The creation of community and identity in Shanghai's new towns

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In the view of China's Ministry of Construction, urbanisation is the motor of modernisation. People living in cities will spend more money, and that is good for the economy. Cities are more efficient in terms of public amenities, production and distribution. Cities are also the means to creating a 'comfortable society', which will in turn result in a better standard of living for all. Suburbs and urban sprawl are American inventions. The Chinese solution is clustered living in extremely high densities. A decentred polynuclear model was proposed shortly after the Second World War, to replace the old centralistic model. Since the 1950s many new towns have been planned and realized in China to guide urban growth and to protect fertile agricultural land. Today some 300,000 newcomers arrive annually to this 'New York of the twenty-first century' to try their luck. In contradiction to the first generation of new towns, which was constructed under the old-style communist regime that focused on (heavy) industries and a huge working class, a new generation of new towns shows much more variation and vitality. The new settlements are intended as a way to rechanneling the enormous flow of economic migrants from the countryside and rehousing a portion of the residents of the existing city in order to solve the problems of congestion and improve living standards. In addition, ageing industrial plants are being relocated to suburban premises. To attract businesses and affluent residents, the new towns are seeking ways to differentiate themselves, ranging from attractive financial terms to cultivating an international urban image through the use of architecture.

Urban experiments and international influences

Shanghai has been the most important 'bridge' between China and the rest of the world since the late nineteenth century. This cosmopolitan city has always been a very exciting mixture of poor and rich, beautiful and ugly, clean and dirty, chaos and order. After the Opium Wars[1] (1839–1860), a French, an American and a British concession were founded, which are still recognizable within the urban fabric. Ever since then this city has been an experimental mix of oriental and western architectural styles. Today this is also reflected in its newest generation of new towns, which are partly designed in cooperation with western architects and urban planners. Since 2001, the direct-controlled municipality of Shanghai has started a number of pilot projects that commissioned foreign designers such as Dongtan Eco City, Lingang Harbor City and also the 'One City, Nine Towns Development Plan', with the aim of catching up with international standards. This is in addition to many model neighbourhoods and pilot towns designed by Chinese designers. The differing working conditions, regulations (which vary per district), set-up and solutions create an especially interesting palette. Some experiments are successful; other pilots did not have such luck. As a response to the lack of identity that many Chinese new towns are facing, and to enable the new towns to compete with the cosmopolitan qualities of the Central City of Shanghai, Mayor Liangyu Chen, in 2001, proposed to assign several 'pioneer projects' a billboard function. The international architectural style of the city centre would be extended to the suburbs with 'European spatial, and architectural qualities'. The so-called 'One City, Nine Towns Development Plan' was adopted as part of Shanghai's tenth five-year plan (2001–2005). Architects and urban planners from a select number of western countries, which trade with Shanghai, were invited to take part in a series of international competitions. Initially, Shanghai's Urban Planning Bureau was opposed to this decision, among other reasons, because of its unhappy association with the former concessions of 'the old imperialist countries'. However, the planners eventually recognised the opportunities in a heuristic[2] international exchange of ideas with regard to design, construction and management. The quality of new construction and environmental standards must meet international standards. The foreign architects and urban planners were asked to present their visions for the development of a new town as well as detailed plans for a strategic component at the parcellation level; depending on the project, such a component could be a commercial centre within the new town, or an exclusive residential area for the upper middle class. The winning plans were in turn worked out by, or in co-operation with, Chinese design institutes. The foreign

designers involved were asked to give visual form to the spatial identity and quality of their own countries, a task which in some cases was given an extremely literal interpretation at the local level by local governments and developers. Due to the great speed involved, differences in decision-making procedures and differences both in terms of culture and geographic distance, not all participants submitted successfully completed projects. Certainly, their images were appealing, but many 'western' problems such as social segregation, discontinuity of the townscape and a lack of (useable) public spaces, were particularly apparent, something not only attributable to the elaborations carried out by Chinese partners, but also to a high degree to a clear unfamiliarity on the part of western firms with regard to local conditions and residential preferences.

Thematic and functional nuclei as urban seed

These thematic sections are relatively small and include 'only' a few tens of thousands of houses, designed as marketing tools to attract residents to the first. The rest of the cities are conventionally built around it in the usual Chinese styles, at breakneck pace. The different competitions yielded concrete projects: the English district, Thames Town, as part of Songjiang New City and a Canadian, German, Italian, Dutch, Scandinavian, Spanish new town, as well as two Chinese new towns, equally distributed over the suburban districts. A projected second, North American new town (Zhoupo) was cancelled. In a comparable manner, but this time outside the context of the One City, Nine Towns Development Plan, a new port city (Lingang Harbour City), and an 'ecological city' (Dongtan Eco City) are now under development, in close co-operation with western architects. While implementation of the latter project has been placed on hold in connection with political considerations, all of the other projects mentioned are being executed in phases, and each exhibits a different degree of completion. The international influences in architecture and urbanism is hoped to bind the prosperous Chinese middle class to the city. It also aims at the higher educated abroad and returning ex-pats and Chinese. The idea is that the Western architectural styles even include a tourist value. This weird language form of the new middle class is an indication that Shanghai is seeking bonds with the rest of the world, as well as that there is a new class wishing to differentiate itself. The relevant international thematic influences have now proliferated into the surrounding standard Chinese urban expansions, which are of an extremely large scale. At dozens of locations, small 'European' streets and neighbourhoods have been created, and are often used as commercial centres with shops, restaurants, cafés and the like. Also other cities in China follow the sample of Shanghai, although there is a lot of criticism among architecture critics in China and abroad. Another form of planting a seed is a functional theming. In several cases, services and jobs from the central city have been placed out, and complete new towns are built around existing industries, such as Anting International Automobile City, which is built around the Volkswagen factories, and in the case of Songjiang New City no less than seven universities were relocated from the central city. The result can be seen as a successful attempt to avoid the mistakes associated with new towns in the west, which have primarily become dormitory towns for commuters. Good access from the 'mother city, short home-to-work distances, and the presence of everyday amenities seem essential for the occasional success of a new town. Many western samples like the Villes Nouvelles around Paris, or the New Towns in England, or the new towns Lelystad and Almere in the Netherlands, prove that the chance for urbanity with vital shops and local employment for the new residents is limited if an attractive living environment and good transportation connections are lacking. The case of Shanghai is just another sample that contemporary Chinese urban planning seems to be far more advanced than in the western world with regard to the construction of new infrastructure, public amenities and greenery. Public spaces are often of a high quality. Mature trees are grown in large numbers on plantations and flank the freshly paved lanes long before the first buildings are erected. Although not always the case, this greatly helps in making new towns more attractive and transforming these newly built settlements into well-functioning neighbourhoods. Thanks to absolute land ownership and high income from the sale of 'land use rights', local Chinese authorities have sufficient resources to make these investments in advance. Notwithstanding the promising success story, there is an alarming problem in the new towns around Shanghai. Due to the rapid increase of real estate prices many newly built houses are used for speculation. Because of this reason in

some quarters more than half the housing stock is empty. Additionally, there is a huge lack of affordable housing for labour migrants.

From state-owned planning to a market oriented approach

Currently Chinese cities undergo a transition of the Danwei system to a market oriented system. The Danwei is an administrative unit with a socio-spatial basis of urban development, originated from socialist China. Since 1949 the Chinese society was reorganized in work-units, the so-called danwei system; State-owned factories or state-farms supplied housing. The transition from a planned economy to a market economy signalled the beginning of the end of the danwei system. Since the early 1990s China has been engaged in the widespread sale of danwei dwellings (state property) to residents for a modest price. This was a wonderful opportunity, because there is no pension scheme in China outside the danwei system. In 1998 Premier Zhu announced that this system of subsidized housing would be reduced rapidly. Old dwellings can be bought directly from the state or through semi-private developers. In addition, home rental and newly-build will be commercialized further. In Shanghai especially, there is an increase in the number of private development initiatives in which the local government plays just a facilitating role. Private developers enjoy a lot of freedom to build what they want. This led to poorly constructed buildings, short-term thinking and greed. According to some experts, the low quality of development offers inhabitants more opportunities to adapt their facades and interiors, but they would have adjusted them anyway. The transition from a planned economy to a market economy means probably the definite end of the danwei system, but the trend is to develop also in new areas new common external devices as shared. The proliferation of thematic developments also suggests the desire to create communities based on a shared story. Under the danwei system public life was organized by state-run companies. Employees lived and worked communally. In spatial terms, this translated into standardized residential quarters ('xiaoqu') adjacent to or on the grounds of the farm or factory where the work of the danwei took place. The system of state-owned danweis was employed as a way of organising society both spatially and socially. Social activities and daily requirements of each danwei were regulated by a neighbourhood committee. Although the danwei system is disappearing, the xiaoqus and neighbourhood committees continue to exist, albeit in modified form. Work and residence are no longer a spatial unity, but residents still share such facilities as gymnasiums, day-care, and laundries. The committees regulate all administrative matters and tasks in the xiaoqu with regard to social cohesion, including for example tai chi exercises. In addition to the work done by government-paid employees, there are volunteer tasks as well, for example the management of the outdoors space.

Searching for new forms of community

In its efforts to promote decentralisation, the national government encourages the 'new-style' xiaoqus to be resourceful. More and more xiaoqus are starting to develop commercial functions within their property. At commercial xiaoqus (i.e., those not developed by the government), owners' associations are even being established for management and maintenance purposes. Especially in the more expensive neighbourhoods, the maintenance of buildings and communal outdoor spaces, cleaning, caretaking and security tasks are increasingly being outsourced to property management companies. A side effect is that xiaoqus are aiming more and more on specific groups. Most commercial xiaoqus are luxurious residential units for the wealthy new bourgeoisie. Even on relocation areas, where inhabitants of demolished townhouses are relocated, the price level often increases to extremes within just a few years after completion. Within a radius of at least 15 km from People's Square (the ultimate centre of Shanghai), it is impossible to find affordable housing for young well-educated starting families. Nevertheless, with the continuing system of xiaoqus and neighbourhood committees there are many chances, if a new balance can be found between government-driven and market-driven urban development. Within Shanghai's densely built urban massiveness, new forms of community are created based on the old danwei system. The xiaoqu can be seen as a basic ingredient for a successful society, with which cities can be composed as a collection of strong communities. Especially in the districts for lower incomes, many residents take their chance to adapt their new living environment. Public greens are used for gardening, part of the new houses are rebuilt for commercial activities like a small shop, a hairdresser's, a noodle bar or repair workshop, even on higher floors. Thanks to this increasing adaptability, new neighbourhoods are becoming more

and more colourful. Since the period of identical state-planning housing has ended, new identities have to be found to create a sense of 'home'. An easy way is choosing artificial solutions like thematic architecture. Much more effective is the adapted continuation of creating small communities, based on the old danwei system. A new society is being created here, built on a tabula rasa but organisational founded on adapted communal roots.

NOTES

(1) Editor's Note: There were two Opium Wars. The first one was between China and Great Britain, and the second one was between China, and Great Britain and France. The Empire of China banned the English smugglers to sell Indian opium in China. The Chinese were defeated, and had to tolerate the trade of the drug. Besides, they submitted Hong Kong to Great Britain, and Macao to Portugal.

(2) Editor's Note: Heuristic is an investigation and discovery technique that searches the solution for a problem using the lateral thinking. It accepts methods such as sizing up, elaboration of diagrams, and reverse reasoning, among others.

China: Conundrums, Constructions and Cities

Bert de Muynck (co-director of Moving-Cities)

Chasing bits of truths is like catching butterflies: pin them down and they die.
Simon Leys, The Burning Forest

The Absence of Insiders

In 2004 Rem Koolhaas wrote in "Triumph of Realization" a timely piece of propaganda on China's state of affairs, in which he carefully avoided the pitfalls of specialization: "With a mixture of concern and fascination, all eyes are focused on China. Perhaps the greatest gamble in the history of mankind, it is a gamble that no one can afford (China) to lose. China's visible transformation into an economic and political giant represents a case of a 3000-year-old "adolescent" growing up in public [...]. It is easy to imagine it going wrong but essential to imagine it going right. Participation in China's modernization clearly does not have a guaranteed outcome. The future China is the moment's most compelling conundrum; its outcome involves all of us – there are no "outsiders"". Is China a world without outsiders, with cities without strangers, featuring a society without exclusion? All of these are hard to imagine while moving from one Chinese city to another. Designers, inhabitants, citizens, investors, vendors, decision makers, land owners, migrants, white collar workers, and students are all part of the future that is under construction. But reality, as everywhere else, is shaped by real-estate investors and the reigning party. Everyone else is an outsider. But does it make sense to claim the opposite – that there are not enough "insiders"?
About fifteen years before the UN-report and Rem Koolhaas, Xiangming Chen published the essay "Giant Cities and the Urban Hierarchy in China " highlighting the following difficulties: "...the large number of rural residents becoming urbanized can only be absorbed by these citified towns. If this policy is smoothly implemented, we will witness unprecedented major population redistribution in China that will involve total redefinitions of both urbanization and urban places. (...)This comprehensive picture of very large cities in the context of China's urban policies suggests that an effective Chinese model of urban development has yet to crystallise." A lot of the attempts to grasp the vastness of China's urban development are centred on forms of fantastic-forensic research. Fantastic because every description and analysis contributes to the outsiders' image of a country floating on waves of irrational, unbelievable, and impressive developments. Forensic because when architects, planners and researches arrive at their city of investigation they are surrounded by crimes and wonders of construction they could never fathom. Investigations on Chinese cities need a different form of specialisation, one that, as Simon Leys wrote in "The Burning Forest", is both necessary and impossible: "Specialisation is necessary. The wealth, scope, and diversity of Chinese culture wildly exceed the assimilating capacities and intellectual resources of any individual. [...] Specialisation is impossible. China is an organic entity, in which every element can be understood only when put under the light of other elements; these other elements can be fairly remote from the one that is under consideration – sometimes they do not even present any apparent connection with it."

Five Elements

For a long time, architects have been dealing with the issue of context; dealing with the relatively possible task to find aesthetic, formal and organisational clues in the immediate environment of any given plot. In today's world, context, like firecrackers, explodes in a multitude