BEIJING BIGNESS – Reaching for the Sky but Losing the Ground ? [i]

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SUPER SIZE BEIJING: Looking around present day Beijing one can see that the last imperial city of China, once famous for its tiny, winding alleys lined with grey, single storey courtyard complexes, that functioned as the backdrop for the mighty imperial palace, the Forbidden City, has nearly vanished. The city and almost all that once determined its character has been swallowed up by the virtual omnipresence of large and extra-large structures, designed as free standing "landmarks" that seemingly randomly spring up all around the city. (fig.01).

Investors, in fierce competition with one another, are in need of ever splendid, ever new, ever visually innovative designs – and they need them NOW! Driven by market forces they act as the conductors, orchestrating the tremendous architectural carnival parading the streets of the Chinese city. (fig.02).

Trying to characterize the state of contemporary architecture in China, we might be tempted to borrow the title of Bernhard Rudofsky's 1964 ground breaking exhibition "Architecture without Architects",[ii] and switch the wording around to create the statement: "Architects without Architecture." Whereas Rudofsky confronted us with vernacular architecture in balance and harmony with nature, architecture created without the help of professionals, in China today we are confronted in a sense with the opposite phenomenon: professionally educated architects producing structures, that only remotely remind us of something known as architecture; professionally educated architects producing structures in disharmony with the surrounding and nature, structures that are best described with a term coined by Charles Jencks: „FAST-FOOD-ARCHITECTURE." [iii]

Whereas the Roman architect Vitruv singled out three main pillars of architecture, namely *firmitas, utilitas* and *venustas*, the first two seem no longer of any concern to the architect in China. His job is reduced to the design of the outside form, the design of flashy, funky façades, that wrap the standard concrete box inside. How this building functions, how this building can be operated, how it can be maintained, how it can develop over time, how it influences the social structure of the city and how much energy it consumes, and thus what kind of impact its very existence has on the environment are questions that are seldom discussed. These kind of questions simply need to be sacrificed in the process of present day super speed planning.

Due to the lack of time as well as the impermanent, temporary nature of all structures, the uncertainty of the future development surrounding the site, the place, the *genius loci* CAN and HAS to be neglected in the planing process. However this present day planning attitude stands in sharp contrast to the planning principles and the understanding of the traditional Chinese city. As ancient society did not place much emphasis on the individual, the traditional city likewise focused NOT on the individual building, on the creation of single monuments but on the building group and the relation of all buildings with one another.

Today, freed from the burden of having to engage with the local culture and context, solely concentrating on the creation of "BEAUTY", whatever this term might stand for, architects and planners from all around the world can participate in the shaping of CHINESE SUPER CITIES. Due to the size of the structures, the negation of the urban setting, the solitary character and the trans-national intellectual origin of its buildings Beijing has lost its identity as a Chinese city. We have to acknowledge that Beijing truly has become a GENERIC CITY, [iv] an international metropolis, a city that apparently defines its new identity by having NO IDENTITY.

After this general descriptive introduction, let me now turn to the phenomenon SUPER SIZE in specific. However before I will try to investigate some of the problems SUPER SIZE entails and where the root causes for the construction of these kind of projects in China are to be found, I would like to first exemplify what kind of dimensions we are actually dealing with. It is one thing to state numbers, to say a building is 300m long or 400m high or that the Tiananmen Square covers an area of 440,000 sqm – but rational numbers can by no means give us a true FEELING of the actual size. It sometimes is quite helpful to turn to the less scientific approach of comparison. To visualize this "jump in scale" I would like to project a local development into the urban setting of a German town. In Beijing, especially along the main East-West axis, the Chang'an Jie, which, with its 40km in length and 120m in width itself certainly qualifies to be called extra-large, we find the Dongfang Guangchang, the Oriental Plaza. (fig.03). Despite the fact that the Oriental Plaza with its enormous size of about 850.000 sqm, ranks among the largest single building complexes in the world, it does not, in the local urban context of Beijing, as seen here from the opposite side of the road, strike us to be gigantic or even impressive.

However if we project this structure now into a middle-sized European town such as Karlsruhe, we could see that the building complex actually would cover the entire downtown area of the city. (fig.04-05). The mighty dimensions as well as the brutality inherent to such a structure can only be felt in such a grotesque comparison. Due to this overall shift in dimension architects and

planners, even architects from „small-scale" Europe have little or no hesitation in designing such SUPER SIZE projects in China in the blink of an eye.

Apart from performing a jump in scale, SUPER SIZE buildings can be characterized by the high degree of diversity of functions integrated within. They incorporate among other functions: offices, apartments, restaurants, clinics, kindergartens and cafes. On top of this they feature public spaces, an element normally considered as an essential part of the city, not a building. Judging from the functional diversity within they can be considered segments of the city projected into the vertical, as urban entities, autonomous urban spaces. (fig.06). But in difference to segments of the city, which are primarily organized in the horizontal, SUPER SIZE structures are foremost organized in the vertical. This difference provokes the quintessential problem of a city largely comprised of SUPER SIZE buildings. Whereas segments of the city are not just connected with the city center, but also among one another, SUPER SIZE buildings generally are accessible on ground floor only. SUPER SIZE buildings thus are isolating objects that only have minimal contact with the city. In order to oppose this ever-increasing fragmentation of the Chinese city a connection of SUPER SIZE structures above ground floor should be aimed for.

Recently the American architect Steven Holl in his project Beijing Looped Hybrid Building tried to address the problem of the increasing fragmentation of the Chinese city. (fig.07). A ring, hosting public facilities, connects the eight towers of the project on the 20th floor. Despite the fact that we have to welcome his idea of formulating an urban public space, an urban sphere within the complex, an element largely absent in Beijing, we have to pose the question: Did he really deal with the problem or did he merely transported it onto a higher level? The eight towers, connected by the ring formulate a city within a city, another SUPER SIZE building, which is not designed to integrate into the surrounding city. By these means the project remains symbolic, pointing out the problem, not attempting to solve it.

As we can see at this point, there are no effective architectural methods to solve or at least efficiently oppose the fragmentation of the city, for the architect can only deal with the shaping of the structures on the site he is actually dealing with. On top of that we have to acknowledge that the influence architects and planners in China exercise on the actual shape of a building or a city is, in contrast to Koolhaas's polemic statement, the Chinese architect would be "the most important, influential, and powerful architect on earth", [v] generally comparatively minimal. Even though the influence of planners and architects has increased dramatically in comparison to the Maoist period, it would be naïve to join Koolhaas and celebrate the power of planners in China. For Koolhaas the amount of square meters designed by an individual

planner in a given time frame functions as the prime indicator. However this indicator does not value the planners expertise but rather diminishes it. In a lot of ways the planner in China is a machine, that has to produce and submit multiple schemes for non-professionals in the field of planning, namely investors and political leaders, who often are not interested in functional or ecological qualities, to choose from. In order to address the problem of the increasing fragmentation of the city and all its negative influences for the urban environment, we rather have to have a look at local regulations and policies.

To reduce the negative impact of rapid urbanisation and to reduce the amount of urban land areas being sealed by buildings and roads, each project has to reserve about 30% of the land area for green. In order not to come into conflict with the regulations regarding sunlight, SUPER SIZE structures are commonly placed in the center of the site – surrounded on all four sides by a tiny strip of green. However due to its long and narrow shape as well as its location along the road, these green spaces lack any kind of quality. The public space in between these SUPER SIZE structures resembles an undefined empty space, a dead area, with no other purpose than to remain vacant. (fig.08).

If by contrast the regulation would not call for leaving 30% of the land vacant but would allow a much higher building coverage rate and reserve at the same time a collective area equalling 30% of land for the construction of public parks, numerous advantages would arise (fig.09): first of all, the combined green area could serve the people of the surrounding buildings as a recreational area. Secondly: via the construction of public "neighbourhood parks" a certain sense of identity with the place could be established. Thirdly: if high-rise and SUPER SIZE structures would be concentrated in denser clusters a PUBLIC URBAN SPACE could be established within. A denser arrangement would also make the connection of such structures above ground level less complicated, thus the outlined isolating effect of SUPER SIZE buildings could be reduced. On top of that the formulation of high-rise clusters would improve the visual orientation in the city. Fourth: if high-rise and SUPER SIZE buildings would be arranged in denser clusters, the walking distances between the buildings could be reduced and public transport could be arranged in a more convenient and efficient way. If the majority of buildings would be within walking distance from a subway station for example, public transport automatically would gain in popularity, thus less people would feel the need to rely on private motorized traffic to achieve a high level of convenience.

By reducing the amount of private motorized traffic in the central areas, the need for the construction of outrageously extra-wide roads would become obsolete. Reducing the width of roads, in itself obviously features various

advantages: the amount of land area within the city sealed by pavement and construction as well as maintenance costs, the latter presently seems to be generally forgotten in China, could be reduced. In addition to this the American landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. already pointed out in 1911, that the width of the road stands in close relation to urban land prices. If more land is covered by roads, less land is available for construction, and consequently land prices will be higher. By these means we can even detect a social implication – for if the land prices within the urban areas soar, less financially fortunate households can hardly afford the higher rent and have to move out into more distant locations, which than itself generates additional amounts of traffic.

As we can see, the problem of the ever-increasing fragmentation of the city, caused to a large degree by a well-intended regulation, can hardly be considered an aesthetic problem alone. It should be of central concern to all planners from all faculties to tackle this problem together.

Despite the fact that the outlined idea sketch might seem a bit optimistic at the present moment, a moment in which Chinese middle class citizens slowly gain enough capital to fulfil their dream of equipping their household with their own apartment and their own car, the two most highly valued current symbols of success, we as planners cannot bow our heads and neglect the utmost important duty of planning: to develop a long term strategy, to ensure as much as possible that the city will function properly in the future and does not destroy the environment beyond the absolute necessary.

However, at this point I have to add a further complication to the matter. Some scholars point out that the fragmentation of the Chinese city, generally criticized by western scholars, cannot be judged upon, for the Chinese city throughout the course of its history always had a different attitude towards public space. In difference to, for example European towns, which featured open public church, market and town squares, public spaces for the citizens to gather upon, the classic Chinese city did not put much emphasis on the existence of open public areas. In their essence Chinese cities of imperial times were administrative and ritual centers. Ancient Chinese city dwellers were mere subjects, who sometimes were not even voluntarily living in the city, but were forced to move here to serve, for example, the imperial court. The city was shaped top-down. Consequently the Chinese city consisted of walled-in inward looking compounds. Till the late Tang Dynasty even the market and the Hutongs, the small alleys presently gradually disappearing, were walled and locked up during the night-time. By these means the fragmentation of the city, the negation of public open space can be considered an essential feature of the traditional Chinese city.

However, China's ancient cultural system, and with it the inseparable classic concept of a city, ceased to exist as of 1911. Since then, and especially since the introduction of the market reforms under Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s, Chinese cities as well as Chinese urban society underwent tremendous changes. To proclaim the negation of public urban spaces and with that the fragmentation of modern Chinese cities a cultural feature that cannot be questioned, to intellectually justify the preservation of this one single element of the traditional city, while neglecting the entire foundation it stood on, does neither do justice to the ancient culture and city, nor to the needs of modern urban city dwellers.

Apart from the ever-increasing fragmentation of the city, SUPER SIZE structures evoke various other problems. In contemporary China quantity is virtually a guarantee for quality. A large development symbolically ensures that the investor is "trustworthy", for he not only has the financial means to realize such a project but also possesses the necessary social and political "*guanxi*". However SUPER SIZE developments bear an intolerable risk for the city. If the project cannot be positioned on the turbulent market – or the investor overestimates his economic strength, the city is blessed with another "SUPER SIZE RUIN" which further tears the urban fabric apart. Driving through Beijing we come across numerous examples of these kind of blessings. A failed project causes a massive waste of construction materials, land and energy, resources a country like China is not blessed with in abundance in the first place.

But not only the immediate or complete failure of SUPER SIZE developments should be of concern to us. As Jane Jacobs already pointed out in 1961: extra-large developments which are built up all at one time, be it single SUPER SIZE structures or extra-large residential areas, lack the power to provide a flourishing diversity in businesses as well as diversity in income-groups, lack the power to reinvent itself and lack the strength to adopt to the changes of time. Jacobs writes: "If a city area has only new buildings, the enterprises that can exist there are automatically limited to those that can support the high costs of new construction." [vi] A "mingling of high-yield, middling-yield, low-yield and no-yield enterprises (…)", [vii] is essential for a long term ability of the area to regenerate itself, for only then, alongside bigger players, young small-scale private enterprises can be set up and gain momentum.

If this diversity is missing and the once posh new large scale development ages and starts to dilapidate, large companies and enterprises start to leave - leaving behind an unoccupied space, that is neither designed nor suitable for small businesses to move in to. Once the strong players leave customers follow suit. By these means it is impossible to set up a small mom-and-pop store, a corner store within a run down SUPER SIZE structure.

Similar problems are to be found within extra-large residential districts. Once the buildings show signs of age, the financially more fortunate start to leave – leaving behind the ones that cannot afford to move, increasing the social segregation within the city. Jacobs concludes: "Neighborhoods built up all at once change little physically over the years as a rule. (…) The neighborhood shows a strange inability to update itself, enliven itself, repair itself, or be sought after, out of choice, by a new generation. It is dead. Actually it was dead from birth, but nobody noticed this much until the corpse began to smell. Finally comes the decision, after exhortations to fix up and fight blight have failed, that the whole thing must be wiped out and a new cycle started. (…). A new corpse is laid out. It does not smell yet, but it is just as dead, just as incapable of the constant adjustment, adaptations and permutations that make up the process of life." [viii]

This vicious cycle projected by Jacobs is all too applicable to the current development in China. In the past two decades small-scale old structures have continually been torn down and replaced by gigantic new complexes, that in the long run will not be able to hide away their destructive character. We have to realize that the life expectancy of buildings in large-scale developments is generally shorter than in areas providing a high degree of diversity of old and new structures. Presently the average life expectancy of a residential building in Beijing is less than 50 years. [ix] Apart form the old courtyard houses, large-scale socialist residential compounds from the 60s, 70s and even 80s are presently being knocked down and replaced by a new cycle of SUPER STRUCTURES.

However some scholar could argue, that in ancient times Chinese did not put much emphasis on the durability of structures, but rather favoured constant "renewability". [x] Thus consequently the short life expectancy of today's structures could be justified with the historical relation towards the physical. However once again, the ancient setting differs fundamentally from the contemporary one. Whereas in classic times buildings were constructed primarily of wood, bricks and rammed earth, today buildings are built out of concrete and steel. Removal of these structures after a rather short life cycle implies a massive waste of resources. By these means the construction of extra-large developments, which potentially shorten the life expectancy of building structures has to be questioned.

The question that needs to be posed now is: why does China currently in all regards engage so eagerly in SUPER SIZE? The foremost plausible reason: in light of its huge populations and the recent swift industrial development rapid urbanisation, unprecedented in speed and scale is taking place. Secondly China has, despite its enormous territory, a severe lack of agricultural land. About 2/3 of its land mass is covered with deserts, mountains and land unsuitable for

agriculture. The per capita agricultural land equals barely a third of the world average. Due to this severe land shortage Chinese cities have to expand into the vertical. However as pointed out earlier, the construction of high-rise structures alone does not guarantee an efficient use of the land.

In addition to this we might single out another reason: China is preparing itself to enter the stage as a new world leader. Like the Americans in the early 20th century, while preparing their stage debut, tried to as Peter Hall called it "overcome collective inferiority complexes and boost business" [xi], by adopting a planning approach primarily concentrating on the representative and monumental, China is currently under the influence of this very CITY BEAUTIFUL MOVEMENT. Architects, planners, investors and politician in present day China seem to be inspired and guided by the words of the father of the American City Beautiful Movement Daniel Burnham: He wrote in 1909 "Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men's blood (…). Make big plans; (…).". [xii] Burnham's dogma, was later adopted by European colonial powers to manifest their supremacy over their colonial subjects and later found its way back to the source of Burnham's inspiration: Europe. Here it found its tragic climax in the planning of totalitarian capitals for dictators like Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin. Peter Hall writes: "What these manifestations had in common, with some qualifications and exceptions, was a total concentration on the monumental and on the superficial, on architecture as symbol of power; and, correspondingly, an almost complete lack of interest in the wider social purpose of planning." [xiii]

Without wanting to compare the current planning attitude in China with Albert Speer's planning for Hitler's capital Germania, Chinese cities presently indeed are less concerned with functional, social and ecological aspects, but rather concentrate on representative features alone. A project like the Dalian Xinghai Guangchang, completed in 1997, an open plaza covering 1.1 Million square meters, an area equivalent to 160 football fields, or 2 ½ times the area occupied by the Tiananmen Square in Beijing, which is commonly known as the largest city square in the world, certainly serves no other purpose but to impress. (fig.10).

I believe that the government is well aware of all the negative economic as well as ecological influences SUPER SIZE entails. To prevent the most excessive waste of resources, the central government has undertaken various steps to downsize the dimension of such projects and slow down the process, but not to prevent the construction of SUPER SIZE altogether. The question remains WHY?

Apart from implying extra-large risks and draining extra-large amounts of resources, SUPER SIZE has one quintessential positive effect. SUPER SIZE

embodies a positive spirit, it functions virtually as a visual guarantee that the Chinese economy will continue to boom, that China is becoming rich and prosperous and that eventually everybody will get their chance to participate in the new wealth of the country. By these means SUPER SIZE is an icon of hope and can be considered essential to ensure social stability, the foundation of future development.

We can conclude that SUPER SIZE is a problem that cannot by any means be tackled by a single profession alone. What is needed is an interdisciplinary approach. Architects, landscape and urban planners as well as sociologists, economists, investors and politicians together need to develop a long term strategy in order to ensure that Chinas future cities do not lose the ground they stand on.

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[iv] Koolhaas, Rem: Die Stadt ohne Eigenschaften - The Generic City, Arch+ 132, Juni 1996, p.18-29.

[v] Chung/Inaba/Koolhaas/Leong: Great Leap Forward, 1st ed., Harvard, 2001, p.161.

[vi] Jacobs, Jane: The Need for Aged Buildings, in Stein/Spreckelmeyer: Classic Readings in Architecture, Beijing, 2004, p.223.

[vii] Ibid.,p.223.

[viii] Ibid.,p.229-230.

[ix] Le Jiayou: *Xiao Gao Ceng Zhuzhai Sheji Tuji*, 1st ed., Beijing, 2002,p.3; Shi Liang: *You Tudi Ziyuan Yueshu Kan Weilai Wo Guo Chengzhen Jumin Zhufang Mianji Shuiping Dingwei,* Jianzhu Xuebao, Architectural Journal, 2002/8, p.4-5.

[x] Boyd, Andrew: Chinese Architecture and Town Planning 1500 B.C.-A.D. 1911, 1st ed., London, 1962, p.26.

[xi] Hall, Peter: Cities of Tomorrow, 3rd ed.,2002,p.189.

[xii] Ibid.,p.188.

[xiii] Ibid.,p.216-217.

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