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Expo 2010 Shanghai: searching for meaning

Editor: An

Editor's note: The 2010 World Expo has turned Shanghai into an international carnival. Xinhua News Agency is inviting participants and visitors to share their "postcards" from China during the Expo. Contribution can be impressions of the Expo or of Shanghai or other parts of China, as well as stories, written reflections, travelogues, comments or any other observations relating to the 2010 Expo.

SHANGHAI, July 1 (Xinhua) -- The following is a contribution from Dr. Robert Lawrence Kuhn, an international investment banker and corporate strategist, and author of the book "How China's Leaders Think: The Inside Story of Reform and What This Means for the Future". He was invited to produce, write and present for China Central Television (CCTV), a national broadcaster, a five-episode miniseries giving his personal take on the Expo.

Expo 2010 Shanghai: searching for meaning

I've just spent five weeks at Expo 2010 Shanghai, the greatest gathering of countries, cities and organizations in World Fair history at the very moment when China has become the second largest economic power on earth.

On its surface, Expo is about dazzling technologies, dynamic design, and cultural diversity. But what lies beneath? I decided to search for meaning in Expo -- implications for world economics, business, finance, and politics.

In a dynamic world, with turbulent markets, CEOs must on constant watch for international trends, ever scanning the horizon for opportunities and threats. Expo 2010 Shanghai, featuring 189 countries and over 100 international companies and organizations, all presenting their core interests and primary visions, is a highly efficient way to watch the world and scan the horizon.

Expo's theme is "Better City, Better Life." More people are living in cities, particularly in the developing world. But most cities make life worse. How can cities makes life better? That's the idea.

BETTER CITY, BETTER LIFE

Why Expo's theme, "Better City, Better Life?" Shanghai Party Secretary Yu Zhengsheng, the metropolis's top leader, told me, "Two hundred years ago, the urban population of the entire world accounted for only about two percent. Now it is more than half." The key global issues facing humankind were "How to make the city more habitable? How to reduce the harm that city life has on the environment?"

Human history is entering a critical phase. Across the globe, as more and more people swell our cities, catastrophe looms -- overcrowding, pollution, unsustainable development, global warming. Humanity's hope lies in re-thinking our urban future. Not only new technologies, but also new respect for the community of nations and for appreciating cultural diversity.

Thus Expo has two goals: Unify the human family and prevent environmental disaster. This I discovered in Expo's vast Theme Pavilion, whose solar panel roof, at 30,000 square meters, is the largest of any building in the world. The cavernous spaces house two monumental and meaningful installations of art. "Urbania" presents diverse families around the world living their daily lives and a room of breathtaking bookshelves as high as a four-story building.

All human beings aspire to a Good Life, to seek for their children more than they have for themselves. But if everyone on earth were to live like, say, Americans, we would soon exhaust our fossil fuels and heat and pollute our planet into oblivion.

That's the dark vision of "Urban Planet," also in Expo's Theme Pavilion, where the "Road of Crisis" presents the horrors of pollution and resource depletion, assaulting visitors viscerally with powerful visual effects.

The largest increases in pollution are coming from developing nations, particularly China and India. But by what right can we, the developed nations, limit the standard of living of those in developing nations? By what decree should we enjoy ten times or more the GDP per capita of others, and freeze growth so as to make such severe inequality permanent? That'd be monumentally unfair, wouldn't it? It would also undermine world stability and peace.

The only answer is innovation: low-carbon technologies. Expo's "Urban Best Practices Area," which showcases how cities are devising new ways to save energy, features pavilions by Hamburg (highest energy standards in a passive structure by using a tree-like airflow system), Madrid ("Air Tree," cooling urban spaces without air conditioning), London's ZED house (human-friendly "Zero Energy Development" living, designed by iconoclastic architect Bill Dunster), and Shanghai Eco-House (where three generations live efficiently with minimum energy consumption).

Here, then, is one deep meaning of this Expo: Rethinking how we should live, and how we can live. It is the wise and adventurous CEO who sees transitions and seeks opportunities.

THE WORLD COMES TO CHINA

Why have all nations of Earth assembled themselves so seriously at this Expo in Shanghai, some paying 50-60 million U.S. dollars or more for pavilions that will be torn down in six months? Every country here is reaching out to the Chinese people. You see it in the signs and symbols, such as maps with large colorful arcs drawn between each country and China. Certainly it's polite to honor the people of Expo's host country. But at Expo 2010, connecting to China seems something more pointed.

England, too, seeks favor with China, but the British have historical baggage to carry: unpleasant memories of empire -- Opium Wars, invasions, concessions, Hong Kong -- and long-standing stereotypes of staid status quo to break. The U.K. pavilion is a creative paragon of striking simplicity. Externally it looks like an "electric dandelion" with 60,000 slender transparent rods that extend from the smallish structure, quiver in the breeze, and glow magically at night. Thematically, there are just two ideas: maps showing only the green areas of U.K. cities, and a seed bank of the world (each of those rods ends in a casing of seeds).

The Japan Pavilion optimizes the power of nature. Vertical hollows bring in sunlight, use stored rainwater, and circulate air naturally. In a gentle bow to the tortuous history between China and Japan, Japan pays respect to China for Japan's cultural development, which was stimulated, particularly in the seventh and eighth centuries, by contact with China's Tang Dynasty.

There is a huge African pavilion. But how could many of these countries, relatively poor, pay the freight? Here's how: The cost of designing and building these expensive sub-pavilions for all 42 African countries -- \$100 million -- was paid entirely by China. China knows what it means to be poor, and to be ignored by the major powers.

The Saudi Arabia Pavilion, shaped like a "moon boat" and surrounded by deserts and seas, just like Saudi Arabia itself, is Expo's most expensive pavilion and it epitomizes understated grandeur produced when contemporary design energizes traditional values. Inside are spirals of elegant art culminating in an immersive visual experience within the world's largest cinematic screen.

Given China's continuing growth, particularly after the financial crisis, relations between Saudi Arabia and China take on special significance, symbolized in the pavilion by Saudi and Chinese trees growing together. Economically linked by energy, and mutually committed to stability, Saudi Arabia and China help shape the New World Order.

Yet, many foreigners are suspicious of China, anxious over China's ambitions, which they believe are fueled by China's economic expansion. Most Chinese are baffled that their country is feared, replying that China has always been the attacked, never the attacker; always the occupied, never the occupier.

Special Report: World Expo 2010

CHINA GOES TO THE WORLD

Although Expo was planned long before the world financial crisis of 2008, the global meltdown has gifted Expo with great significance. Although China's surprising growth has structural uncertainties -- heavy investment in fixed assets and massive bank loans - let no one doubt that China helped halt a cascading depression and that China is now helping to lead a still-shaky recovery. China is no longer simply the world's center of cheap manufacturing. China now seeks to be world-class in new technologies, creative design, and cultural expression.

The China Pavilion is a massive superstructure, triple the height of any other pavilion. Also known as the Oriental Crown, the China Pavilion celebrates traditional Chinese elements -- architecture, calligraphy, gardening and urban planning. The 30-meter-high roof is constructed from 56 wooden brackets, which represent the 56 ethnic groups of China. The green technologies are not just for show -- China is investing heavily and intends to lead the world in their design and manufacture. Inside is breathtaking, highlighted by a 128-meter long, animated rendition of Song-dynasty China, patterned after a famous ancient painting.

Culture is critical at Expo. Every day there are about 100 live events and performances. In Expo's six-month run, about 20,000! As Shanghai Party Chief Yu Zhengsheng told me, "Why is there lack of mutual understanding between nations? This is often due to cultural differences. I believe these performances will play a key role in promoting cultural exchanges and mutual understanding. Misunderstanding about China will become less. Communication will cultivate mutual trust."

All Expos focus on the future. But for Expo 2010 Shanghai, designing a new future is not only entertaining, it is also essential. We witness the most innovative ways to change our energy-challenged civilization, and we watch the world coming to know China and China the world. Thus, two major meanings of Expo intertwine: the global requirement of green technologies and the sudden rise of China. When future historians look back on the early 21st Century, these trends will likely predominate.

China and the world are partners. There is no alternative as the largest population on earth continues the greatest transformation in history. Read Expo 2010 Shanghai as China's vision of the future.