

THE LUXURY URBANITY OF NEW HOUSING PROJECTS. REPORT OF AN URBAN DESIGN AND PLANNING COURSE IN CHINA

F. FRASSOLDATI¹ / S. WANG² / Z. DENG³

Keywords: Housing-China, Value Judgment, Urban Wealth

'Housing' is an issue combining architecture, planning, and social matters like the role of the market and an equal access to urban resources. Housing is worldwide effectively mirroring the socio-economic changes, as measured by institutional statistics and personal income. The housing stocks supplied by the market, and the public policies correcting that supply, also materialize common or questioned ideas on urbanity. While housing in the real world is mainly considered the result in balancing these different constraints, residential areas are also one of the first applied exercises in the courses of urban planning. The Chinese University context, and particularly that of a large metropolis like Guangzhou, offers a hot spot to look at the role that planning education may - or might have - in preparing professionals for the future challenges and addressing crucial public decisions on the future urbanity.

Housing and the task of making better urban places: the setting of the issue in Western countries and in China.

Housing is a basic component of every urban society, as well as the morphological basis of the urban fabric. Although we mainly identify cities through special buildings, housing is their major component. Urban shelters where more than a half of the world population live in, differ obviously in quality and urban performance. It is housing density that materializes the compact historic European city. It is housing sprawl the icon of the American dream. It is the ashamed threats of slum conditions during industrialization peaks that pushes governments to develop strong urban policies and planning and architectural milestones. A decent house is finally the first commodity achieved by a wealthy household. Thus the dwelling condition, the quality of the housing demand and supply, and the kind of housing policy and planning approaches by the governments, are tangible symptoms of the socio-economic stages of cities and of the accepted urban models. Urban planning in itself is not defining which housing projects will be chosen by the market or by

¹ South China University of Technology, School of Architecture. The paper is part of a research program supported by the National Science Foundation of China (50950110350)

² South China University of Technology, School of Architecture, Guangzhou.

³South China University of Technology, School of Architecture, Guangzhou.

the households; nevertheless, planning is asked to coordinate and balance high discrepancies in the supply side, and a fundamentally distort market.

A short excursus into basic space and luxury space

On considering housing as a merely mass process, architects and planners have had a crucial role in setting up tentative Utopias: dealing with the mass urbanization, the proposals by planners and architects were the radical modernist breaking down of the continuity of building- neighbourhood-city. They acted as social designers for the best of the new citizens, setting their targets and aspirations. Planners worked as organizers of urban functions (i.e. distribution and consumption functions), they imagine themselves as the directors of a city-machine built up on residential cells that can be substituted at any change of individual necessity or at any change of citizens.

Utopia crashes on facing a global urbanization wave and urgent needs of new dwelling. It is in this phase, since 1950s, that world cities expands into former rural areas, without any possible distinction between city and countryside (Hall, 1984). There is no more time for questioning the kind of new city which is growing; the problematic peripheries of Europe will be unveiled not before the 1970s. The foci move instead from the production of things within the urban space - buildings within an urban fabric - to the production of the urban space itself (reinterpreting Lefebvre, 1974). According to leftist social analysis of the urban growth, this way the capitalist mode of production maintains itself and make room for itself and the needed society (workers and consumers). Urbanization is capitalism's primary extension, and in this view the value of the physical space is reduced to its cost: the traditional urbanity is merely a potential amenity, to be used to produce surplus value. The new dwellings, either public housing or estate property, have instead any functional target, but the city production.

The turbulent social movements in the end of the 1960s, combined with the international oil crisis in the first 1970s, open another kind of praxis, questioning the growth in itself and assuming a political focus on the social and ecological life of a limited community. The more we get closer to current years, the more we see an alternative to the urban space as a function of the market. It is rediscovered the value of a differentiated space, ancient fabrics are renewed and re-appreciated, plans are settled up to limit the urban growth and to intensify the urban land use. This exclusive space is the adequate achievement of mature societies which are not growing any more, in terms of population, and have a wealthy and differentiated economic basis. The principle of the dwelling for everybody is generally overcome with the idea of a dwelling for each individual. The target, the positive or negative utopia, is shouldered on one own possibilities (Beck, 1992). The idea of luxury is then commodified and personalized, according to individual tastes, fragmenting and recombining potential class affinities.

Collective needs and individuals luxury in China

The Chinese context obviously combines a different social culture, a different dimension of social processes, and a different government system. The development of a property market for housing, instead, offers some similarity as well as the incremental individualization of the housing commodity. Housing projects are necessary for Chinese masses, nevertheless they swing relatively, from functional to communitarian, to commodification.

The tradition of centralized planning has changed dramatically in China in recent years, and housing has been one of the most affected sector. Not long ago, the urban residential space was mostly owned by the central government and households paid nominal rent (Song et al. 2005). Urban planning was a tool for the government in regulating urbanization and dwelling of urban citizens through the *danwei* system. In short, every urban citizen belong to an urban working units, the *danwei*, which provided basic accommodation, basic welfare and education to the household. A basic condition was thus guaranteed to all urban citizens, housing was designed according to *existenz minimum*, and Soviet Union models and principles of community design, as they were defined in the 1950s. In the Chinese post-Revolution urban model, the economic planning in itself acts as the locational power that urban planning just need to materialize into the built environment. The Schools of Planning, that re-opened in the late 1970s, have extended this subordinate approach to the economic realm, offering proper design tools and light assessments to the economic and political mainstreams (Zhang, Wang 2001; Yeh, Wu, 1990; Leaf, Hou, 2006).

In 1978 the National Plan for Housing Reform was adopted, and private ownership encouraged in addition to a pro-market approach. After the revision of the National Plan in 1990, the official housing policy is one of a market-oriented housing system. Today the housing renting fees reflect the cost of location, construction and maintenance, many Chinese households own their places (either new ones or former State-owned), and a powerful property estate block leads construction and urbanization. In the recent approach to local Economic Development Plan, city governments act as direct promoters of urban development, seeking for growth-coalition with outside investors. The privatization of housing stocks and the negotiation with commercial housing developers are crucial resources for the local administrations, in dealing with the speedy urbanization of new citizens, that requires more affordable housing, and the increasing willing of wealthy people to display their personal success.

Housing is increasingly considered an investment for wealthy households and for agencies working in the property market. The idea of luxury is thus related with these recent possibilities of differentiation. In the former Chinese context of standard housing provided by the State or the *danwei*, any idea of differentiation was targeted as a backward attitude against the egalitarian communist system. Spatial differences were actually leveled also within the existing urban space. The urban or rural condition simply stated a different belonging to the same system; it was not a matter of better or worst. Only when the reform period

encouraged different development speeds among regions and individuals, luxury could be publicly pursued and became the synonym of cash value and economic success. All declinations of luxury fill in the advertisements of new residential areas and the banners of under construction high-rise buildings. The first urban house, the house for the future of a young family, the family's investment for the son who will come back after a foreign education... obviously they have different target of luxury. The market is a good supplier of dreams “to walk into pure luxury”. The market can provide a luxury urbanity according to each diverse social expectation. In the beginning of these race for a luxury appeal, new projects focussed on higher standards of communitarian facilities, improving the traditional typologies of 8 storeys condominiums which before characterized the centralized plans. Nevertheless, quite soon, the idea of modern and fashionable dwelling was copied and pasted from Hong Kong: high-rise buildings, dense residences, club services for housing compounds. This typology and this urban morphology allow quite a fast urbanization on the edges of the consolidated city, and house communities of several tens of thousand people. The idea of luxury is more and more restricted to a personal space, either a furnished apartment, or exclusive urban amenities, or a well defined owned space...

The cost to access this luxury urbanity is that of mono-functional residential areas, usually inhabited by quite homogeneous households, and built spaces that are no longer the one of a compact city, neither the rural environments into which they have usually grown. Although the names of these compounds and some decorative details call back European historic towns or scenic spots, “most housing on the urban fringe consists of mid- and high-rise condominium estates—much denser than anything in suburban America” (Campanella.). The current “urban” luxury for middle and upper class is located into these controlled compounds which introduce innovative urban fabric, or similar and simpler places for lower income households (public policies actually try to limit the economic segregation, asking for a minimum amount of affordable housing also within more luxury estates). If it is true that in the US, by 2000, 60 percent of the nation's population lived in suburbs, sharing an universal aspiration to own a piece of land for a single-family house (Kotkin 2006), the dwelling model here is different and still uncertain; there is no time for manifestos or big statements, either by the commercial professionals or public urban planners about the ongoing city construction. There is only a common anxiety for a certain better future and a shared commitment to growth.

More concerns might be related with the differentiated rights (property or users rights), or the large standards adopted for public infrastructures within the compounds, that require a large land waste: roads within these residential areas are usually wider than international standards, the green spaces are proportionate to huge buildings shadows, even if these dimensions are not the ones recommended by neighbourhood design. With these facts clearly in mind, we can understand the troubling educational work into Chinese planning schools. The new citizens look for these dwellings; the market provide them; the public administration can get some benefit from this urbanization. Any spatial or architectural research seems too precarious for citizens that have just been assembled and want an image of “urbanity” to mirror their unprecedented luxury

achievements. On considering planning as a social process, we should be aware that the inputs and solution to one problem prepare for another one. It is thus quite limiting to educate students only on coping with existing demands and supplies.

Planning Education reacts: when collective minimum shelters switch to market property

It is thus quite interesting to examine the educational program of the courses of planning and architecture. In fact, as well as the society, planning schools are trying to find their way in conceptualizing the role of the profession, and of the city, vis-a-vis national development strategies (see Leaf, Huo 2006). Courses of planning have a clear task when dealing with regulation: they need to provide students with all the needed knowledge to understand and apply existing standards. At the same time it is part of the educational role the attitude to questioning existing rules on coping with undergoing transformations. What is the current value of mono-functional residential areas? How to actualize the new city-making with tools other than super-blocks or isolated high-rise building? Is it acceptable a regulation avoiding mix uses, when all around the new developments mixture is appreciated? The Schools of Planning in China are one among few places in which it is possible to debate the Chinese urban future, although most part of the teachers are also directly involved as professionals in the city growth. All other spaces are contracted to solve immediate objectives and to fulfil the demand of the market. So far, it is quite a crucial point all over planning schools to understand whether the main educational goals is to simply fulfil the market's request of technicians able to apply planning rules, or to develop an attitude towards utopia. In a nutshell, schools are responsible to “produce” students who can easily find employments in the existing market and thus make their bread&butter, or to enhance their personal critical approach to the existing context visualizing alternatives, while being prepared for possible future changes. It is easily answered that it is necessary to set up a system of values with the students; how to do that, right now, is not so clear either among the society or the educators at schools.

However, teaching urban planning, we propose to our students in grade 4 the plan and design for a housing compound of up to 5,000 households. As usual, the exercise on dwelling models and units is a crucial phase in the career of our students. They think they know the problem, housing being familiar to them. They know the market, they know the individual needs, they know egalitarian or harmonic public efforts. At the same time, they have few chances in imagining a different context or a different space designed by them. It is quite a challenge, while educating people who will draw tomorrow cities, to introduce the willings to understand the present and eventual future society. We are actually about asking them to balance individuals' and public's expectations, while everything around is changing fast and with great contradictions. So far, they are the ones orienting future professional public choice and markets. The debate within the school bring us back to issues that are the basis of urban planners' profession, in imagining a better world pursuing or regenerating urban spatial and ecological values.

The courses of Urban Planning at SCUT

To explore the present and the future luxury urbanity, both physically as well as intellectually, we have examined the experience of Urban Design courses at South China University of Technology (Guangzhou) in grade 4, from 2002 to 2008. The course starts analysing the “adequate” housing projects which are familiar to our students, and we focus on the stereotyped dwelling patterns coming from Europe and USA that developers are currently adapting to the Chinese context. Doing this, we try to highlight the challenges in designing new neighbourhoods and places in current China. These premises would like to enhance the students' understanding of places qualities and the capacity of mixing a fair distribution of urban amenities with market targets, within a liveable urban space. Although these urban spatial concerns may be considered too luxurious in the present times of fast urban growth in China, some higher “ambitions to change the world” are cultivated in the initial stages and offer possible alternative methodology to approach the classical exercises.

A multitude of students approaches urban design as a method for creating an economic value (i.e. higher prices), nevertheless we try to define with them some values for their design. This is a constraint coming from the real situation: a paradox of the fast urban growth in China is that, having an overwhelming market's demand and being quite fast in decision making and construction, there is little room for planning to analyse the medium-term demand by the market itself. Most part of the transformations in the urban realm are actually incrementing transitional stages, and generally speaking to transform or rearrange quite new projects is a common practice. The intellectual space to think about the reason of planning and design decisions has become a luxury in itself, both in education as well as in the practice.

Ideological issues of existing regulation and students' creativeness mix to house a growing population into Chinese cities. While the public is less engrossed in the provision of housing stocks over time, the success of new urban areas or dwelling models is legitimated through the buyers choices. Students' works set how far this model as the urban future.

Finally, they all face a common task:

- They are requested to visualize the space they are drawing. Because of the dimension of the residential compounds, birds view and relational spaces are both relevant.
- They need to define their way for sustainability, either social, market, or ecologically oriented.
- They hopefully improve the capacity to evaluate different stakeholders' need (investors, inhabitants, developers, government).

A tentative taxonomy of students' works

On looking at seven years of students' exercises (2002-2008), we have an idea of the changes in their approaches, in their references, in their methodology. The students have reached an adequate competence about the existing dwelling models and the market, while the surrounding urban Chinese context has changed: the property market is accepted; private estates are the references of a modern urban life; the urban ideal can eventually be restricted to a selected amount of people (as an exclusive piece of city). We might expect a more careful attention to individual amenities and more market oriented projects, combined with few but original thoughts on community housing.

The exercises tell us also another story, about changes within university. In the earliest exercises the requirements were for a FAR lower than the one adopted by the market. In 2007 a higher density has been introduced (from 5,000 inhabitants to nearly 5,000 households), according to changes into the open market (FAR 2.5-2.8).

Originality is not a general target, among students dealing with this exercise. The constraints of typologies and density have the higher impact in defining the final arrangement of blocks and facilities. Particularly after 2004, students find quite traditional obediences to the set of rules that copes with a controlled space. High-rise buildings float into green areas with some ideas of neighbourhood units (WANG Jiayin, BAO Xinting, ZHOU Baiping). Only one student among these best evaluated had introduced a “big thing”, establish a long medium-rise building as the border of his design (LIU Lixiong). It is quite interesting to mention that after 2004 none uses the historic patterns or the traditional spaces as references in building a modern Chinese space: in general, the modern housing model is not negotiable with usually low-rise local styles. Research of a Chinese space (TAO Jin, LIU Sijin).

Several students propose an actualized version of the superblok/siedlung, blended with some British-American design for residential communities (ZHOU Wei, WU Tingting, Zhou Kebin; ZHANG Tianyao). These exercises are usually more oriented to set up communities, according to the classical principles of urban planning and urban models (combination of different density, distribution of the traffic system). There are no influences by recent international examples, the main reference being the Chinese property market for students. On the one hand, it is the context they experience directly and into which they are asked to set up their ideas. On the other hand, it is quite rare in other country to face similar professional tasks. It is thus quite challenging to imagine something different with the students, without reasonable references; the idea of past, present and future urbanity seems to be quite specific and in some continuity with the recent urban past. The educational concern is that with the present market as the main reference, these students will difficulty address the market and the tastes of common people. A general market-oriented approach (LIN Yuming,

TAN Yusheng, ZHANG Guojiun, YE Fangfang) and a more defined targeted-market in which everyone can find the illusion of his own space (YE Buyun, LI Jue, Qinglin) combine one another. We can group these project through the distribution of amenities, the attention to public open spaces and facilities... Recent exercises provide more individual spaces: single buildings float in the green spaces, not into an organized space for community (CAO Yuan, LI Luying), almost secluded neighbourhood parks are arranged (LI Ziming). All people can find here an individual satisfaction, combining a privatized accessibility to amenities, a clear definition of a safe individual space, a careful proposal of different built typologies, and less attention to the public facilities.

When high FAR and regulation combine together, the exercise functionality offers small room for design. The organization of car traffic has a stronger impact than natural amenities in the sites (topography, canals/rivers within the area or nearby). Bird views done by the students display dense compounds, and a stock of space for roads that eventually will be changed into something different. Working in a course of planning, students do not develop original building typologies, but visualize the rules they want to set up in the urbanization of the study-area. To avoid the gridlock of monumental axes and standard references, discussions on the urban space for housing are introduced. Quite often, students seem to follow the available technical tools, the easiest examples and the regulation they have. It thus seems that both the idea of space and the idea of what is valuable and what is luxury is coming from a mainstream that offers gated communities as the most appreciated habitat. To escape this simplification, discussions and alternatives need to be explored by professors, instructors (quite often the ones getting money or actually living in such kind of housing) and students.

Students are finally quite able to sell their products, according to the common rules for evaluation of their exercises. Innovative combinations of density-volumes-spaces, questioning the city's growth model, are rare. Nevertheless the drawing ability is usually convincing in proposing reasonable quality improvements, not really the possible “paradigm shift” for the future making of the city, on looking both at the typology (where the people and functions have room) and the urban morphology (how that new city is shaped).

An almost innovative market.

While the School is puzzled by market compliance and impracticable utopia, luxury is marketized into real estate advertisement and public policies have little concerns for the luxury seekers as potential aggregators of gated enclaves. Even if there is still a slightly negative public judgement on exhibited luxury, the structure of the city growth is not questioned. Interests in this soil consuming growth are enormous. There are immediate returns to the local governments through land right use taxes and a massive increasing in the urban employment. This is a Chinese model that can reasonably efficiently work at this stage of development: it

fuels urban development thus increasing the local finance for infrastructure provision (through land use rights and public land leasing, Ding 2007); the construction sector can offer lot of works for not educated people, thus introducing a social and political values for construction and urbanization... The urbanization rate was below 20 per cent before 1978, and is nearly 50 per cent in 1990s (State Statistical Bureau), with areas of the Delta reaching 70 per cent. Actually all over 2008 and 2009 news of real estate agents' difficulties succeeded one each other. A great part of the urban growth had been fuelled by international investments, wishing rapid returns on Hong Kong stock exchange market; nevertheless, in the end of 2008, because of more restriction by the PRC government and a cooling effect on the Hong Kong stock market, the situation collapsed and most part of the foreign investors tried to move back to reduce losses. In Hong Kong, Evergrande Real Estate Group and international banks and funds which supported it first, since the beginning of 2009 lost as much as \$ 19 billion.

Housing is going too fast and too far. The prices of residential units in the main Chinese cities is higher than the actual value and are now too expensive for realistic end-users, i.e. medium-income citizens. International investors support the local developers in buying even more land for construction, than what was actually planned locally. The risk they know is to eat the real estate market, with overbuilding, getting land waste and no-quality, but confident in their capacity to substitute all their material culture. The purchase of second houses as a financial investments is more and more common in the wealthy middle class of Guangzhou. The expectations of wealthy inhabitants are converging to similar models of housing, urban amenities, premium services supply, and a recognizable distinction in the built space. This is actually pushing the developers to targeted specialization and innovation. Some of the largest investments group, like Vanke, are introducing quality and quite advanced technical and architectural.

The situation is full of spatial dilemmas: from luxury gated communities, to obsolete dense dwellings, both are urban futures which are driven by the housing market and local politics. At the same time schools are mainly teaching the benefit of the traditional compact city and are not prepared to a highly mobile and polarized society, which is progressively increasing the demand for quality, at different market prices. We need to conceptualize and visualize the emerging urban context as well as a different paradigm of housing. We can say that either European or Chinese urban contexts have similar urgency - and obviously different pace - to satisfy the demand for decent residential places and differentiated spaces which reproduce an increasing disparity. Planners work out luxury spaces, sometimes dignifying the basic needs, some others offering a physical appearance to socio-economic divides. The luxury housing projects of China, on looking at magazines of architecture/planning and real estate brochures, somehow worry about the guarantee of a great capital investment, bringing amenity value and emphasizing the role of planning as place marketing (Leaf-Huo 2006 p.559).

The new urban China never stops to produce different urban contexts or “city”, displaying its power through this urbanization element. It is not clear how far these people are allowed to mature also a cultural capital of urbanity. It is not directly questioned nor yet answered, but in the background we discuss the kind of urban society, more or less polarized, that is going to be built. Researches on how to provide innovative low cost settlements, balanced subsidized home-ownership into market units, and integrated spaces are the keys to improve the making of better urban places.



Fig.1- Example of an exercise by YE Buyun, 2003.

References:

Beck, U. (1992). *The Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage Publication.

Bray, D. (2005). *Social Space and Governance in Urban China: The Danwey System from Origins to Reform*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Campanella, T.J. (2008). *The concrete dragon: China's urban revolution and what it means for the world*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.

Ding, C. (2007). "Policy and praxis of land acquisition in China". In: *Land Use Policy* 24 (2007) 1-13

Ding, C., Song, Y. (2005). *Emerging Land and Housing Markets in China*. Cambridge: Lincoln Institute of Land Policies

Hays, K.M. (2000). *Architecture Theory since 1968*.

Haley, P. (2007). *Urban complexity and spatial strategies: towards a relational planning for our times*. London: Routledge.

Hall, P. (1964-1984). *The World Cities*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson (3rd edition).

Kotkin, J. (2006). *The City: A global History*. New York: Modern Library, Chronicles Book.

Leaf, M. - Hou, L. (2006). "The third spring of urban planning in China: the resurrection of professional planning in the post-Mao era". In: *China Information* 2006; 20; 553.

Lefebvre, H. (1974). *La production de l'espace*. Paris: Anthropos.

Massey, D. (2005). *For Space*, Sage Pub., London.

Yeh, A.G.O., Wu, F. (1990). "The transformation of the urban planning system in China from a centrally-planned to transitional economy". In: *Progress in Planning* 51, 167-252.

Zhang, J., Wang, T. (2001). "Economic Recovery Following the Soviet Model and Reflection during the First Five-Year Plan (1949-1957)". In: *Modern Urban Housing in China*.