

Chasing Ghosts

Over the past 31 years, Canadian photographer Greg Girard has been living in Tokyo, Hong Kong and Shanghai, documenting changes in all three metropolises and other parts of Asia. In his new book, *Phantom Shanghai*, he turns his lens towards the vanishing old architecture of Shanghai. He talks about his career, concepts and feeling about China's disappearing architectural heritage.

By Yenni Kwok



Photo: Greg Girard (www.greggirard.com)

How did your interest in photography begin, and how did you get drawn to Asia?

I first got interested in photography looking at magazines like *Popular Photography* in the early 1970s, standing and reading at the magazine section of a neighborhood drugstore in Vancouver. I started taking pictures when I was 14, with my father's camera, and bought my first 'serious' camera, when I was 16. My formal training was a course in high school, learning to develop film and print in the darkroom. In my last two years of

high school on weekends I'd check into a cheap hotel downtown and take photographs of people in hotel rooms, in the street, in cafes etc. Traveling from the suburbs to downtown was the first time I was conscious of using a camera to enter another world.

I'd been reading Graham Green and Sommerset Maugham and that's probably where I got the idea of visiting the Far East. After finishing high school I worked for a year to save money and then booked passage on a freighter to Hong Kong, arriving in the summer of 1974. I was 18 years old. By that point there weren't many passenger-carrying freighters left but I was determined to cross the Pacific by ship and the Philippine freighter I was travelling on was on its last voyage, returning to Manila from San Francisco via Hong Kong.

I visited Hong Kong a number of times in the following years and ended up staying on there after a visit in 1982 until 1998. I've been living in Shanghai since then. Before that, I lived in Tokyo in 1976-1977 and 1979-1980.

Your major works, first *City of Darkness: Life in Kowloon Walled City* and now *Phantom Shanghai*, shares a similar topic: the demolition of unique organic architectural entities. Why are you interested in this topic?

I haven't really thought about it but with *City of Darkness* and *Phantom Shanghai* perhaps what they have in common is that both "cities" grew 'between the cracks', as it were, in ways that were unplanned and unpredicted. In a sense both places (the Walled City, 'phantom' Shanghai) were never "meant" to happen. They are orphans, bastards. Both places are the products of politically inspired neglect, left to their own devices for decades – mutating in the case of the Walled City, paralysed in the case of this "phantom" Shanghai – until finally a centrally planned fate is decided for them.

Is it fair to view *Phantom Shanghai* as a document of a city's rapidly disappearing architectural heritage – or even a document of Shanghai losing its 'soul'?

It's less a document of the city's architectural heritage than it is a record – a partial and subjective one – of a specific period in Shanghai. The reason so many of the city's period buildings survived as long as they did, and in the

way they did, is because urban development for profit stopped in 1949. This started to change in the early 1990s when Deng Xiaoping directed the city to 'catch up' with places like Shenzhen, already benefiting from economic reforms for a decade.

I've tried to photograph the ways many of these period buildings are used, ways never intended: a single-family houses sub-divided and occupied by dozens of families; hallways turned into communal kitchens; storage sheds and car garages turned into homes. These older buildings are gradually being demolished or gentrified and the evidence of the hard flow of time through this city is gradually disappearing as well. That evidence is really the subject of the book.

Were there any unique challenges involved in producing *Phantom Shanghai*?

I started photographing in 2000 in black and white and then after a year decided that was wrong way to do it and switched to colour. The pictures in the book were taken between 2001 and 2006, so five years.

As you might expect, getting inside people's homes was the biggest challenge. The downside was that people – older folks mostly – often refused, saying: 'Foreigners are always trying to make China look bad'. The upside was that at least they knew I wasn't there to steal the TV.

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