

Chinese Generic Cities and Their Urban Futures

Las ciudades genéricas chinas y sus futuros urbanos

SUNNIE SING-YEUNG LAU y PAULA GONZALEZ MARTINEZ

Abstract / Resumen

Despite the fact that China's urban growth has been widely studied and discussed over the last decades, this paper intends to offer a particular and most recent vision of the present scenario. From our Hong Kong and Mainland architectural experiences, being fully involved in the cases that we are about to describe and trying to avoid generalizing, we aim to redefine somewhat of a repetitive reality and the implications of it in the near future because of two major dangers: 1. The new cities become generic without proper assimilation process to illustrate locality and cultural identity; 2. Built large scale development losses adaptability to changes into other program once obsolete.

A pesar del hecho de que el crecimiento urbano de China ha sido ampliamente estudiado y discutido durante décadas, este texto pretende ofrecer una visión más específica y reciente de la situación actual. Desde las experiencias arquitectónicas de Hong Kong y Mainland, estando completamente involucrados en los casos que vamos a describir a continuación e intentando evitar generalizaciones, nuestra intención es redefinir una realidad reiterada y las implicaciones que puede acarrear en un futuro cercano, teniendo en cuenta dos peligros fundamentales: 1. Las nuevas ciudades se convierten en genéricas sin un adecuado proceso de asimilación que tenga en cuenta el lugar y la identidad cultural; 2. La construcción de un desarrollo a gran escala pierde adaptabilidad para asumir cambios en programas desde hace tiempo obsoletos.

Keywords / Palabras clave

China, generic cities, urban growth, cultural identity, large scale.

China, ciudades genéricas, crecimiento urbano, identidad cultural, gran escala.

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Background

Chinese economic euphoria has led to different scenarios in the urban status, that illustrates the questionable phenomena of Chinese speed urbanization.

- Fact 1: unprecedented speed of developments—“McKinsey & Company predicts China will build 50,000 skyscrapers in the next two decades, the equivalent of 10 New York.
- Fact 2: A real estate housing bubble is surfacing—there is nearly 64 million empty housing in China.
- Fact 3: Scale grows bigger becoming a problematic issue at different scales.
- Fact 4: Speed growth unable to address change in use. Factories and houses left abandoned in the area of early developed Pearl River Delta.

Although Kevin Lynch once mentioned that “physical form is not critical (...) to shape the value of a city nor physical form is the key variable whose manipulation will induce change;¹ he did not deny the importance of the coexistence of both architectural forms and human values—“Theory must deal with the esthetic aspects of cities, even though it may be a more difficult part of its task. Indeed, it must deal with function and aesthetics as one phenomenon.” Nevertheless, both factors shall come hand in hand together in the production of a good city form. And we should not see designing a city as if it was one building but as if it was a series of layers and grains that come together to form a larger spatial settlement.

Several case studies show us the rise and fall of the new metropolis. Through the analysis of former developments, typologies and other urban-scapes (Detroit, Leshan, Guangdong,) we try to suggest different models that could be better apply to the current scenario.

As a hypothesis, this paper intends to list general ingredients of a great city: Activity, Connectivity (as a stream less flow of accessible information and infrastructure,) strong cultural identity, mixed use, diversity, intensity of use of space and time, overlapping of functions, dynamism, flexibility and public and private spaces. All these ingredients are necessary to formulate new viable alternatives in the next wave of inevitable development processes.

1. China's current urban status I: Uniqueness ad infinitum

China's urban population is increasing while rural population decreases. What are the implications of the scale of these transformations?

To allocate the immense flux of immigrants, the country needs to produce the equivalent to 12 times the same built substance as the one in major European cities. It is simply not possible to produce in the new Chinese cities the same architectural content that Europe has been layered over time.

If we carefully look at the list of some of them, we observe that maybe Shanghai, Hong Kong or Tianjin (with a longer history of postindustrial development) do have a distinctive character; but in a short time of massive building, the result is what we could call a “generic city:” A city composed of the same ingredients repeated over and over. It is essentially “all the same.” Exceptional and high rise buildings appear continuously and compete with each other. The repetition of the “extraordinary” becomes naïf. Stagnation. Uniqueness produced “ad infinitum” to the point that the term loses its value. Mediocrity.

In 1925, Le Corbusier designed a suburban scheme for Paris. A century later, by looking at a generic plan for one specific Chinese two—tier city, one saw that there is no difference or improvement. With the exception of the Japanese metabolism

¹ Lynch, Kevin. *Good City Form*. “Chapter 5 –But is a General Normative Theory Possible?” MIT Press, Cambridge, 1981, pp. 99-104.



RMB city by Cao Fei & Vitamin Creative Space, 2009.

Fuente: <http://www.vitamincreativespace.com/en/?work=the-opening-of-rmb-city>

Chance encounters w/the elevated landscapes of Guangzhou, near Zhu Jiang New Town.

Fuente: <http://untestedcity.com/2009/12/13/pearl-river-delta-in-flux/>

movement in the 1960's, which inspired in Asia the public before the private issues, the Chinese thinking process has just started, whereas in Europe, urbanization achieved a "thinking plateau" in the 80's that has led to certain structure and hierarchy.

The lack of thinking implies that we have globally surrendered to the market economy, making the urban condition itself less adventurous than in the 50's, inspiring predictability, safety, and comfort. The essence of urban life is lost. Maybe because the quality of the "local" consultants in planning operations is not good enough to produce real content. Or perhaps because the "exceptional" foreigner consultants, such as Herzog and de Meuron, or Rem Koolhaas, are many times producing architectural solutions that no longer serve the city as they should.

Moreover, business (according to Forbes magazine) sees an opportunity in the new upcoming Chinese megalopolis, and today companies like Siemens are positioning themselves as producers of the new Chinese city.

These newly qualified businesses compensate the lack of an urban logic by demanding more and more exceptional buildings. As some potential government laws in Spain, to qualify other professions in order to produce speed urbanism and architecture, for which the architect is specifically educated, has its (negative) implications on a long term basis.

2. China's current urban status II: Seeking Flexibility

As critically reminded by Sorkin's word in his article of "End of Urban Design:" "We must be wary of all totalizing schemes, especially those that propose universal formal solutions to complex social and environmental problems, that obliterate human, cultural, and natural differences, and that usurp individual rights through top-down, command application."²

The market-driven model has begun to gain criticism together with the insensitive top-down planning approach from the government. The dictatorship of urban form leaves no room for designers and architects to respond according to social and other cultural needs. The homogeneity of the "modernist skyscraper city" creates an overall unified form, as if it was designed under one single "masterplan" and fascinates most of foreigners and tourists. However the need of the local residents is not satisfied in a metaphysical level. In order to answer the question of "how to make a sense of a place," the image or identity of a city is crucial. Beginning with a strong and pure capitalist model, is it possible to reinvent a new urbanism that responds to a more humanistic approach?

We might be able to extract some cultural specific elements from the daily environment that are different from the usual residential typology, such as the reuse, retrofit and

² Sorkin, Michael. *The End(s) of Urban Design*, pp. 155-182, *Harvard Design Magazine* 25 (Fall 2006/ Winter 2007), p. 18.

Guangzhou city's skyline.

Fuente: <http://publicaddress.net/cracker/weapons-of-mass-production/>



Chance encounters w/the elevated landscapes of Guangzhou, near Zhu Jiang New Town.

Fuente: http://www.jorge-ayala.com/2008_08_01_archive.html

repurpose of old buildings and factories by younger generations who see the value in flexible studio spaces in old industrial buildings. These are good traces of historical heritage where residential units would be more meaningful.

There should be a good balance between different approaches: a highly efficient architecture or a humanistic and integrated one. Any of them on its own would hardly be sustainable on a long term basis. The cross-fertilization of these different approaches in "urbanism" should be optimized by the qualities of a specific geographical location. (Contextual architecture.)

In 1971 after the economic crisis in Japan had emerged, Maki criticized Metabolists' naïf belief that a city is capable to grow continuously and the lack of concern among architects of creating human or liveable spaces in the city. He wrote: "Until quite recently we, have not questioned the menace of unlimited expansion of large metropolises... but today there is increasing uneasiness and apprehension among us... At what level can we be most effective? We believe architects are most useful restructuring our physical environment at a scale ranging from a district of several thousand inhabitants to a complex of buildings in one block." (LIN, 228³)

The notion of designing an entire city with one single plan is currently not possible in China because of its inherited top-down planning system. However, Maki made a point about the fact that the idea of a single model imposed by few architects might become true when the country is undergoing social and political instabilities.

Under the capitalistic development model, China has seemingly urged to find a new model of development in responsible to its true locality. The term "typical typology" represents a certain ideology within a culture, meaning "the most effective and efficient form" of a particular city, that is constantly replicated and stamped all over the city creating its overall urban form. The obsolescence of the "typical" form comes from the fact that no application of one single model would be able to satisfy the hybridized nature of the changing social ideals in the contemporary China.

3. Learning from the past: Ghost Towns and Abandoned Luxury

In the essay "China's Future Landscape is already made in the USA (2006,)"⁴ Alan Berger makes a prediction on the future of Pearl Delta River's deindustrialized Landscape. "The year is 2050. China's modern industrial age is ending, and obsolete factories are strewn across the urban landscape. Global investment has evaporated, as corporations thirst for new low-wage labor forces in other parts of the world. China itself is outsourcing much of its own low-skill labor to other countries. The Chinese economy's backbone is middle-class consumers, while the middle class represents the majority of the national workforce. Environmental

³ Lin, Zhongjie. *Kenzo Tange and the Metabolist Movement: urban utopias of modern Japan*. Routledge, NY, 2010

⁴ Berger, Alan and Margaret Crawford (editors). *Nansha Coastal City- Landscape and Urbanism in the Pearl River Delta*. Harvard University Graduate School of Design, Cambridge, 2006, pp. 67-69.

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Detroit, Michigan Central Station, 2010.

Fuente: <http://www.maplescoop.com/node/30342/%E5%A4%B1%E8%90%BD%E7%9A%84%E7%BE%8E%E5%9C%8B%E7%B2%BE%E7%A5%9E%EF%BC%9A%E6%B1%BD%E8%BB%8A%E5%9F%8E%E5%BA%95%E7%89%B9%E5%BE%8B%E8%8D%92%E5%BB%A2%E6%85%98%E6%99%AF/>

resources, such as water and landscape are rendered shadow less. Sanitary landfills are full, and transportation infrastructure is oversubscribed. Nearly everyone owns at least one automobile, and gasoline stations are ubiquitously located throughout every city, town, and village. Petrochemical plants line urban waterfronts and are cordoned off from public access due to contaminations and derelict buildings.”

It is happening right now, in 2013, in the Southern coastal parts of China (Pearl Delta River,) where industrialization started. Industrial pollution, abandoned fields and derelict factory buildings increase. Urban landscapes shaped by the force of Capitalism that are “programmed to die” no longer are an answer to this country.

According to Gillem Tulloch, an analyst from Forensic Asia Ltd, statistics shows that 64 million vacant empty apartments are existing across China, with a maximum of 25% occupancy rate, being optimistic.

The “building/development” formula created = high-rise apartment building type “transplanted” from successful cities as Hong Kong or Singapore, failed to respond to the local diverse culture within Chinese communities. Therefore much real estate is left built but never occupied. As a result of the wealth disparity, speculation and real estate investment, many of these developments remain as grey ghost cities, a parallel case to Spanish urbanism in the past decade, the infamous Seseña, for instance.

“Vast new cities of apartments and shops are being built across China at a rate of ten a year, but they remain almost completely uninhabited ghost towns. It’s all part of the government’s efforts to keep the economy booming, and there are many people who would love to move in, but it’s simply too expensive for most.” Ghost towns in Zhengzhou, Dongguan, Qingshuihe... were built within the last decade. Including civic buildings, public buildings, hotels and apartment buildings; with all necessary infrastructures.

As an example, in Ordus—an inner-Mongolia city rich in natural resources such as coal and oil,—the city has shown a property boom since 2006. The local government built a new city for one million people, Kangbashi, but the project turned stagnant in 2011 when the central government started measures that tried to bring down the country’s property inflation. Prices have dropped by up to a third affecting investors and buyers and leaving unfinished skyscrapers and fleeing migrant workers.

Old Factories #1, Fushun Aluminum Smelter, Fushun City, Liaoning Province, 2005. Photography by Edward Burtynsky.

Fuente: <http://photographyofchina.com/Edward-Burtynsky#.UcN9DPIJMIo>



Another flagrant example is Hebang Development. In 2012, a local mainland Chinese developer from Chongqing and a notorious exfabricant of chemical substances, promoted a three plot real estate development of about 266,000 sqm. Each, with an ambitious high-tech residential and mixed program. After a one year design process, about 1,000,000 sqm. of built substance where produced.

Looking at these facts, the reality is that today’s architecture is a high speed business that many times becomes uncontrollable. We, as architects need to find new ways of controlling the city. We can no longer do so at a high speed efficient rate, and transplanting no-matter-where typologies that may work in some other city around the world.

Rem Koolhaas states in his lectures, that every year 500 square kilometers of urban substance are created in the Pearl River Delta. This is the equivalent of Paris, doubled. Western architects, by comparison, built nothing. They are virtually extinct. In the context of this hyper-development, the traditional architectural values —composition,—aesthetics, balance are irrelevant.

In 1990, his competition of Melun Senart, he found a new way forward, by reserving landscape corridors or major landscape highways, and abstaining from building in them. Being planned ahead, this void areas would remain untouched and the new “fast food architecture” would be embedded in the remaining area. As a sort of “architectural health pills” for China he describes a new attitude towards old typologies, towards culture, towards Preservation and towards the countryside. He states that we need to shift our attention for control and modify our expectations of urbanity by focusing on the non-built part of the city.

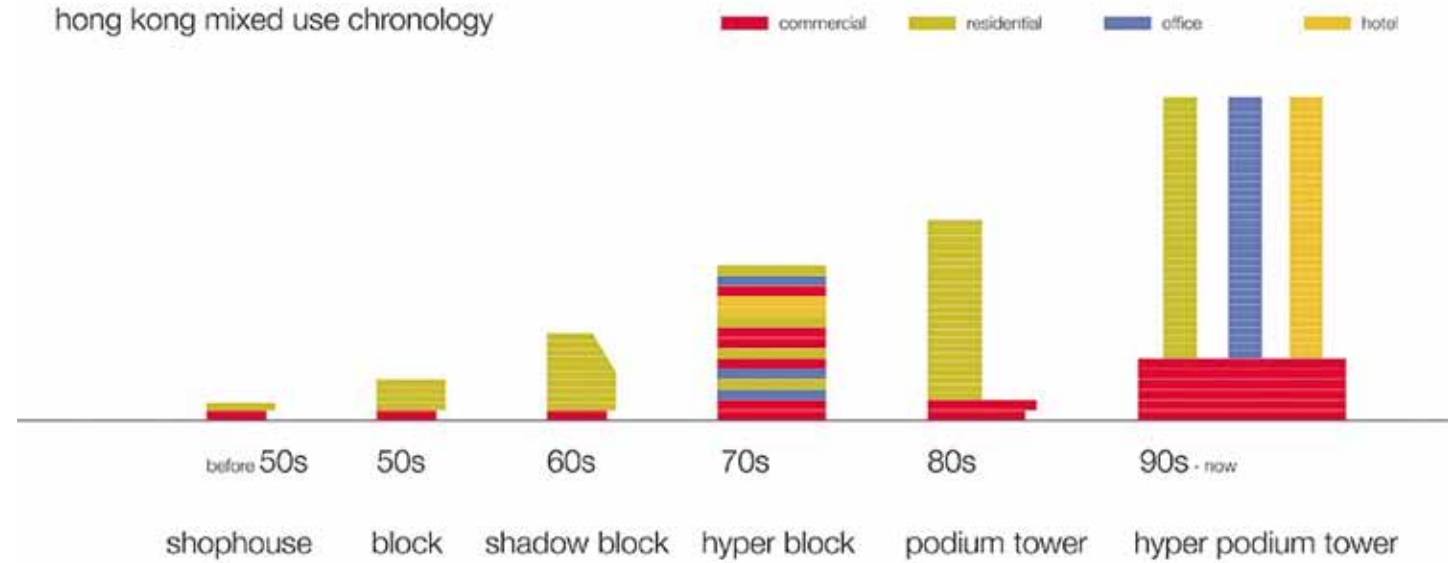
How can we reserve and design what to be remain void spaces?

4. Learning from the past: Is Podium Typology Applicable Anywhere?

“Cities today have become far too large,” Wang said in an interview while visiting New York in April. “I’m really worried, because it’s happening too fast and we have already lost so much.” Wang Shu, the Pritzker Architecture Prize Winner of 2012.

The dominant residential typology has grown in scale, so as the development block grows bigger and bigger. Early Hong Kong is a pre-cursor case study for Chinese

hong kong mixed use chronology



Evolution of mixed use typologies in Hong Kong.

Fuente: <http://icebloghk.blogspot.com/2011/03/radical-mix-in-hong-kong.html>

cities: in 1955, one could see the evolution of residential building typology was due to the strong population growth and high demand of land for housing, within a confined buildable geographical limited land.

The building ordinance of Hong Kong was revised to allow densification. Regulations allow building height to build from 3-4 times high of the street width up to ninth floors without an elevator. Later in 1962, the "Plot Ratio" (FAR) of site coverage was introduced and depended on the function of the plot. The birth of Podium Tower typology became the most commonly existed form of residential type in contemporary urban fabric. There is a sliding relationship between plot ratio, building height and ground cover: with increased one could build reasonably massively or stand tall and slim on a site but not both the lower floors of buildings to be set aside for non-residential uses such as retail, parking or building services, and that these floors be allowed 100% site coverage.

Given Hong Kong government holds a *laissez-faire* economic policy—fast—foodfree market economy, and rarely intervened in the private residential market. So, the "invention" of podium towers is mainly developed by private developers when the main concern is to maximize profit in each plot of development. In order to reach 100% site coverage on the ground level, developer create a podium base which houses a variety of mixed use programs and even infrastructural transportation. Hong Kong's podium tower apartments—are certainly a success—proven case study for Chinese uprising cities to follow—only in the eyes of developers.

5. Conclusion: how could we, architects, imagine cities again?—a retrospective view towards the globalizing Chinese cities

As a number of conclusions to the current phenomena in the building process, we have identified some issues in the Chinese development model:

- the increasing uniqueness,
- a need of a grain or background,
- a severe lack of flexibility,
- the necessary consideration of future scenarios.

a) China needs to reinvent typologies or adding more diverse types. The major implement of urbanism in China is the skyscraper. Is the part of the world where most of the skyscrapers are built. Together with the podium tower, the skyscraper has been adapted, transplanted and blindly stamped all over cities of China.

Hong Kong, Connaught Road footbridges connecting podiums of individual development.

Fuente: <http://www.jr-art.net/news/inside-out-in-hong-kong>



However, without a constrain of land as it is a crucial factor driven in Hong Kong, the Chinese development scale has become unprecedentedly vast and generic. Creating mega blocks like 400x600m (3 times bigger than the typical Manhattan blocks of 65x250m) of privatized and monopolized single-styled developments. Rich and diverse small scale houses with organic streetscapes are scrapped away without a thought. Local culturally responsive architecture and heritage are replaced by modernized glazed south-facing luxury apartment high rises with a swimming pool deck on the top of the podium base. In the scale and the speed in which cities are produced nowadays, we cannot go back to the previous condition. We have to impose/ introduce/ inject value and content through other means.

b) How could we imagine cities again? Chinese cities are seen as a generic city full of unique elements. "The Boom Town is nowadays a city of objects impossible to differentiate" (Margaret Crawford's, *Everyday Urbanism*). The "Harvard School of Design Project on the City" (MUTATIONS, 2001⁵) described the generic components of city building as if they were roman cities. The manual identifies some general operating principles, such as standard equipment, building types, infrastructures, trade services, transportation and commercial programs. This "general schema" of generic components would then become contextual when adopted into its own local variations throughout the dimension of space and time. How shall we address such a wide issue not falling into superficial considerations? As another example, while thinking about the relationship between the generic and the specific metropolis during the design of a new city in Dubai, the OMA team imagined a "starter kit" for a metropolis, creating a very dense piece of urban matter connected to all infrastructures, conceived with minor pieces in a repetitive way, like a rigorous identical grid in which they could insert something outstanding or architectural exceptions. The key would be to introduce some character in the substance to avoid the generic collection of skyscrapers. In this experiment, the architect would accept that a lot of the current architectural production will have no character, emphasizing that in certain cases character is necessary. In mainland China's two tier cities every new building is essentially the most expensive, the tallest, the widest, the brightest. There is a lack of an alternative, a homogeneous mid-rise urban unit (a grain.) We could imagine a typical Chinese grain in the traditional Chinese courtyard house, (regarding the effectiveness of its spatial structure and the sustainable aspects of it.) This urban grain, or mid-rise, is crucial to reinforce the city's character (as an urban background as opposed to a foreground) and through repetition it could weave a homogeneous fabric, in which some architectural exceptions could inject character or identity in a coordinated context.

⁵ Rem Koolhaas, Stefano Boeri, Sanford Kwinter, Nadia Tazi, Hans Ulrich Obrist. *Mutations: Harvard Project on the City*. Actar, Barcelona, 2001.



Overview of building settlement of Hong Kong (in purple).



OMA in the Middle East: RAK Gateway masterplan.

c) Not only this homogeneous context is sufficient, as it is such a complex combination of social political and economic issues. Paraphrasing Sorkin in “End of Urban Design:” “We must be wary of all totalizing schemes, especially those that propose universal formal solutions.”⁶ What is lacking in the process of transplantation is assimilation and flexibility. In the case of Hong Kong: Residential high-rises with podium filled with amenities or shopping malls. Streetscapes are diminished to the minimal. The podium tower made a successful case in Hong Kong because of an extra layer of highly connective elevated footbridges is added which compensates/recreates different activities on the street level. Sharing of time, sharing of space, and sharing of function are able to happen on the elevated level similar to the street level. However, the huge scale of mega blocks in the new Chinese cities fails to address such connectivity in infrastructural levels which result in social alienation and segregation of neighborhoods.

d) Some urban planners argue that in China, a slow down economy would reinforce the local culture productivity, and therefore its tourism, also underlining its identity. A relented economy would be a fortunate “tragedy.” Culture lives longer than any expanding economy, and would evolve through interdisciplinary collaborations. Architecture is now an economic engine, but shall it become a cultural tool? To engage architectural thoughts with the booming economy would contribute to the definition of contemporary Chinese architecture in Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai, Shenzhen, (potentially upcoming cultural hubs,) in a society that has evolved from pre-modern to postindustrial. What is next when architecture is exhaustively serving itself as cultural monuments in these postindustrial eras?

To conclude without overstating, we as architects, should be critical and situate ourselves in a long term view scenario, regarding a wider economic scenario: Whether the XXI century is China’s economic hegemony or not, the consideration of greater aspects is required: politics, economic, finance, technology, health, migration and population issues. We need to establish a framework of the era we are living in as a holistic anthropological science that will create the arguments in which we shall stand in order to build our future cities.

6 Sorkin, Michael. —The End(s) of Urban Design, pp. 155-182, *Harvard Design Magazine* 25 (Fall 2006/Winter 2007), p. 18.

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