

This article was originally published in the August 2013 issue of Mabuhay Magazine

Art in the Industrial Park: A Walk Around Danshanzi District by Oz Mendoza

When asked to think about “art and fashion,” what normally comes to mind? “Art” is likely to spark a memory of a famous painting or sculpture, or some timeless piece of graphic art such as Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss*. “Fashion” might bring up images of sleek runway shows or poised women in Prada strutting down New York's Fifth Avenue.

Less likely to come to mind are visions of corroding machinery, rusty metal pipes, and towering smokestacks.

Yet such views abound in the streets and alleyways of Beijing's most vibrant art and fashion district, Dashanzi—home to the refurbished factory spaces of 751 D-Park and 798 Art Zone. Here, post-apocalyptic grunge meets hipster contemporary in a fascinating fusion of artistic reinvention, engineered solution, and good old fashioned Chinese pragmatism.

There is definitely something compelling about the weatherbeaten brick walls, the wrought-iron walkways, and the complex tangle of cantilevered pipes that inhabit the otherwise clipped and manicured grounds of 751 D-Park. At close to sundown, the space becomes hauntingly silent, the stillness almost demanding to be broken by the sounds of clanking machines, factory whistles, and hissing exhaust fumes. Yet all is quiet, and the complex turns out to be a fine setting for a leisurely stroll or bicycle tour.

Nearly 60 years ago, a radically different scenario prevailed. In 1957, these grounds were part of a massive industrial area known as Joint Factory 718, a center for wireless joint equipment production. It had initially been designated as a follow-up to 156 “joint factory” projects that the then-Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China had collaborated in establishing. But the Soviets backed out of the 157th project and suggested East Germany as a new building partner.

And so Joint Factory 718 was planned and engineered by the Chinese, the East Germans, and one remaining Russian consultant, who proved untiringly critical of the Germans' way of doing things. The Russian, along with many of the Chinese, frothed over the Germans' insistence on costly but high quality construction standards, which the Russian consultant sneered at as “over-engineering.” But the Germans' standards prevailed, and the factory that arose exemplified Teutonic aesthetics, in particular a functionalist mode of design reminiscent of the Bauhaus School.

Joint Factory 718 launched carrying the luster of being counted among the best industrial plants in China. But that luster would fade over time. The first blow arrived in 1964, when the massive complex got subdivided into a multitude of smaller plants, including factories 751 and 798. By the early 1990s, most of the factories had been shuttered, leaving abandoned husks of old buildings in dire need of new tenants to occupy them.

Gradually, avant-garde artists began moving in and occupying the abandoned spaces, many of them within the zone of the former Factory 798. At the time, the Chinese government was exceedingly wary

of the contemporary arts community, which cooped itself up in the out-of-the-way, abandoned factory grounds in part to maintain a low profile. But a large community of prolific creative minds was hardly destined to remain underground forever.

Widespread awareness of the 798 art community skyrocketed with the 2002 opening of Beijing Tokyo Art Projects and its inaugural exhibition, “Beijing Afloat.” Since that coming-out party of sorts, the Dashanzi district's reputation as a sanctuary and incubator for art on the cutting edge has blown up big-time.

The success of 798 got carried over to other parts of Dashanzi district, particularly Factory 751, which had been a coal gas plant for 40 years before it was abandoned in 2003. Today, the former Factory 751 area has been reinvented as a fashion and design hub—indeed, 751 D-Park is a fixture of such events as China Fashion Week.

But many remnants of the past linger in plain sight. You can still see the factory's old train station, where a massive locomotive sits on permanent display. The railway actually remains in use for coal and oil transportation. A walk through 751 zone will also take you past hulking boilers, overarching gas lines, piles of rusted tubing, and clusters of derelict machinery. The juxtaposition of high style and industrial detritus combine to inspire a sense of surprise and delight.

It's a lot of fun simply exploring Dashanzi on your two feet. Every few steps will lead you to an interesting sight, whether it be a ghostly remnant of its industrial past, or a startling display of provocative urban aesthetics—especially in the summer months, when artists paint portraits of famous people up and down the street. If you want to know of specific establishments to check out within the district, here are a few suggestions:

798 Space is typically the first place that comes to mind whenever the Dashanzi Art District is mentioned. This art gallery is known for its signature high, cylindrical ceilings that permit natural light to permeate a large part of the exhibition space. One ironic, retro touch: old Communist Party sayings have been preserved upon the walls, including a slogan in huge red characters that proclaim, “We wish that Chairman Mao live forever!”

Timezone 8, a bookstore, happens to be one of the district's original historic landmarks. Founder Robert Bernell was the first foreigner to set up a business in the 798 zone. Bernell was an art collector and scholar, and his passion for Chinese art did a lot to invigorate the 798 artistic community, spurred on even more when his employee Xiao Li and her husband, the highly-respected performance artist Cang Xin, came to live and work in the district. Historical significance aside, Timezone 8 is a cozy nook in which to sip a cappuccino and browse deep stacks of books on art, design, architecture, and photography. Its expanded operations now include a Timezone 8 restaurant, Timezone 8 bar, and Timezone 8 sushi bar.

At Cafe is another historic establishment, owned and designed by Huang Rui, a pioneer of Chinese avant-garde art. Huang Rui was one of the first artists to open a studio in Dashanzi, and was a key participant in efforts to keep the zone from being demolished in the mid-2000s. At Cafe is the place to go for premium Italian coffee.

There is much more to see and discover at Dashanzi. Surely no other place so successfully combines industrial junk, cutting-edge fashion, Bauhaus aesthetics, urban street style, and elements of traditional Chinese culture. Whether you're a lover of contemporary art, or simply curious about how creativity

revitalized an industrial wasteland, you'll find a visit to 798 Art Zone and 751 D-Park a refreshing experience.

END

How to get there: The easiest way is to take a cab. Tell the taxi driver that you want to go to 798. If that doesn't work, then ask to be taken to Dashanzi.