

Walking around in Guangzhou

Guangzhou is beautiful, ugly, scary, exhilarating, obscure, coherent, restrained but with boundless energy. Its people never fail to amaze, but then the surprise is mutual. Even the faintest emotion is expressed in some way, if not in words then silently with eyes, head or hand-movements. There is a focus, a concentration that is profound.

The city is like its people, overstated even wild, full of light, with an introverted, moody side. The oversized skyscrapers waving their colourful banners of modern and postmodernism and in between wall to wall greyness in which people live and work hard for a newly acquired or future life-style. LIFESTYLE is the buzzword, for a new improved standard of living; a bigger-and-better re-invented society. A giant golf-course that seems to breath misty hot air over its Truman-show-like artificial nature is looking down from the neighbouring hills.

I have a room in one of the skyscrapers with one glass wall overlooking the pearl-river. Which is like having live wallpaper, glowing at night in such dazzling colours, that it makes Xmas look bland. From my bed the little multi-coloured neon-lit boats, floating up and down the river, look like toys. I imagine someone has the remote control and can speed them up arbitrarily; left right, right left.

In the morning I'm taking a stroll around the block. All around are building sites. Immediately I'm confronted with a wall that says; 'DECONSTRUCTION' in English and Chinese characters. In the west a word pregnant with meaning; as an -ism it's a verbose architectural movement that turned all architecture into the symbolic embodiment of chaos. Here it represents the stark reality of wilful change; hazardous demolition.

I walk onto a busy street, with small open shop-fronts that double as workshops. The washing hangs out to dry in the trees, electrical wires or any possible protuberance; clothes and underwear of all kinds and colours. The artisans sit on their hastily assembled 'Rietveld'-chairs. Having to sit is a great source of invention, sometimes to dizzying lows, as some are barely off the ground (photographer Michael Wolf documents these in 'sitting in China'). Everyone is a resourceful craftsman. One man welds metal doors, any design, ready next day. Another makes clothes, (a dress in 2 days, a suit in 3) or handbags. I look at a small bag that has dots in colours almost damaging to the eye. The salesman stands next to me and start to point at the bag excitedly. Keen to keep my eyes fixed on the bag, hoping that the length of time I look at it will be proportionate to my eagerness to buy.

I enter a shoe-shop. A well dressed young salesman sizes me up, looks at the shoes that attract my attention and disappears. I fear he's going to find me the only shoes that will fit big feet; colourless, clunky nurses-shoes. Instead he returns with several pairs that are truly beautiful and well designed, only one pair fits. They are bright orange, boots that stop at the ankles, skilfully manufactured. I'm stunned. Never anywhere in the world has a shop assistant made such a deft and accurate assessment.

Now I could do with a massage and enter a narrow parlour with a counter and a sofa, in which people are impatiently staring at a young manageress. Behind them is a small fountain and a wishing pond, with coins in it. Slightly disturbing as you wonder what you should wish for in this environment that aims to relax. I realise 'what' soon enough! The treatment is a subtle torture. A young girl comes to boil my feet adding grassy tealeaves that turn them lemon yellow. Her small rock-hard cyber-fingers seem to want to lift every bone from its comfortable crevice, by paralysing all surrounding muscles with the most powerful pinching and kneading. It was hard not to scream in pain, but I managed to leave it at whimpering softly. I walked home 'princess-on-the-pea' style, with pulsating feet, that registered every irregularity in the pavement tiles.