

MISSION REPORT: WUHAN 2019

Participation in the 2019 Creative Cities roundtable conference in Wuhan, China, as part of Wuhan Design Day and the 5th Wuhan Design Biennale



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November 2019

Montréal's Bureau du design invited me to represent the city and present the winning project in the Creating a Biodiversity Corridor in Saint-Laurent multidisciplinary landscape architecture competition, developed by LAND Italia, civiliti, Table Architecture, and Biodiversité conseil. The event took place in Wuhan, China, a UNESCO City of Design, from October 31 to November 3, 2019, under the theme "Delicate City." This report summarizes the highlights of that mission and an appreciation of the one-of-a-kind experience to which I was invited.

The event organizers provided an outstanding welcome to delegates and a brief overview of Wuhan as a creative city, and planned a number of tours and activities that allowed us to explore the city and its culture from various perspectives.

The high-rise hotel where the delegates stayed offers magnificent views of the Yangtze River and its built-up shorelines. This cityscape is even more spectacular at night. There is a monumental animated lighting concept that operates synchronously on all the high-rise buildings and bridges in the city, setting up a dialogue on either side of the river. Seen in depth, it reveals the incredible breaks in scale between the three-storey heritage buildings and the adjacent skyscrapers.

1 Display at the entrance to the Riverside Creative Fair. Credit: civiliti (cover page)

2 Lighted landscape on the shores of the Yangtze. Credit: civiliti (p. 3)

3 Lighted landscape seen in depth, revealing breaks in scale. Credit: civiliti (p. 3)



Opening ceremony at the Liddell Bros. Packing Plant

The opening ceremony of Wuhan Design Day 2019 and the 5th Wuhan Design Biennale was held at the former Liddell Bros. Packing Plant. Arriving delegates signed an honour scroll. After the opening speeches, an honourable mention from the Asia-Pacific Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation was presented to the developers and designers of the Liddell Bros. Packing Plant repurposing project, in recognition of its design excellence. This was a project to preserve and rehabilitate a former industrial packing facility dating from the early 20th century, located on Qingdao Road in a historic district of Wuhan. In my opinion, the salient points are:

- The conservation of the original buildings' significant architectural characteristics,
- The integration of a distinctive contemporary architectural language,
- The permeability between the interior and exterior
- The addition of a new roof rising above the interstices between the original buildings.

Tour of the exhibit at the Liddell Bros. Packing Plant

The exhibit was housed in the rehabilitated heritage complex. It comprised several sections, one of which showcased projects by firms from the Design members of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network. They included two Montréal projects submitted by the Bureau du design:

- The Saint-Laurent Biodiversity Corridor, developed by LAND Italia, civiliti, Table Architecture, and Biodiversité conseil,
- Biodôme Renewal, developed by Kanva architecture, AZPML, NEUF architect(e)s, Bouthillette Parizeau, and NCK.

During our brief visit, I toured two immersive virtual-reality environments: the first was assembled from drawings by Wuhan children exploring the theme “city of the future,” while the second allowed the user to play a traditional Chinese percussion instrument.



4 Signing the honour scroll. Credit: civiliti (p. 4)



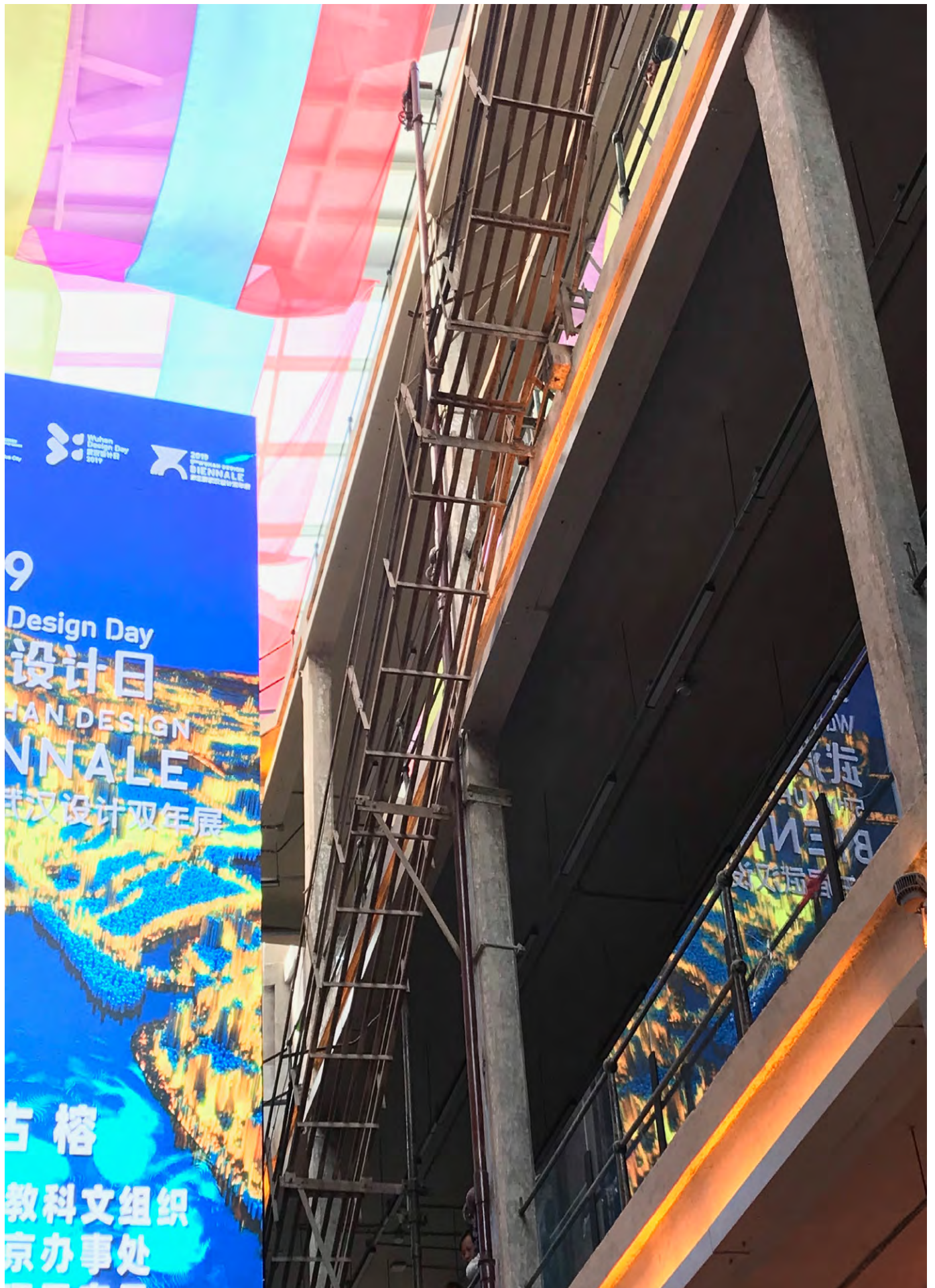
5 Exploring an environment created using drawings by children from Wuhan. Credit: Wuhan (p. 4)

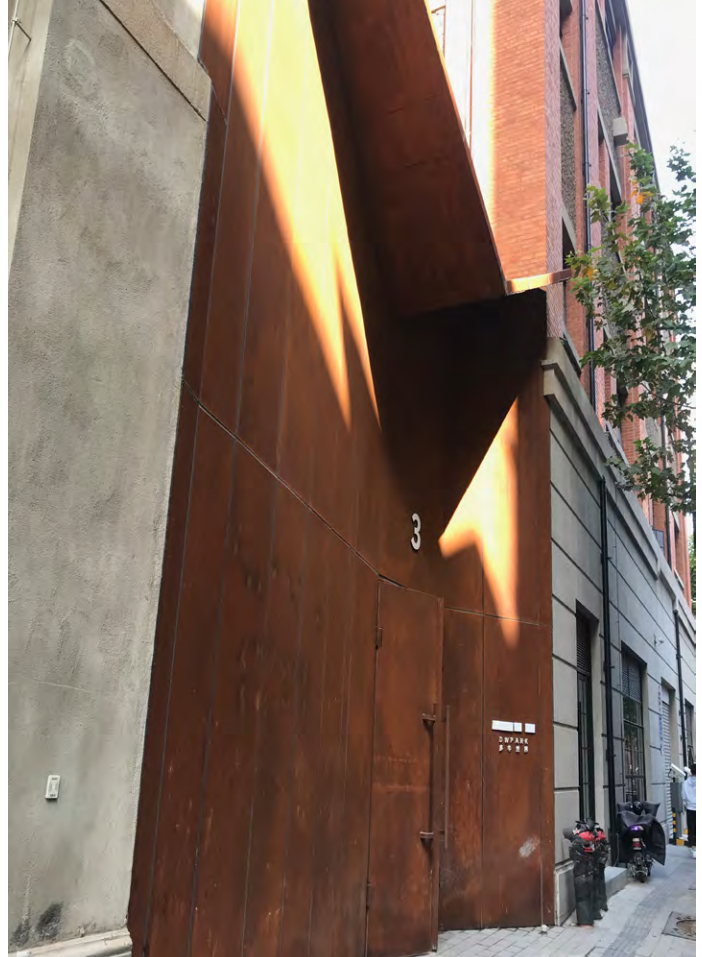
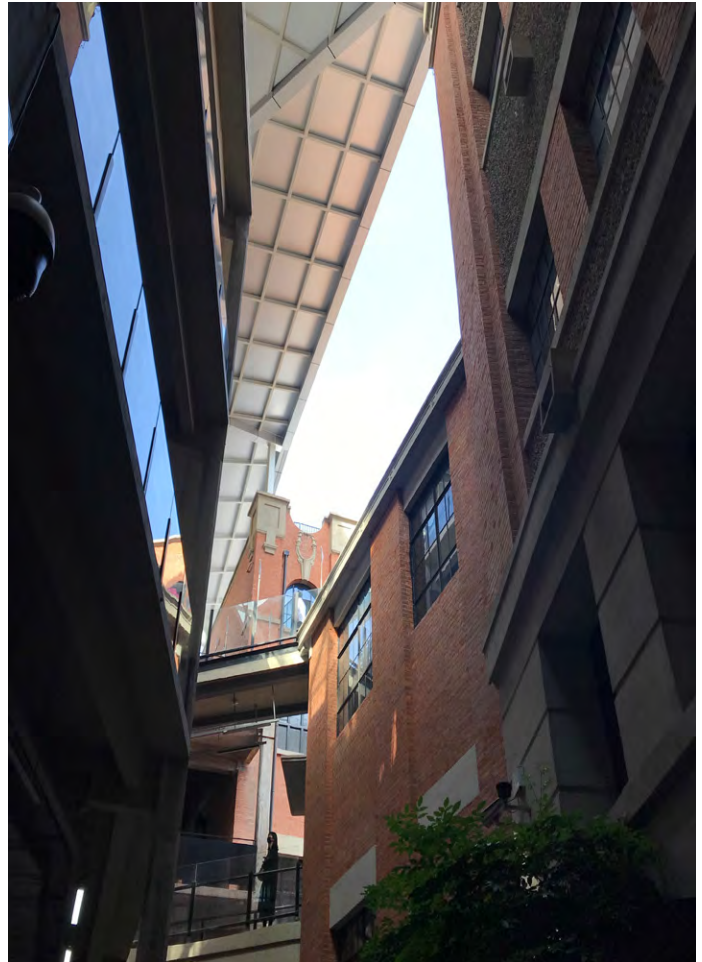
6 Projects submitted by Montréal's Bureau du design. Credit: civiliti (p. 5)

7 Exhibit of projects submitted by Cities of Design; aisle with Montréal projects on display. Credit: civiliti (p. 5)









8 Liddell Bros. Packing Plant – secondary entrance. Credit: civiliti (p. 6)

9 Liddell Bros. Packing Plant – main entrance. Credit: civiliti (p. 6)

10 Liddell Bros. Packing Plant – part of the interior. Credit: civiliti (p. 7)

11 Liddell Bros. Packing Plant – exterior/interior view. Credit: civiliti (p. 8)

12 Liddell Bros. Packing Plant – secondary entrance. Credit: civiliti (p. 8)

13 Liddell Bros. Packing Plant – detail of a staircase. Credit: civiliti (p. 9)



Tour of the Riverside Creative Fair

This was an exhibition of works by Chinese engineering and architectural firms. As no translations of the displays were provided, one of the delegates acted as my interpreter from time to time so that I could talk to some of the exhibitors.



14 Meeting exhibitors. Credit: civiliti (p. 10)

15 Monument on the shore of the Yangtze River Cultural Park seen through Biennale signage. Credit: civiliti (p. 11)

16 View of the exhibition set up in the park in front of the Museum of Crossing the Yangtze River. Credit: civiliti (p. 11)



Tour of the Museum of Crossing the Yangtze River

This museum is located in the Yangtze River Cultural Park along the shore of the river and offers views of it. It tells the story of Mao Zedong's many crossings of the Yangtze from Wuhan and the great mass crossing campaign subsequently launched from Wuhan, with the founder of the People's Republic of China still present. Another part of the museum focuses on major engineering works associated with the Yangtze (e.g., bridges, hydro dams).



17 Delegates and accompanying persons on the museum steps. Credit: civiliti (p. 12)

18 Part of the exhibition. Credit: civiliti (p. 13)

19 Part of the exhibition. Credit: civiliti (p. 13)



Guided tour of Lihuangpi Road

Our historian guide showed us several heritage buildings dating from the mid-18th to early 20th century, a period when the city included five foreign concessions, French, English and Russian among them.

Wuhan has begun tackling a major challenge in recent years to breathe new life into these older districts and redevelop their heritage architecture. To the untrained eye, it is difficult to tell which parts of these buildings have been rebuilt and which are original. In addition, the uses of these heritage buildings and historic district fragments remain uncertain over the short and medium terms, as the process of rehabilitation often requires relocating residents to locations away from the historic district. Mobilizing the city's creative communities is a revitalization solution that Wuhan has adopted since it joined the UNESCO Creative Cities Network.



20 Delegates, accompanying persons and historian guide on the tour of Lihuangpi Road and adjacent streets. Credit: Wuhan (p. 14)

21 Corner building. Credit: civiliti (p. 14)

22, 23, 24, 25 Historic architectural and urban fragments. Credit: civiliti (p. 15)



Tour of the Hankou Historical and Cultural Centre

This museum is dedicated to the history and culture of Hankou, one of the three historic cities that today comprise Wuhan. We learned that its port was a major hub of the historic tea trade. There are several old maps and photographs illustrating hidden or long-disappeared treasures. The contrast between the historical illustrations and the buildings next to the museum is striking.

Our tour of the museum was followed by a parade of traditional Chinese costumes in a magnificent room of the cultural centre.



Banquet and continuation

This first day of visits closed with a banquet at which we enjoyed some aspects of Chinese cuisine. As a prelude, we were treated to a short performance of traditional Chinese opera. The seating arrangements allowed delegates sharing the same table to meet for a longer period and converse more informally.

Afterward, delegates who were interested took a walk on a very lively commercial thoroughfare not far from the hotel. As we were strolling in smaller groups, I took advantage of the presence of Dr. Penny Lewis, professor of architecture at the University of Dundee and the University of Wuhan, to soak up some more authentic street life in the historic district near the hotel. We had already taken a walk during our lunch break to appreciate some urban fragments and historic buildings that are still preserved but precarious, and which are the subject of Dr. Lewis's university workshops. A last nighttime stroll in the park on the shores of the Yangtze marked a magnificent end to this day of introduction to swaths of China's culture and Wuhan's history.



26 1876 map, part of the exhibit at the Hankou Historical and Cultural Centre. Credit: civiliti (p. 16)

27 1930 historical photograph, part of the exhibit at the Hankou Historical and Cultural Centre. Credit: civiliti (p. 16)

28 High-rise buildings near the Hankou Historical and Cultural Centre. Credit: civiliti (p. 14)

29 Delegates, accompanying persons, and performers wearing traditional Chinese garb. Credit: Wuhan (p. 17)

30 Graphic design from the costume exhibition at the cultural centre. Credit: civiliti (p. 17)





31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36 Nighttime street life scenes. Credit: civiliti (p. 18)

37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42 Daytime street life scenes. Credit: civiliti (p. 19)



Brief review of talks and roundtable

On the second day, dedicated to talks and the roundtable, attendees discussed ways of incentivizing creative communities. I have summarized some of the talking points that were most interesting to me among the various topics addressed.

Ecological protection and redevelopment of cultural heritage are the main challenges posed by Wuhan's projects in a context of sustained economic growth and fast-paced development. The plan is to clearly position Wuhan to ensure its attractiveness within China and internationally (i.e., making it a "world-class city"). Wuhan is thus seeking a model that reconciles green, cultural and economic considerations. The city's uncontrollable expansion, characterized by a 1% annual growth rate, is described as "urban disease." How to stay the course at this rate and at the pace of development it requires? Refocusing on the historic city has begun in order to leverage its assets and attractions.

Dr. Duan Fei, National Certified Urban and Rural Planner and Chief Planner with United Design Group Xinrui (Wuhan) Ltd. Co., presented a project to repurpose an industrial complex in Wuhan, the Xinhua Printing Factory, providing an example of the transformation process under way. Study of the history of the complex, the original uses and the spatial qualities of the buildings making it up is supporting interventions on advanced knowledge of the existing property. The term "identical restoration" is used to describe the search to replicate the original appearance. The master plan is for a vast mixed-use project: culture, creativity, office space, sport facilities, stores, etc. Several existing buildings are being preserved and new ones integrated. Little reference is made, however, to the architectural, landscape and urban qualities of the complex. Several other industrial complexes of this type are currently disused; hence the importance of beginning this process to impart a new vitality, as suggested by the title of this presentation: "Old Impression New Vitality – Wuhan Xinhua Printing Factory Cultural and Creative Industrial Park."

New technologies, especially passive technologies, are being used to ensure examples of architecture that reflect thinking on sustainability. China's first net-zero energy building was cited as an example by its architect, Tu Xuelin of the Tianjin Architecture Design Institute, who also demonstrated how his practice has evolved in recent years through a better

understanding of passive technology concepts, which he feels are of true interest for the future. Links to landscape, however, were not explored.

The questions "Who are we?," "What is our heritage?" and "What types of expertise do we have?" are core concerns of contemporary creative practices and research into novel design practices. They are also important to supporting and growing creative communities and the wider society. They are even put forward in the context of reintegrating the most vulnerable members of society.

"Designing Design" was the research topic explored by Tomohide Mizuuchi, a professor of art at Nagoya University, in his talk titled "Potential of Design Processes in the Complex Society." He presented the results of research aimed at leveraging the knowledge and expertise of the broader community of which designers and developers are a part. In his view, moving away from the pragmatic question "What can we do?" and thinking about the broader, more open question "What should we do?" imparts a significant distinction that allows us to ground design in a process that is more collectively engaged. This is about seeking a more ecological stance, starting from the basic premise "Everyone has their one creativity."

Several of the guest speakers showed us that the social benefits of creativity are many, ranging from emancipatory to empowering. Some participants posited creativity as a means of overcoming social, economic, gender and other disparities. Juliet Muyonjo demonstrated the touching example of Entebbe, Uganda, in her talk "Promoting



43 Presentation of the Saint-Laurent Biodiversity Corridor project by Fannie Duguay-Lefebvre. Credit: civiliti (p. 20)

44 Presentation of the Saint-Laurent Biodiversity Corridor project by Fannie Duguay-Lefebvre. Credit: Wuhan (p. 21)

45 Delegates and observers. Credit: Wuhan (p. 21)



Creativity Among the Most Vulnerable Groups in Communities.” Creativity is clearly propelled by learning, specifically the “learning city,” as proposed by Luis A. Gonzalez-Arenal, an architect and commissioner in Puebla, Mexico. His project “Aprendiendo en el mercado” posits the market, a space shared by everyone daily, as a cross-cutting, universal creative platform for stimulating lifelong learning and valuing informal learning. Loss of knowledge and know-how was devastating effect of contemporary societies bemoaned by several participants. “Design makes the difference,” in the words of Eberhard Schrepf, CEO of Creative Industries Styria in Graz, Austria.

Creative communities generate numerous significant benefits, including financially. Mr. Schrepf invited the Cities of Design to document every step of implementation of projects to ensure that the genuine benefits of projects supporting creativity are well understood.

“How can we make creative communities more visible?” was another angle of questioning shared by many of the guest speakers. These communities are often fragmented, and connecting them is seen as an asset—a celebration of human vitality. Participants envisioned novel events and beacon venues conducive to exchanges as ways of bringing designers together while also attracting very broad audiences. A one-of-a-kind experience was suggested by Besign México: short talks by designers in the Estrella de Puebla, the city’s famous Ferris wheel. Luis Rodrigo Gonzalez, an architect with Rearquitectura and the Director of Besign México, introduced the concept. He also asked us the question: “What traces do creators want to leave?” while speaking to the importance of creators’ ecological stances.

Overall appreciation

With these stimulating exchanges and tours fresh in my mind, I can state that I greatly appreciated my experience, in several respects. Thanks to this invitation from Montréal’s Bureau du design, I had the chance to visit a city that may not stand out at first glance on the international map—one might describe it as “out of the loop,” an ordinary city of sorts. And yet, my brief tours allowed me to see many historical, urban and landscape qualities to be developed. I particularly enjoyed the vibrant street life in the historic district where I stayed and the park opening onto the grandiose scenery of the Yangtze. Wuhan is immense and dense, with its 13 million inhabitants, its high-rise architecture and its infrastructures, a city that seems to

be developing at a faster pace every year. The quest for a unique identity and the search for an authentic relationship to history seem to have been initiated as a way to achieve quality living environments to support that unbridled growth. The city faces challenges different from Montréal’s, and certainly has different structural and financial means; these differences, but also certain similarities, are now feeding my thinking.

The meetings I had at this event were another positive aspect that left a strong impression. Many delegates from diverse backgrounds, all interested in design, the arts and culture, came together for this event that provided opportunities to share experiences officially as well as engage in more informal dialogue. These one-on-one meetings were enriching and the exchanges stemming from them were very interesting intellectually, creatively and professionally speaking. Although it proved demanding from an organizational standpoint, this invitation from the Bureau du design provided me with time to step the back and reflect on my practice, its relevance and its international positioning.

Along with the activities every day, the trip and the discoveries it provided as well as the meetings that resulted added up to much-appreciated “recharge time.” I am all the more appreciative of the opportunity to take part in this international event in that it has allowed me a broader reading of design practices and how they are evolving, are asserting themselves, and are supported around the world. This has also been a unique opportunity to assess the state of my knowledge.



46, 47, 48, 49 Scenes of everyday life along the Yangtze River late in the day. Credit: civiliti (p. 22, 23, 24)

50 A slice of urban life late in the day. Credit: civiliti (p. 25)





