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From Shanghai to Rome: People in Public Space

This paper will discuss the results of a two-year photographic ethnography project aimed at understanding human behavior in public urban spaces in two very different cultural contexts. The author, who is an architect and educator, lived and worked in China for six months in 2008 and in Italy for four months in the following year. In each case he collected thousands of images of people occupying the public domain, and cataloged the images according to the kinds of activities in which the subjects were involved. By comparing the images drawn from China with those from Italy he was able to observe similarities as well as subtle, as well as not so subtle, differences in the ways people behaved in public urban spaces in different parts of the world. While these observations are to be seen more as tentative hypotheses than as concrete conclusions, the photographs provide striking and poignant insight into place, culture, and human condition.