SHANGHAI NEW TOWNS - SEARCHING FOR COMMUNITY AND
IDENTITY IN A SPRAWLING METROPOLIS

Harry den Hartog

Urban Language, Rotterdam (NL) & Shanghai (CN), Email: harry.den.hartog@urbanlanguage.org

ABSTRACT: This paper is a preview of a book that documents and critically analyzes a number of recent New Towns in the province of Shanghai. All New Towns are co-productions of Western and Chinese designers. An international team of urban planners, architects and photographers from China, Europe and North America, makes the book (edited by Harry den Hartog) that will be presented together with a symposium and exhibition during the World Expo 2010 in Shanghai.

KEYWORDS: urban growth, new towns, regional planning, mass housing, identity, governmental planning, market driven planning, and community.

1 SHANGHAI AS A MODEL CITY?

From May 1 to October 31 Shanghai will host the World Expo 2010 with as theme 'Better City, Better Life' on the question how to make better urban living environments and a better society. This topic relates to the moment that the majority of the world's population lives in cities. It is expected that the percentage of urban dwellers worldwide will increase significantly next few decades. End of 2010 or beginning 2011 more than half of China's population will be living in cities. Millions of people are expected to leave the rural areas. In the urgent need to give shelter to all these new citizens, new models are needed for mass accommodation.

Shanghai wants to be a model city, and promises, according to the municipality, to show how the city of the future should be shaped. This cosmopolitan port city is the most important 'bridge' between China and the rest of the world since the late nineteenth century. Shanghai holds an exciting mix of oriental and western architectural styles. After the opium wars different concessions (French, American and British) arose that are...
still recognizable within the urban fabric. Shanghai is a cosmopolitan mix of east and west, tradition and futurism, rich and poor. As a result of the economic boom many are attracted to this 'New York of the twenty-first century' to try their luck.

To alleviate the city from the enormous pressure and to bring also benefit to the immediate surroundings of the city, the board of the city province implemented the 'One City, Nine Towns' plan in the year 2001. This plan is based on a shift from the central city model to a poly-nuclear model. The plan consists of ten New Towns: a new medium-sized city (Song Jiang) and nine compact key cities. With this measure, the province wants to prevent the countryside from urban sprawl. The core of most New Towns is more or less completed; hundreds of thousands of homes and facilities are realized and another hundred of thousands are planned to be build. Some New Towns came to a hold while other New Towns are still in development. At this moment important lessons can be drawn already. Our research will register what is going on and will try to find an answer to the spatial, cultural and social significance of this model for China and for the rest of the world.

**Figure 2** Lingang New Town, meant for 800,000 inhabitants. Designed by GMP Architekten

### 2 OBJECTIVES AND MOTIVATION

The central question is: how does this decentralized planning model work out in Shanghai, what is learned from Western examples and what can the West learn from China? With this publication we explore what China has taken over from Western examples, how they operate imported models and consolidate them within the Chinese context. In what way this is the right tool to absorb the growing urbanization and what can international professionals learn from these experiences?

In addition many other questions are involved. Is it purely for the picture or are functional aspects also copied? What’s added from the Chinese building tradition? How to interpret this development: is it an improved copy of the original, which is the improvement, what is missing? What is the influence of Western designers in China anyhow? Important sub-themes to be discussed are: the blurring boundary between town and country, the use and accessibility of public space, the conflict between mass housing and community building, the search for a new identity and theme park urbanism.

Since the early 20th century Chinese cities are undergoing a process of Westernization. The "One City, Nine Towns" Shanghai model gives a preference for Western culture, architecture and urbanism.
Housing developers import Western models as a form of self-colonization. Analogous to the import of classical forms during the Golden Age in the Netherlands, Shanghai is importing postmodern architectural language on a large scale. The big question is why here in this post-colonial era is chosen for the voluntary (re) import of Western urban models. What does this convey to the city? These Chinese cities show many common problems, such as social segregation, discontinuity of the cityscape and the lack of (useful) public spaces.

The book will certainly be critical, but is not biased Western stance. It will also show how Chinese themselves look against the project. Chinese are known for their copy art. The copies are however adapted to ones own preferences and context. Not everything from the western world can be seen as an ideal example (see also: Kishore Mahbubani, 'The New Asian Hemisphere').

Figure 3  Sales center in GaoQiao New Town (Dutch Theme)

3 THEMATIC GERMS

The rapid urbanization of China need, and also makes it possible, to test new forms of urbanism. Like many other Chinese cities, Shanghai sees itself as a model city. With eyes on the upcoming World Expo in 2010 the city promises to show how 'the city of the future' should be shaped. Shanghai’s regional model has to alleviate the enormous pressure on the city and also let the immediate surrounding countryside benefit from economic growth. The central government of the metropolitan region decided in the year 2001 to implement the "One City, Nine Towns Development Plan". This growth model is based on the shift of the central city model to a poly-nuclear model with the construction of ten New Towns: a new extension of the existing New Town of Songjiang and nine new compact 'key cities'.

The cores of the New Towns around Shanghai are intended to be thematic germs that will become cities of several hundred thousand to over one million inhabitants each! Meanwhile, also dozens of villages in the
area are designated to absorb urbanization with compact high-rise blocks. The current 5-year plan of China is based on a "new socialist countryside" and a "distribution of wealth". This is translated in a fragmentation of the metropolitan mass into several relatively 'small' nuclei. The problem is that many fertile lands in this Yangtze delta region is threatened this way.

The Shanghai model searches for a new balance between government-driven and market-driven urban development. Simultaneously it is searching for more sustainable forms of urban planning, the creation of identity, the retention of higher incomes in the city, the distribution of work and facilities and the prevention of uncontrolled urban sprawl.

According to the definition of 'The New Town Institute' a New Town is "a city that has been deliberately planned and designed from scratch. New Towns distinguish themselves from historic settlements and suggest a heroic act and a promise of progress. They are ideally achieved without the problems of the old town (problems in Shanghai: congestion, pollution, logistical problems). With the theme of the World Expo in mind, this research will examine whether and how this 'Better Cities' and a 'Better Life' are offered and to whom.

Figure 4  Chinese citizens cycling in GaoQiao New Town (Dutch Theme)

4 SEARCHING FOR IDENTITY

As a response to the lack of identity that many New Towns are facing, the Shanghai municipality decided in 2001 to add a European and North American thematically blend. In consultation with architects and urban developers from represented countries a Spanish Town, an Italian Town, a German Town, a Dutch Town, a Scandinavian Town and a British Town are realized. Each city gets its own unique character or identity. The other themes are one modern and one traditional Chinese town, a Harbor town and an ecological town (an intended North American town is cancelled).
This experiment of New Towns, partly designed by western architects and urban planners, is not only meaningful for the blending of Western and Chinese culture. The significance lies especially in the quest for an own place in the vast increasing urban violence. It is a response to the lack of identity that many newly built urban living areas are facing. This post communist mixture of Western and Chinese culture has a very large socio-cultural significance. The question is whether this will also fulfill the great need to 'Better Cities' and a 'Better Life'?

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. Due to congestion and poor air quality of the existing city, more and more city dwellers escape from the city during the weekend to visit historical canal towns and parks. Indeed, some new thematic and more picturesque parts in European style are a welcome additional change and are becoming a popular as a backdrop for wedding photography because of the exotic character. The wedding industry thrives in the thematic parts of some new cities.

Never before an urban plan was realized on this huge scale and short time. A unique aspect is that the New Towns, analogous to the Garden City theory of Ebenezer Howard, promises to be totally self-sufficient and moves beyond its Western examples. Even services and jobs from the central city have been placed out to here. Other New Towns are build around existing industries, such as the new 'German' Anting town which is built around the Volkswagen factory. In some cases, large-scale industries and even universities were replaced from the central city to their new location. The new cities are relatively spacious with lots of greenery. These are the new 'outposts'.

The thematically parts of the New Towns are especially intended as a germ or "billboard". 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. These are cities of several hundred thousand up to a million people each! The dimensioning of new infrastructure here is made ready for this.

Figure 5  Picturesque street in Song Jiang, Thames Town (British Theme)
The research for the book will give special attention to the liberalization of urban planning in China. The traditional top-down planning will be compared with the contemporary market-driven developments in the New Town development. What is the role of government and how does the market react? Are market driven forces able to create vibrant and livable cities, in contrast to the tightly controlled government planned urbanism? How to create a responsible balance between state capitalism and communism?

The economic and political landscape has changed rapidly in China. For many years urban planning in China was dominated by a top-down approach. The withdrawal of the state requires rethinking of the bottom-up approach process on spatial planning and a careful analysis of its implications and potential. Due to 'open door policy', the economic boom, the rapid urbanization and influences of globalization, the city province of Shanghai is searching for new planning strategies. Semi-private developers are involved now in the design and implementation of new city extensions.

An important theme concerns the extent to which the government is steering this development? Many Chinese developers appear to have little knowledge on project development. There is a lack of research, so the build houses often don't match the demand. Due to the new market reality, many properties are currently used as speculative real estate, as an investment for retirement or as a second home. The architectural decoration is rich and well executed compared to Chinese standards. Rental and sales prices are in some cases extremely high. The travel distance to the central city varies. A number of New Towns are accessible by new metro lines from the city center. Others are more remote and are forced to function autonomously. Without a car you are not able to live here. Because of the lacking implementation of public transport and even more because of speculation reasons, many houses, shops and offices remain empty. Sometimes they are even already in decay. A few New Towns look like ghost cities. Some others are very alive.

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. The transition from a planned economy to a market economy means probably the 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. Maybe these narrative parts play a role in community building?

Figure 6  Emptiness in Anting New Town (German Theme)
6 BETTER CITY, BETTER LIFE? THE FUTURE OF URBAN PLANNING

With the theme "Better City, Better Life" the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai will be the first in history on the subject of city and urbanization. The multi-disciplinary and international composition of the research team and the international character of the "One City, Nine Towns' project will provide a unique opportunity for cross-fertilization and international exchanges. The World Expo is by definition an international hub for knowledge exchange and cultural exchange.

For the growing number of designers from abroad that develop projects in China, the project will offer a new angle: how do Chinese want to live, what moves them, how do they use their new living environment, what attracts them? The publication will be a valuable addition to the relatively limited knowledge in the Western world about Chinese urban development and architecture. The book will therefore reflect on cooperation, experiences and results of international designers in the Chinese context.

An important question is what effect the import of Western models can have on Chinese architecture and urbanism. On websites, we usually only see beautiful renderings, but what about the Chinese reality? How does it look like? What has become of the intentions of planners and designers?

The book researches the quality of new urban residential areas within the context of rapid urbanization. Does this reinvented and decentralized model lead to the establishment of better cities and a better way of living? We will give an analysis of the urban design, ownership and management. On a documentary-like way it will show daily life and critically examines the architectural and design qualities as well as social and cultural aspects. The special atmosphere and diversity of housing types will be mapped. Who lives behind these facades, how do Chinese residents and users identify themselves with this foreign architectural language? What are the political motives? What impacts have the New Towns on the surrounding area? Is the mixing of Chinese and western culture only in the facade or also in the use? Are the mistakes of western New Towns corrected? Do the New Towns and the old city function as an integral whole? Are there any innovative aspects? What improvements have been made over the original plan and what concessions are made? In short, in what way is this model a successful solution to the current problems? In addition, short left sidelines are made with regional developments in the west (new models of towns around Los Angeles, Paris and London, Walter Christaller's central place theory, the Randstad, etcetera).

The different conditions and different approach of each New Town development result in an interesting palette that shows what can go wrong and what can become a success. A number of New Towns are since shortly directly accessible from the city center by the new metro. Others remain very remote and have to operate independently. Some cities have stopped growing while other cities continue to develop rapidly. Some New Towns have literally copied architecture while others offer postmodern Chinese interpretations. This variation gives good reasons for comparison. Why does the one function better than the other? The new towns together form an exciting new laboratory where very different influences are melted into a new reality.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

'SHANGHAI NEW TOWNS - searching for community and identity in a sprawling metropolis' will be produced in close cooperation with The International New Town Institute (INTI) in Almere, the Delft University, Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism, BNSP (Amsterdam), FAR Architecture Center Shanghai and Art Council England.