

IS CHINA READY FOR ANOTHER UTOPIA? (1)

China's cities are growing with unprecedented speed. Revisiting a city after as little as six months of absence we are confronted with the presence of just another high-rise or two, super size structures that virtually appeared out of nowhere. Since the introduction of the "Open Door Policy" under Deng Xiaoping, since China's leaders acknowledged that industrialization is inevitably linked with urbanization, China's urbanization rate has skyrocketed. Whereas in 1978 the majority of Chinese still lived out in rural areas and only a mere 18% dwelled in urban centres (Song/Zhang,2002,p.2317), by now it is estimated that around 40% of the total population lives in cities. In view of such dramatic urban growth we as planners have to ask some questions: Will the current construction boom continue or has China's high-speed urbanization already surpassed its peak? In the case that China's urban population does continue to grow at the current rate, how can we as planners react? Is it time to make radical changes?

URBAN CHINA

Despite the fact that it is unlikely that after the 2008 Olympics and the 2010 World Expo big urban centres like Beijing and Shanghai will continue to "grow" at the present rate, China's cities as a whole will continue to expand dramatically over the next decade or two. "It is predicted that by 2030 China's population will reach 1.6 billion and the level of urbanization will increase to 55 percent." (Lü Junhua, 2001,p.16). More recent forecasts predict an even higher urbanization rate of more than 60% for the year 2030. (Swianczny,2005,p.60). Given that this would only roughly equal the urbanization rate of mid-19th century England and given that the average urbanization rate worldwide is predicted to reach 60% by the year 2030 as well, it is certainly not unlikely that by that time more than half of China's total population will reside in cities.

The magnitude of change resulting from such an increase is almost unimaginable. On top of the current estimated 400 million city dwellers, which make China already rank number one in the world in regards to the absolute number of urban population, China's cities will have to accommodate an extra 500 million people. But not only this increase in urban population is causing the continual expansion of China's cities and with that a dramatic change in the urban landscape. In the past two decades the overall living standard has been increased significantly. Whereas "in 1952 the national average per capita floor space was 4.5 square meters" (Lee,1988,p.388) and had plunged to a mere 3.6 square meters per person in 1978 (Lalkaka,1984,p.64), the average Chinese city dweller, according to the National Bureau of Statistics, enjoyed 15.5 square meters of living space in 2001. „The country's construction authorities will

strive to guarantee 23 square metres of living space for average urban residents by the end of 2005." (China Daily,23,03,2001). On the one hand this improvement certainly has to be celebrated as a huge success, on the other hand however the present-day "THE BIGGER THE BETTER" mentality is causing a great deal of problems for China's cities and the country as a whole. (2) Ostentatious SUPER SIZE APARTMENTS with 500 or even 1000 square meters or SUPER SIZE VILLAS like the ones in the „*Palais de Fortune*“ where the smallest unit offers a spacious 1500 square meters is certainly not compatible with a country where the per capita agricultural land is less than a third of the world average. Most recent government attempts demanding that from June 1st 2006, homes smaller than 90 square meters must account for at least 70 percent of the total floor space in any new residential housing projects, are, despite the obvious problems resulting from such a regulation for the individual household, a step in the right direction.

In the light of the challenges ahead it is time not to simply wait for the government to announce new regulations that try to STOP US from occupying each square-inch of this country with another high-class villa compound. It is time to question our contemporary blue-print planning attitude, question our present-day city as such and call for innovative ideas and solutions that go beyond the pseudo-innovative beautification of the outside skin. It is time to leave Koolhaas' celebration of China's WILD URBAN GROWTH behind us and search for new strategies. It is time to rehabilitate UTOPIAN IDEAS.

UTOPIA

To call for the rehabilitation of UTOPIAN IDEAS in a country that just underwent one of the largest "experiments" in human history of trying to implement a UTOPIAN IDEA certainly must sound naive and childish. The great suffering caused by the attempt to create a perfect society with perfect cities (and perfect people) is still all to present in peoples' mind. Certainly most ordinary Chinese are tired of UTOPIA, have no desire to get engaged in the realization of yet another UTOPIAN experiment. And sure, Chinese are not the only ones that burnt their fingers and learned the painful lesson that great plans, plans that promised so much in the beginning, in the end, after their implementation, all too often leave us with less than we started off with. Consequently "THE END OF UTOPIA" (Herbert Marcuse,1967) has long been proclaimed. So why then call for the rehabilitation of UTOPIAN IDEAS when talking about the future of the Chinese city?

Before I will try to describe what kind of UTOPIAN IDEAS I believe China's cities are in need of, let me first go back to the beginning of UTOPIA and its original intent. The word UTOPIA goes back to the title of a novel written by the Englishman Sir Thomas Morus in 1516. (3) It is a pun on the Greek "*eu-topos*," the GOOD PLACE, and "*ou-topos*," NO-PLACE / NOWHERE. In his novel Morus describes an ideal, harmonious society being located on a fictitious island called UTOPIA. It depicts a symbiosis of nature and technology. By positioning the stage for his "GOOD PLACE" in "NO-PLACE", Morus detaches his UTOPIA from reality. Like in the case of Louis-Sébastien Mercier's UTOPIAN novel "The Year 2440: A Dream If Ever There Was

One" (1770), the first UTOPIAN society projected into a far distant future, this displacement in time and place functioned in a way as a personal "protection shield" for the author. Since clearly labeled as FICTION only, contemporaries could not accuse the author of having written a political manifest that aimed for the destruction of the current social order and the creation of this new "ideal society".

However in addition to this more or less pragmatic reason we might detect another motive for the displacement of this perfect society with its perfect cities: Since we all know that we human beings are far from perfect to begin with, a perfect society, a "GOOD PLACE" cannot exist in reality, can only exist in "NO-PLACE". By these means it is safe to say that the aim of the novel was not to propagate an ideal, perfect society that was to be put into reality or to formulate a blueprint plan for a perfect city respectively. Morus' UTOPIA rather has to be understood as a "request" to critically reflect upon the readers' own society, the readers' own city, the city of 16th century England.

Already in Morus' own time the opinions about formulating UTOPIAS differed greatly. In the belief a perfect society or a perfect city respectively could be created some strived for its realization. Others like the Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) already pointed out the dangers implied in such ideas and models: the danger that UTOPIAS can all too easily flipside and become DYSTOPIAS. DYSTOPIA is the opposite of UTOPIA, a dark, depressing place with disenfranchised and enslaved citizens.

Apart from the apparent danger of creating a DYSTOPIA instead of a UTOPIA (in the sense of "GOOD PLACE") Morus himself, who dedicated an entire chapter to the design of the ideal cities of UTOPIA, indirectly points out another problem of ideal cities: they are static. Since there can only be one ideal form, each and every city pretty much has to look the same. Morus writes. "HE that knows one of their towns knows them all." (Morus,1516). Not only would such a universal perfect city model eradicate all cultural differences, would eliminate local culture and customs all together, it would also be the end of progress. Once the state of perfection is reached, once the final model of the ideal city is formulated, no further improvements are necessary or even desirable. This kind of static arrangement opposes the dynamics of reality of urban life. Any kind of change in the economical, technological or social configuration cannot be dealt with.

REALIZING UTOPIA

After the wake of the Industrial Revolution in Europe and America, as huge masses of rural population, in the hope to find work and thus create a better life for themselves, poured into the cities, causing them to expand dramatically, turning them into MEGA CITIES, cities "in which one can roam for hours without leaving the built-up area and without seeing the slightest sign of the approach of open country (...)" (Engels,1844), reams of VISIONARY and UTOPIAN city models were conceived. (4) In response to the devastating, unhygienic living conditions of the urban masses and the increasing alienation from nature, many of these VISIONS such as Soria y

Mata's LINEAR CITY (1882), Howard's GARDEN CITY (1898) or later Le Corbusier's proposals for the VERTICAL GARDEN CITY (5) of the 1920s aimed to "repair" the cities relationship with nature (at least from a peoples' point of view). These models carried a promise, a promise to put an end to the inhumane urban living conditions of the modern industrial city and insure a "better life" with plenty of sun light and fresh air for all. In difference to Morus' UTOPIA, which was projected into "NOWHERE", these late 19th and early 20th century VISIONS and UTOPIAN CITY MODELS were not designed to remain fictitious. They were designed to be realized.

However lacking the technological as well as political strength at the time, many of these ambitious plans had to wait a long time until they finally were implemented. "Much if not most of what has happened – for good or for ill – to the world's cities, in the years since World War Two, can be traced back to the ideas of a few visionaries who lived and wrote a long time ago, (...). (...) for many of them their visions long lay fallow, because the time was not ripe. (...) When at last the visions were discovered and resuscitated, their implementation came often in very different places, in very different circumstances, and often through very different mechanisms, from those their inventors has originally envisaged. Transplanted as they were in time and space and socio-political environment, it is small wonder that the results were often bizarre, sometimes catastrophic." (Peter Hall, 2002, p.2-3). 20th century city planning can be characterized by the attempt to realize UTOPIA – and fail with it.

21st CENTURY CHINA

"With speed as the main factor in architectural design, an architect assumes the role of a chef who cooks from set recipes. (...) Architectural recipes have become indispensable references to every professional architect and student. Existing projects or previous designs are recycled with minimum alternations." (Lin, 2001, p.183). Under the enormous time constraints of the hour, turning to others for a model, copying what others have developed seems legitimate to many planners. However, uncritically adapting models created by others, created in another place and another time, isolating them from their original intent, does not only, as we saw, constitute a legal problem. China is a country with a long history and a unique culture. Any kind of instantly imported model is bound to fail or at least create tremendous long-term problems.

In order to create a better – NOT A PERFECT CITY – we have to challenge our view on what a city actually is. We have to ask what we want the 21st century Chinese city to be. We have to ask: Is the adaptation of 19th and 20th century occidental ideal city planning models, such as Corbusier's VISION of the VERTICAL GARDEN CITY, really a sign of progress? Is the city of western MODERNITY, with its fascination for technical advancements such as high-rise buildings and the automobile really a suitable model for the future development of China's cities? (6) Is our modern Chinese city, the city with its SUPER SIZE BUILDINGS, SUPER SIZE STREETS and SUPER SIZE TRAFFIC JAMS the city that we were dreaming of? Is this creature of asphalt and concrete something that we can proudly hand over to the next generation to live in?

In order to create a better city for the future we have to travel – travel to distant UTOPIAS, to distant “NOWHERES”. We have to confront ourselves even with bizarre and crazy ideas like Guenter L. Eckert’s 1980 project “*Die Röhre*”, a proposal for the construction of a single buildings structure spanning for 35,000 km all around the globe, accommodating as many as 4,3 billion people (virtually all of mankind). We should study Edgar Chamless’ *Roadtown* as well as Archigrams’ *Walking Cities*. We should formulate UTOPIAN VISIONS for our future cities, VISIONS that are not restricted by investors constraints, VISIONS freed from the burden of having to be implemented. Let’s open our minds and be inspired by UTOPIAN IDEAS, let’s discuss and argue about their advantages and disadvantages. Let’s confront ourselves with them in order to detect problems of our contemporary city. Let’s unfold the CREATIVE POWER of UTOPIA.

However, in order to create a better city we have to distance ourselves from the idea of a universal ideal form of a city that can be poured into concrete anywhere, anytime. Since each and every country, each and every region and city has its very own social, cultural as well as climatic characteristics, there can never be an ideal model suitable for global implementation. Back in the early 20th century, as planners believed in the universal healing power of technology, the idea of a single ideal city model seemed in reach. However, today we are long aware of the fact that technological advancement is a double-sided sword.

In order to create a better city we have to distance ourselves from the idea of PERFECTION. 20th century UTOPIAN MODELS claimed to solve all problems of the city once and for all. But as we discovered, achieved PERFECTION is the end of PROGRESS. Aiming for the realization of perfection thus cannot be our goal. The NEW UTOPIAN MODEL cannot be a fixed or static one. We are not searching for ideal cities that are poured into concrete, that cast life in a certain form and don’t leave room for economical, social and cultural changes. We need an open framework. We need flexible, open-end models that leave room for future generations to integrate their needs as well. This includes the option that once China’s high-speed-urbanization process has come to an end, once the urban population decreases, our city can react to this change accordingly. In order to deal with the challenges ahead we should not shy away from undertaking a journey to UTOPIA.

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