenticity, and historical continuity. Yet their actual history—of colonial extraction, worker exploitation, environmental devastation—is carefully drained away, leaving only aesthetic form.

This is atmospheric sanitization at its most sophisticated. The preserved industrial architecture provides visual interest and photographic appeal while systematically erasing the social relations that animated these structures. Former coal scuttles become "kiosks for visitors to take a rest." The violence of conversion could hardly be more total. The ambiance here performs complex ideological work: it satisfies demands for historical preservation while guaranteeing that history itself remains safely aestheticized, incapable of generating critical consciousness or collective memory that might question current arrangements.

More troubling still is what cannot be preserved because it has been entirely erased: the hundreds of thousands of workers and residents displaced by waterfront development. The ambiance of the waterfront is predicated upon a prior violence that remains invisible precisely because the new sensory environment is so compelling, so successfully attractive. Official planning documents celebrate providing "improved public space to over 4.8 million people within 15-minute walk" yet remain silent about the communities destroyed to enable this improvement. The sensory pleasure of the waterfront—its light, space, views—depends upon forgetting those who once inhabited these territories under very different atmospheric conditions.

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This amnesia is built into the waterfront's phenomenological structure. The emphasis on long sightlines, panoramic views, and visual consumption produces a mode of spatial engagement that is inherently superficial—skating across surfaces rather than penetrating depths. The ambiance encourages movement: jogging, cycling, strolling. It discourages dwelling, gathering, or any form of spatial occupation that might foster the development of collective consciousness or oppositional uses. The waterfront's sensory regime is one of perpetual circulation, where bodies are kept in motion through carefully calibrated atmospheric gradients that make lingering uncomfortable or impossible.

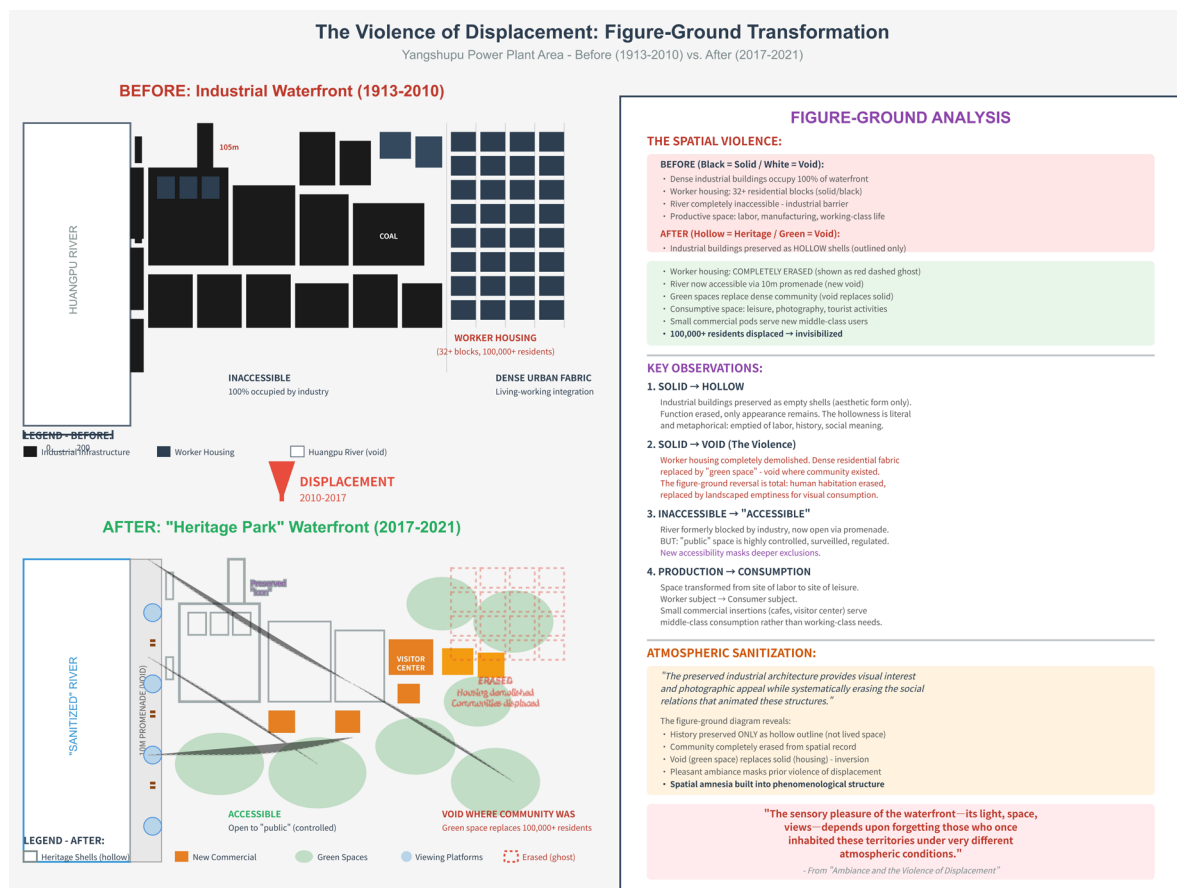


FIGURE 3 – The Violence of Displacement: Figure-Ground Transformation.

Sources: Author, 2025.

The Performative Publicness of Aspirational Ambiance

The concept of "publicness" requires particular scrutiny in contexts where genuine public sphere remains constrained by authoritarian governance. Shanghai's waterfront produces a fascinating simulation of democratic public space—physically open, nominally accessible, filled with diverse users engaged in apparently spontaneous activities. Yet the quality of publicness here is fundamentally theatrical. The waterfront offers a stage for performing citizenship within strictly delimited parameters. You may jog, take photographs, sit on designated benches, consume from approved vendors. You may not organize, demonstrate, or use the space in ways that challenge its prescribed atmospheric order.

The ambiance itself enforces these restrictions. The openness of the waterfront is deceptive—while appearing to maximize accessibility and freedom, it actually facilitates comprehensive surveillance and control. The very atmospheric qualities that make the space feel liberating—its expansiveness, its visual transparency, its lack of hiding places—render users maximally visible to both security apparatus and social discipline. The pleasurable ambiance becomes the mechanism of its own policing.

This dynamic reveals something crucial about how ambiances function in neoliberal-authoritarian contexts. The sensory environment need not feel oppressive to be effective at producing compliance. Indeed, the more pleasant the ambiance, the more successfully it naturalizes the conditions of its own production. Users experience the waterfront as gift from the state, generating gratitude and legitimacy rather than critical consciousness. The atmospheric qualities—the careful lighting, the strategic views, the orchestrated encounters with water and sky—produce affective attachment that precludes questioning the massive displacements, environmental costs, and speculative real estate bubbles that enabled this "public" space.

The waterfront's ambiance speaks the language of Scandinavian social democracy—people-first, sustainable, human-scaled—while serving the interests of state capitalism and property speculation. This is perhaps the most sophisticated form of ideological production: the deployment of progressive urban design vocabulary to legitimize fundamentally regressive social arrangements. The sensory experience feels authentic, humane, even radical in its apparent prioritization of public life over private profit. Yet every atmospheric detail serves to facilitate the waterfront's primary function as engine of real estate appreciation, tourist consumption, and global city branding.

Minsheng Wharf and the Limits of Designed Experience

A brief examination of Minsheng Wharf, a specific section of the eastern waterfront, reveals how the gap between intended ambiance and lived experience generates productive tensions. Despite the sophistication of sensory design—or perhaps because of it—users persist in behaviors that exceed or resist the prescribed atmospheric order. Here one finds migrants sleeping on benches, elderly residents practicing tai chi in spaces meant for scenic viewing, street vendors operating in zones designed for unobstructed sightlines. These practices generate counter-ambiances that briefly rupture the waterfront's atmospheric coherence.

Yet even these resistances are ultimately contained. The waterfront's scale, its relentless consistency of design language, its integration with circuits of capital and surveillance—all conspire to absorb deviation and return space to its intended atmospheric state. The elderly practitioners of tai chi become picturesque elements in tourist photographs, their presence lending "authenticity" to an otherwise sanitized environment. The migrants are periodically cleared by security, only to return in an endless cycle that never threatens the fundamental order. The waterfront demonstrates remarkable atmospheric resilience, an ability to metabolize challenge and maintain its sensory regime.

This resilience points to a broader characteristic of aspirational ambiance: its imperviousness to critique. Because the sensory qualities are objectively pleasant—the space is clean, safe, beautiful, functional—criticism appears churlish or ideological. Who could object to clean water, safe pedestrian zones, accessible waterfront? The ambiance

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disarms critique by fulfilling conventional definitions of quality public space while evacuating the political content that would make such space genuinely public. This is the ultimate achievement of aspirational ambiance: to produce sensory environments so successful at simulating democracy that questioning them appears perverse.

Sensory Spectacle and the Production of Acquiescence

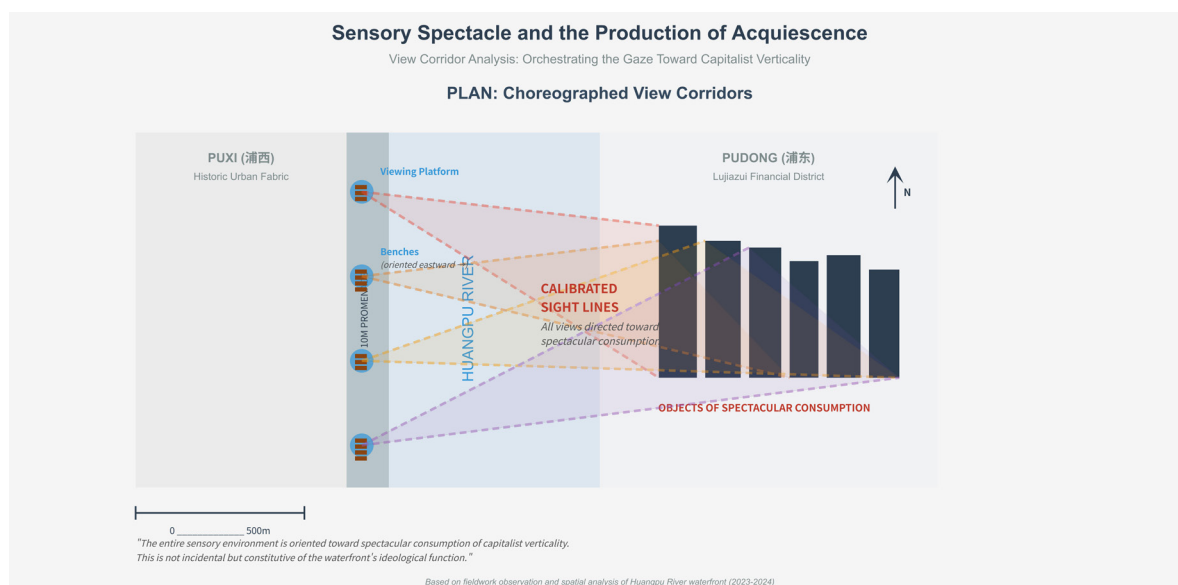
The Huangpu waterfront's relationship to the spectacular Pudong skyline across the river deserves particular attention. The waterfront is organized around the act of viewing this skyline—benches face it, viewing platforms frame it, photographic opportunities are carefully calibrated to capture it. The entire sensory environment is oriented toward spectacular consumption of capitalist verticality. This is not incidental but constitutive of the waterfront's ideological function. The ambiance produces not merely pleasant experience but specifically directed consciousness: awe at development, pride in Chinese modernity, desire for participation in ascending prosperity.

The sensory experience of viewing the skyline from the waterfront generates particular affective states—wonder, aspiration, belonging—that serve to naturalize the vast inequalities those towers represent. The ambiance transforms spatial injustice into aesthetic spectacle. The towers—themselves monuments to speculative capital, elite consumption, and uneven development—become objects of collective pride rather than critique. The waterfront's atmospheric orchestration ensures that users experience themselves as beneficiaries of this development rather than its casualties, even as housing costs soar beyond reach and displacement accelerates.

This reveals how ambiances function as technologies of subject formation. The sensory environment does not merely provide pleasant experience but actively shapes desires, aspirations, and identifications. Regular users of the waterfront internalize its atmospheric logic, learning to derive pleasure from precisely the sensory experiences that serve state-capital interests. The ambiance feels personal, authentic, chosen—yet its parameters are thoroughly determined by planning apparatus operating at scales far removed from individual agency. This is soft power at its most sophisticated: the production of consensus through sensory pleasure.

FIGURE 4 – View Corridor
Analysis: How Skyline Viewing
Produces Ideological Consent

Sources: Author, 2025.



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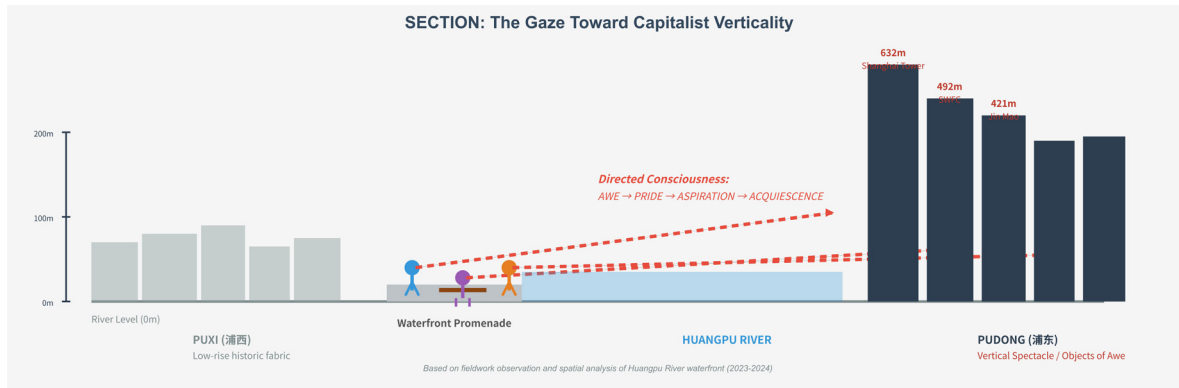


FIGURE 4 (cont.) – View Corridor
Analysis: How Skyline Viewing
Produces Ideological Consent

Sources: Author, 2025.

The Ecological Mystification

The waterfront's environmental narrative demands equally critical scrutiny. Planning documents celebrate ecological restoration, wetland terraces, native habitat, and water quality improvements. The sensory experience confirms this narrative—the water appears cleaner, vegetation abundant, birds visible. Yet this atmospheric ecology obscures more than it reveals. The waterfront's environmental improvements serve primarily to facilitate real estate appreciation and tourist consumption. The ecology is thoroughly instrumental, designed to produce specific atmospheric effects rather than genuine ecological function.

Moreover, the focus on waterfront greening distracts attention from the broader environmental catastrophe of Shanghai's development model. The carbon emissions embedded in the waterfront's construction—the concrete, steel, lighting systems, maintenance regimes—are never calculated against the modest ecological benefits. The displacement of working-class communities to distant suburbs generates massive increases in transportation emissions. The waterfront becomes site of green spectacle while the metropolitan region's actual environmental impact accelerates. The ambiance of ecology masks ecological destruction.

This dynamic exemplifies what might be called atmospheric greenwashing: the deployment of environmental aesthetics to legitimize fundamentally unsustainable development. The sensory experience of nature—birdsong, rustling leaves, water's edge—provides emotional satisfaction that precludes examination of systemic environmental violence. Users feel they are experiencing nature restored when they are actually consuming highly managed simulations that serve to naturalize the very development patterns devastating actual ecosystems.

Toward a Critical Phenomenology of Designed Ambiance

What, then, is a critical position toward ambiances like Shanghai's waterfront? Not, certainly, a blanket rejection of sensory pleasure or well-designed public space. The waterfront's atmospheric qualities are genuinely compelling—this is precisely what makes them ideologically effective. Rather, critical engagement requires developing what might be termed suspicious phenomenology: an attentiveness to sensory experience that remains alert to the political work atmospheres perform.

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This means asking of any designed ambiance: what does this sensory environment make possible, and what does it foreclose? Who benefits from these specific atmospheric qualities? What histories are preserved or erased? What forms of publicness are enabled or prohibited? What subjects are produced through regular exposure to this sensory regime? These questions do not diminish the value of phenomenological engagement with space but rather insist that such engagement remain connected to broader structures of power and inequality.

In Shanghai's case, this critical phenomenology reveals the waterfront's ambiance as simultaneously achievement and tragedy. The sensory environment represents genuine accomplishment in design sophistication, environmental remediation, and public space provision. Yet these same atmospheric qualities serve profoundly conservative ends: legitimizing authoritarian governance, facilitating capital accumulation, producing docile consumer-subjects, and erasing collective memory. The ambiance is not false—the pleasure it produces is real—but it is ideological in Raymond Williams's sense: lived experience that naturalizes particular social arrangements and makes alternatives unthinkable.



FIGURE 5 – Sensory Spectacle
along Shanghai's Huangpu River

Sources: Author, 2025.

Conclusion: Ambiances in Changing Worlds

Shanghai's Huangpu waterfront offers crucial lessons for understanding ambiances in contexts of rapid urban transformation under neoliberal-authoritarian governance. The case demonstrates how sensory design becomes a sophisticated tool of political power precisely when it appears most devoted to human flourishing. The production of compelling atmospheric experiences—pleasant, accessible, democratically coded—serves to manufacture consent for fundamentally undemocratic arrangements. The waterfront reveals that in changing worlds, ambiances change not merely as passive reflections of social transformation but as active agents producing new subjectivities, desires, and political possibilities.

This has implications beyond Shanghai. As cities globally compete for capital, talent, and prestige through quality-of-life narratives, the production of aspirational ambiances becomes central to urban strategy. We see similar patterns in waterfront developments worldwide—the same atmospheric vocabulary, the same sensory strategies, the same gaps between democratic aesthetics and oligarchic function. Shanghai's waterfront is exemplary not because it is unique but because it reveals with unusual clarity dynamics that operate more subtly elsewhere.

The challenge, then, is not to reject ambiance as inherently ideological but to develop forms of atmospheric design that resist instrumentalization by power. This requires moving beyond the current paradigm where ambiance serves primarily as marketing device, real estate enhancer, or tourist attraction. It demands imagining sensory environments that foster genuine publicness—spaces whose atmospheric qualities enable rather than foreclose collective agency, that preserve rather than erase difficult histories, that produce citizens rather than consumers.

Whether such ambiances are possible within existing structures of development remains an open question. Shanghai's waterfront suggests they are not—that truly democratic atmospheres require democratic processes of production, democratic control of land and resources, democratic determination of spatial priorities. Until such conditions exist, even the most beautiful ambiances will remain what the Huangpu waterfront exemplifies: sensory spectacles that feel like liberation while securing chains we cannot see.

The waterfront will continue attracting millions, generating stunning photographs, providing genuine pleasure. This is not diminished by critique. But as we walk those immaculate promenades, enjoying carefully calibrated breezes and spectacular views, we might occasionally pause to ask: what atmospheric possibilities were foreclosed to enable these specific sensory experiences? What other worlds might these same resources have produced? What ambiances are we not sensing because the current atmosphere is so successfully overwhelming? These questions will not ruin the walk. They might, however, make it genuinely public.

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