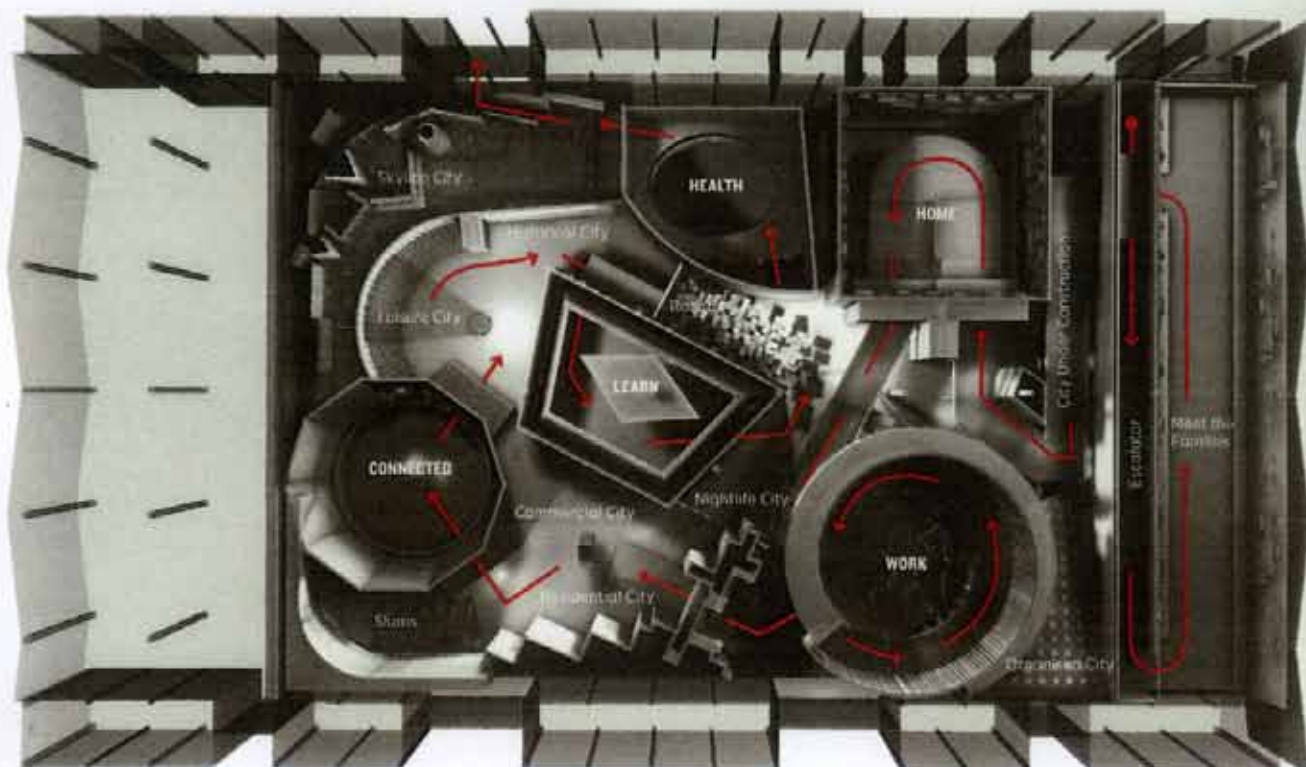


# A TALE OF SIX CITIES

**HERMAN KOSSMANN** went looking for the stories of real people in half a dozen global metropolises for the **URBANIAN PAVILION** in Shanghai.

WORDS FEMKE DE WILD  
PHOTOS THIJS WOLZAK



'A visit to an exhibition can be best compared to a tour of a city. You walk through a story, determine your own pace and use all your senses.' Herman Kossmann is sitting with senior designer Michèl de Vaan at a large conference table in the office of Kossmann.dejong, in the heart of Amsterdam, on the bank of the IJ inlet. Partner Mark de Jong gathers up sketches for the MicroZoo, a new project that will be a permanent feature of the local zoo, Artis, while Kossmann opens an enormous book about the World Expo in Shanghai. After a successful pitch - Kossmann.dejong was one of 150 firms competing for the commission, only 15 of which made the second round - the Amsterdam agency was asked to design the visual form and content of one of five Chinese pavilions. In this case, the design of the Urbanian Pavilion literally resembled a walk through the city.

'The pavilion had to be about life in a city, about people, and for us the focus was on a single question,' says Kossmann. 'What makes city life so attractive that it beckons one and all, that people even board a tiny boat and risk their lives to get to that city on the other side of the water?' After discussing the subject with a historian, an urban sociologist and a specialist in the field of new towns, the design agency came to the conclusion that five themes determine the quality of life in a city: housing, work, communication, education and health. The power of attraction exerted by each of these aspects lies in variation and supply. 'In a small village, you know well in advance how your life will evolve, what type of work you'll be doing and what kind of girl you'll marry,' says Kossmann. 'In the city, the possibilities are endless.'

Inside the gigantic pavilion - 150 by 100 m and a towering 22 m tall - a crew of 300 people built a metropolis out of everyday objects. An organized urban neighbourhood was made from milk cartons, while stacked crates became skyscrapers, removal boxes a skyline and corrugated cardboard a slum area. 'It didn't turn out exactly as we'd envisioned,' he says. 'China has an adventurous attitude, so there's not much you can't do, but when you make something in China, somehow or another it's always going to be Chinese. They like to reproduce everything as precisely as possible, even if it's supposed to look old. We wanted to allow room for imagination, though. It was a constant battle between the literal and the abstract. We spent a lot of time in Shanghai, but to have everything go perfectly - including construction - we should

### 'A filmmaker thinks in terms of protagonists, in a build-up of tension - aspects that remain undervalued in exhibitions'

Herman Kossmann

have moved there for the duration, as did John Körmeling, who designed the Dutch pavilion (see *Frame* 75, page 128).

The walk through the Urbanian Pavilion begins in the morning and takes visitors through five subpavilions, each comprising a separate

exhibition devoted to one of the chosen themes. An ingenious lighting plan and sound design create the illusion of a whole day passing in the 45 minutes needed to tour the building. The layout is unusual and is based on sightlines. As you walk through the commercial centre of town, bright with big neon signs, you see slum areas in the distance, and skyscrapers stand tall behind a low-rise urban neighbourhood. Brought in especially for this project was Matt Vermeulen, whose years of experience in theatrical set design made his input invaluable. 'In the meantime, Matt has become a permanent member of our team,' says Michèl de Vaan. 'It's one example of how our team grows increasingly stronger as people from all sorts of disciplines climb on board. We have lighting designers, architects and people like me, with a background in interactive technologies.'

Exhibiting has long been confined to the presentation of objects, but clients looking for no more than a handsome pedestal or an interesting display case to highlight an artefact needn't bother calling on Kossmann.dejong. 'We more or less hijack every commission,' says a grinning De Vaan. From the outset of each project, a multidisciplinary team is involved in developing the concept. Depending on the client, specialists are asked to furnish substantive input, and those directly involved in the concept phase include not only architects, but also lighting and sound designers. 'People from different disciplines offer different perspectives. Light and sound shouldn't be layers slapped on a design at a later date; everything should be integrated,' says Kossmann. During the development of a project, his role is more like that of a director than of a designer. 'There are enough designers.'

he says. 'We always use content as the point of departure for our work. First we need a story, a scenario. Form isn't important; that comes automatically.'

Two filmmakers were part of the process that led to the exhibition in Shanghai. 'We wanted to show reality,' explains De Vaan. 'With unscripted images of real people, you can make abstract statistics pertaining to life in the city both personal and recognizable.' Six families were filmed, all leading ordinary lives in big cities, each on a different continent. Kossmann.dejong called this part of the project 'The Expedition'. Using the five earlier-mentioned themes, they made a series of 3.5-minute films - each family features in five short films - which became focal points of the subpavilions. Originally, the overall theme had been 'In Pursuit of Happiness', but it was soon changed to 'Quality of Life'. 'In China, balance is crucial,' says Kossmann. 'Happiness is too one-sided; furthermore, a large part of the population still lives in rural areas, and the city cannot be interpreted as a "better" place to be.'

Political sensitivity in host country China emerged again during the search for the right six families to film. The process was long and complicated: which cities to select and what kinds of families? 'If it had been up to us, the contrasts would have been much sharper,' says Kossmann. 'We wanted a millionaire from Moscow, someone from a São Paulo favela, and a Parisian artist. Paris was approved early on, or so it seemed until the Dalai Lama paid a visit to the city.' After many extensive and detailed presentations of the concept to a 40-member Chinese delegation, the choice finally fell on six very ordinary families. 'That's got its good side, too,' says Kossmann. 'It's easy for the visitor to identify with the main characters of the story.'

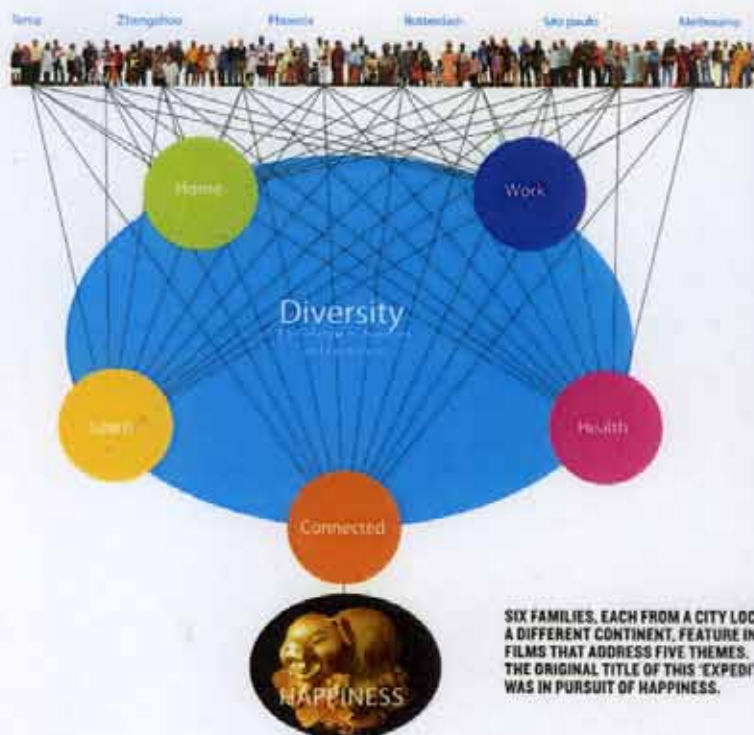
In Kossmann's opinion, few exhibitions take the opportunity to engage people and make them part of the theme in an optimal way. 'It's perfectly normal for a filmmaker to think in terms of protagonists, in a build-up of tension, in flashbacks - to use a scriptwriter and a sound designer. All this remains undervalued in most exhibitions. Allowing the visitor to stop in the middle of a story, or even to retrace his steps, can give an exhibition that extra jolt of excitement. By telling multiple stories simultaneously, you can make comparisons and encourage people to form associations on their own: impossible to do when staging plays or showing films. The potential is gigantic. You can tell important stories in a moving way to a very large audience. The World Expo could elaborate on such ideas much more than it does.'

The World Expo was initiated in the distant past for the purpose of exhibiting cultural, social and, in particular, technical developments. Nowadays, however, the event has turned into a series of billboards for the world's many nations. 'At an expo, you could examine serious subjects like energy, human rights and famine in a creative way,' Kossmann continues. 'The next World Expo will be held in Milan, where the main theme will be food. Why not have the following one in the middle of Africa, a continent that really needs the world to join forces and focus on food? It's a shame that the emphasis of most pavilions is on the architecture and that the story they want to tell is of minor importance. The best pavilions in history were *gesamtkunstwerken* in which great names combined a diversity of strengths. You can layer a variety of disciplines

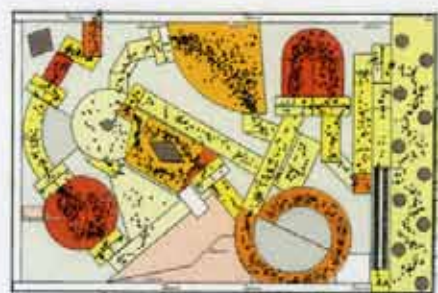
ad infinitum, combine old and new technologies, and experiment endlessly. This is what makes our job so interesting.'

According to Kossmann, mixing disciplines can be applied more often and not only in exhibitions. Both Kossmann and De Jong were trained as architects, and in addition to exhibitions and permanent museum interiors, they design environments for hotels, restaurants and other public places. 'If more designers would realize that an interior is being made for people who will use it, and that these people are a sort of audience, they would produce much better work,' says Kossmann. 'I'd like to see a lot more thought given to the senses. Music can work really well in a home for the elderly, for example, as can elements that feel different, that stimulate the sense of touch. Too many designers think first and foremost of their own preferences.'

Besides interior design and an increasing number of requests from architects who want the agency to 'think along' with them on various projects, Kossmann.dejong sees exhibition design as the main player in its game plan. 'But we're talking here about exhibitions in which more and more often it won't be objects that tell the story,' says Kossmann. 'I love building a narrative out of nothing, putting a personal twist on a project, translating something from the past into the present, and imbuing the result with a sense of half knowing, half experiencing. It's an approach that invariably results in another interesting enterprise.'



SIX FAMILIES, EACH FROM A CITY LOCATED ON A DIFFERENT CONTINENT, FEATURE IN SHORT FILMS THAT ADDRESS FIVE THEMES. THE ORIGINAL TITLE OF THIS 'EXPEDITION' WAS IN PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS.



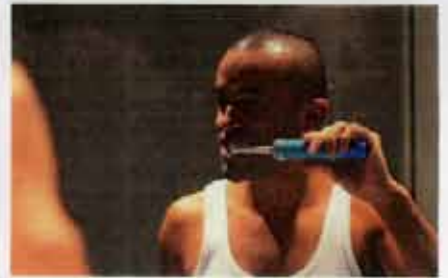
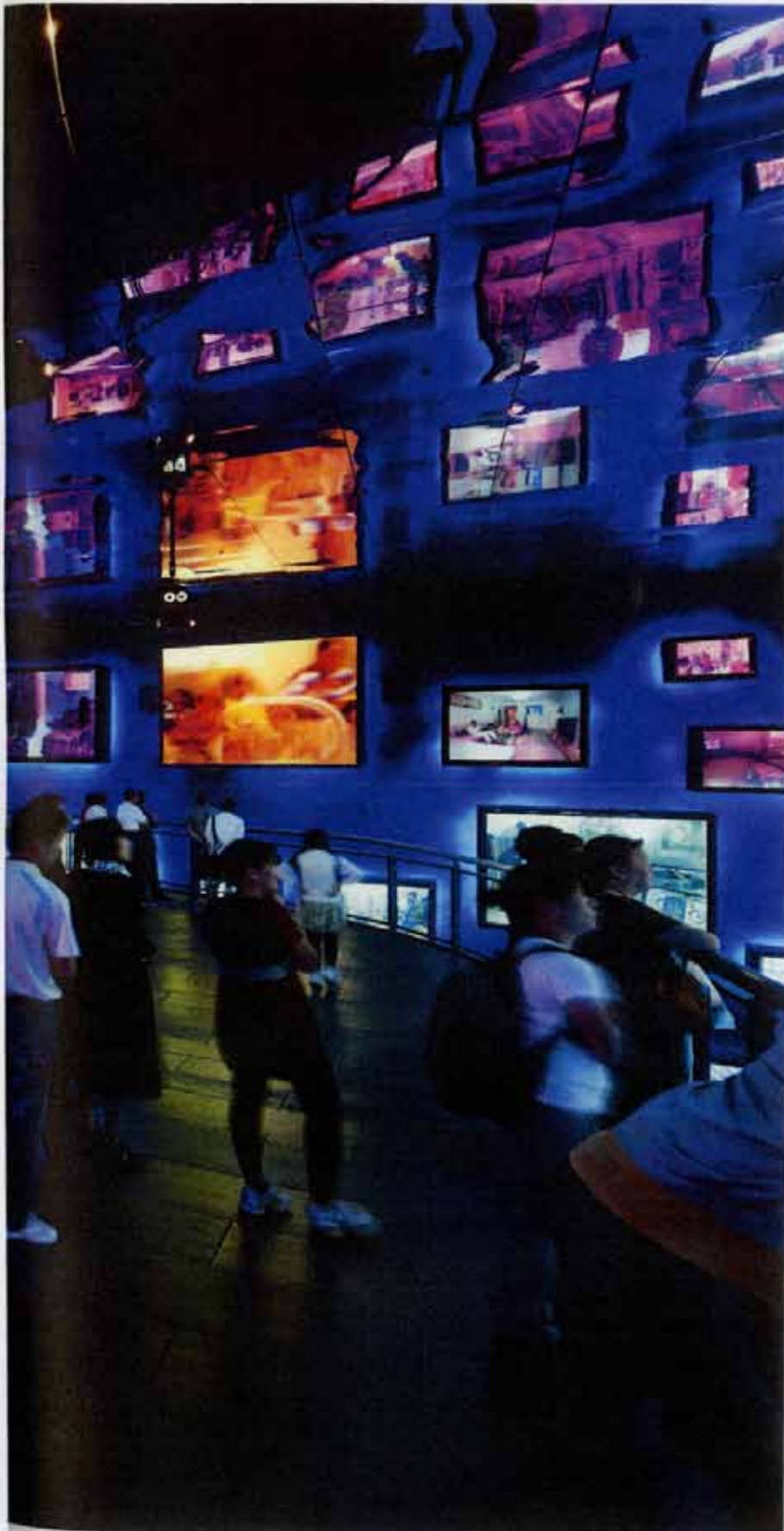
AN ANIMATION CREATED BY A CROWD-CONTROL CONSULTANT OPTIMIZE THE FLOW OF VISITORS, A GOAL THAT INFLUENCES SUCH MATTERS AS THE LENGTH OF THE FILMS AND THE WIDTH OF THE AISLES.

**THE CITY**

Every day, 40,000 visitors enter the pavilion via a 10-m-high escalator and make their first acquaintance with the six families. During their walk through the city, they pass five sub-pavilions where the sub-themes provide the central focus. In each of the pavilions - Home, Work, Connected, Learn and Health - videos of all six families can be seen on synchronized multiscreen projections.



MIRRORS ON THE CEILING AND FLOOR REFLECT THE SPACE INTO INFINITY.



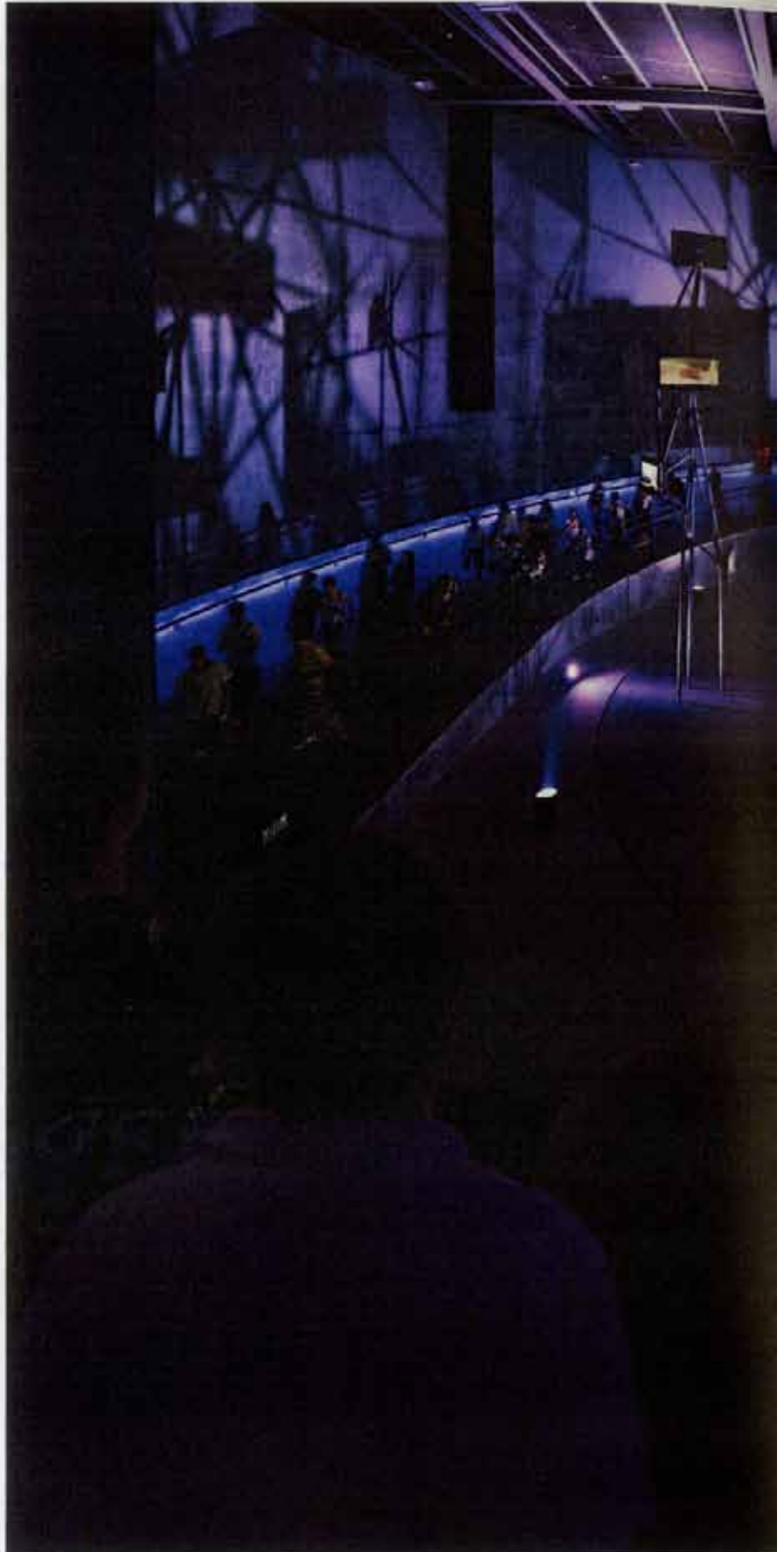
SHORT FILMS SHOW HOW MEMBERS OF THE VARIOUS FAMILIES (IN. FROM TOP TO BOTTOM, SÃO PAULO, ROTTERDAM AND PHOENIX) GET UP IN THE MORNING AND CLEAN THEIR TEETH.

## HOME

The pavilion consists of more than 120 show-boxes, an exhibition technique that has essentially been in use for centuries. On the screens, 3D images can be seen made from photos of various living rooms in the chosen cities. The largest boxes show film images of the six families simultaneously getting up, opening the curtains, brushing their teeth and eating. LED lamps, sound and video are all synchronized. Statistical facts and personal stories complement each other. ■■■■

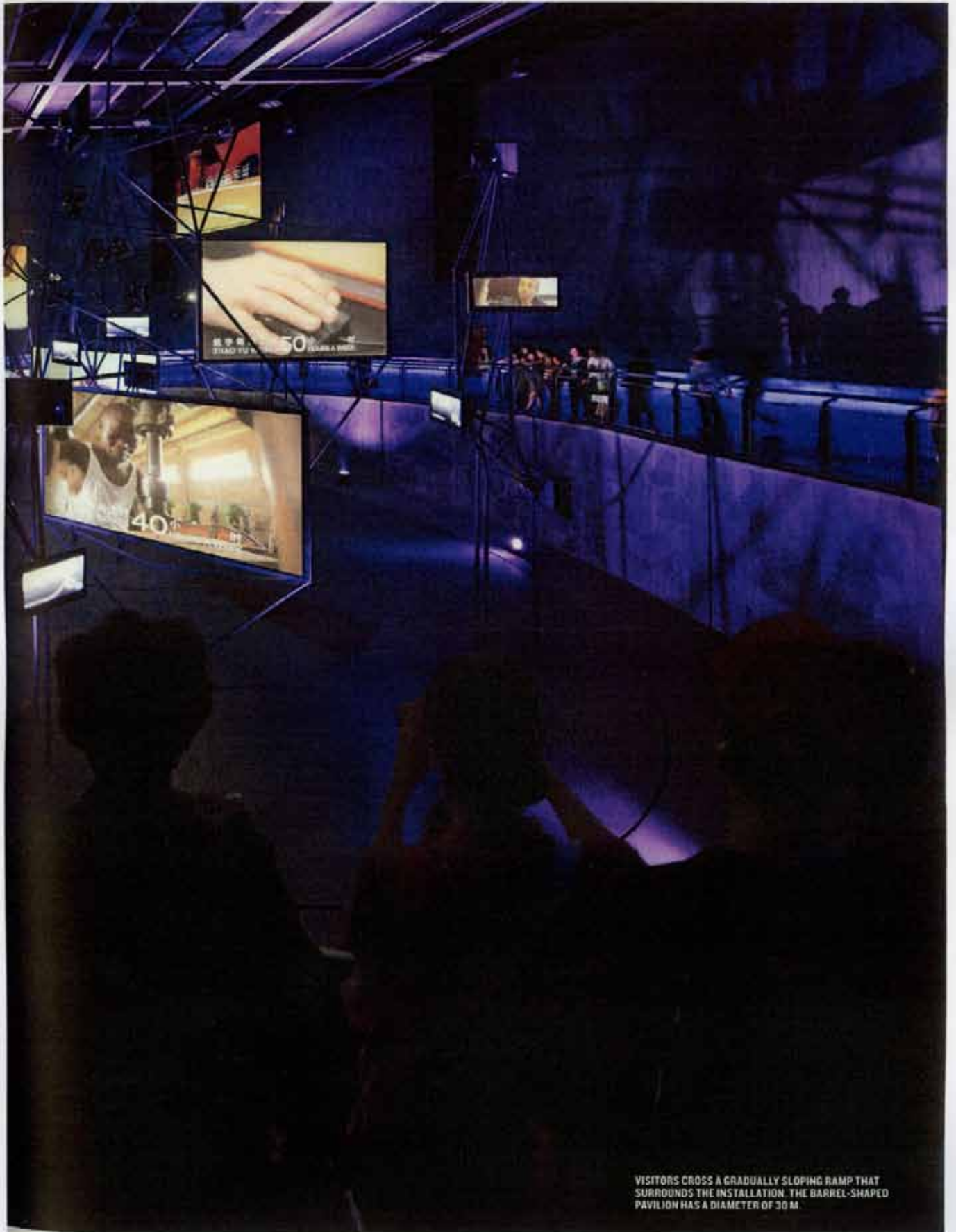


HERMAN KOSSMANN (RIGHT) AND MICHEL DE VAAN EVALUATE A MODEL OF THE MACHINE FOR THE WORK PAVILION.



## WORK

Chinese Army engineers developed a large rotating machine for the Work pavilion where the central focus is dynamics. Videos of the six families can be seen on six large screens, which relate, for example, how many hours each main figure works per week. All sorts of details can be found on 22 rotating TFT screens. ■■■■■



VISITORS CROSS A GRADUALLY SLOPING RAMP THAT SURROUNDS THE INSTALLATION. THE BARREL-SHAPED PAVILION HAS A DIAMETER OF 30 M.





THE FILM IN THE 'CONNECTED' PAVILION INCLUDES PEOPLE ON THE PHONE, METRO MAPS AND DIAGRAMS OF SOCIAL NETWORKS.

### CONNECTED

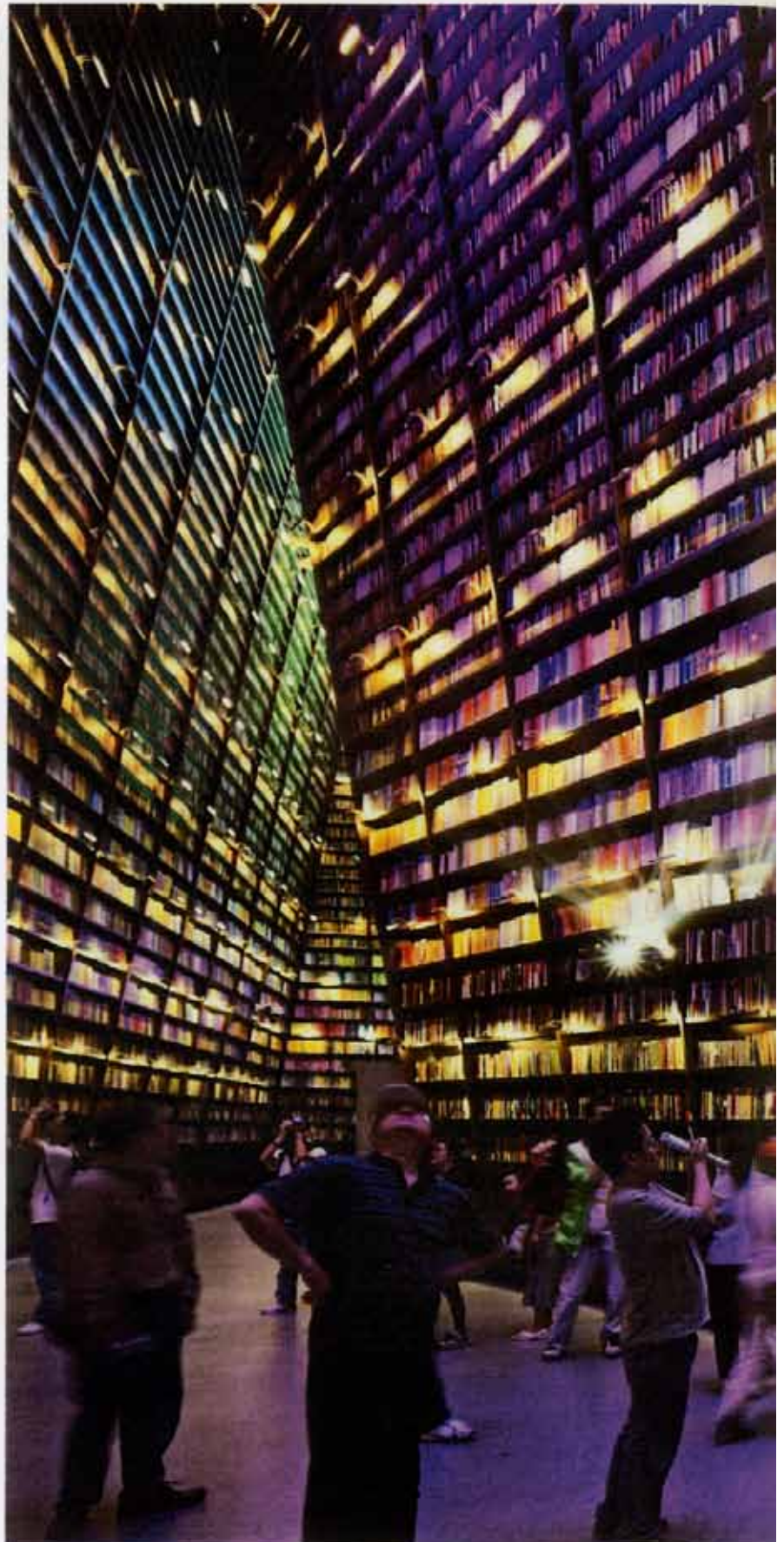
There are no individual films to be seen in this pavilion, but eight beamers project consecutive images onto the domed roof. To begin with, Kossmann.dejong wanted to make a network of vertically and diagonally stretched strings that visitors literally had to walk through, but that was not feasible, for logistic reasons. In the end, an 8-m-high horizontally suspended woven construction refers to the concept and importance of social networks, transport systems and meeting places. ■■■■

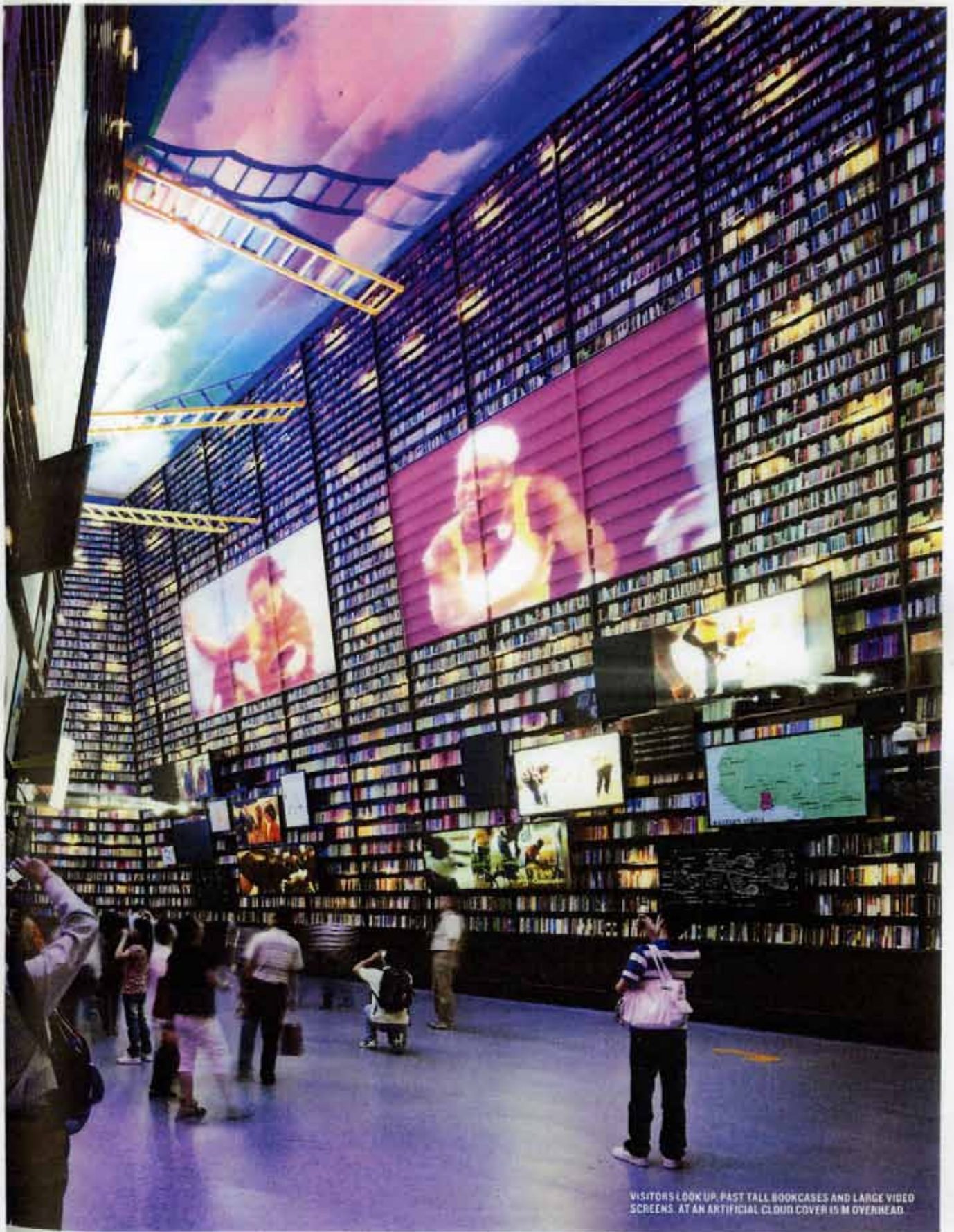


TEENAGERS CHAT IN A HIGH-SCHOOL CLASSROOM (ABOVE), AND YOUNGER CHILDREN MAKE HANDICRAFTS IN A PRIMARY SCHOOL (BELOW).

## LEARNING

15-m-high slanting bookcases refer to education in the big city, where 'the sky is the limit'. Facts and figures about education in the different cities are displayed on blackboards, so that the cities can easily be compared with each other in this pavilion, too. Films show the children from the six families going to school, sitting in class, making things with their hands, learning arithmetic, having music lessons or going to jazz ballet. ■





VISITORS LOOK UP, PAST TALL BOOKCASES AND LARGE VIDEO SCREENS. AN ARTIFICIAL CLOUD COVER IS M OVERHEAD.

## URBANIAN PAVILION

**LOCATION** World Expo 2010, Shanghai, China

**DESIGN** Kossmann.dejong (kossmandejong.nl)

**AREA** 15,000 m<sup>2</sup>

**HEIGHT** 22 m

**CONTENT RESEARCH AND ADVISERS** Arnold Reijndorp,

Michelle Provoost, Paul Meurs

**PROJECT MANAGEMENT** Kossmann.dejong, Adelina Lee

**MEDIA-CONTENT CONCEPT** Kossmann.dejong,

Tungsten Studio, De Aanpak

**LIGHTING DESIGN** Tweebekke Licht

**MEDIA-CONTENT PRODUCTION** yU+co.(sh), Kossmann.dejong

**ON-SCREEN GRAPHIC DESIGN** yU+co.(lab), Kossmann.dejong

**AUDIOVISUAL TECHNICAL CONSULTANTS** yU+co.(lab)

**CROWD-CONTROL CONSULTANTS** Incontrol Simulation

Solutions

**CONTRACTOR** Guangdong Jimel Design and Construction

Company

**LIGHTING AND AUDIO HARDWARE** Shanghai Yong Jia

Lighting and Audio Contracting

**AUDIOVISUAL HARDWARE AND SHOW CONTROL** Shanghai

Foremost Multimedia

**TECHNICAL AND PROJECT CONSULTANTS (DESIGN PHASE)**

Hypsos Leisure Asia

**STARTED** August 2007

**COMPLETED** May 2010

## HEALTH

In the middle of the space, which is finished with white tiles, a round, half-transparent screen is suspended. Water runs down the walls and droplets fall from the leafy ceiling. The screen moves gently in the breeze created by the fans and the smell of eucalyptus fills the air. In the film projected on the inside of the screen, the six families can be seen going to the fitness club, the market and the butcher's. Images of babies are accompanied by displays of life expectancy data in the various cities. Other images show that the percentage of overweight people in São Paulo is many times less than in Melbourne and Rotterdam. ■■■■■

THE WHITE-TILED SPACE HAS THE SAME AIR OF CLEANLINESS THAT CHARACTERIZES HOSPITALS, SWIMMING POOLS AND SAUNAS.



DROPLETS FALL FROM A LEAFY CANOPY AT THE CENTRE OF THE PAVILION.

