

Building Urban Narrative: Themed New Towns in China

“We are not only good at destroying the old world, we are also good at building the new.” -Mao Zedong

Much has been made, in both breathlessly enthusiastic predictions and sharply critical admonitions, about China’s emerging role as a laboratory in which the world’s architects and planners are testing their latest theories. Urban development, however, does not take place in a lab, with its controlled environment and re-creatable conditions, nor is it subject to the verification that laboratory research generally entails, as Cedric Price and his colleagues noted in “Non-Plan” (Barker et al, 1969).

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Rather, what proponents of the China-as-laboratory perspective point to is the confluence of large amounts of capital, speculative and otherwise, the huge impetus for development, and a political environment in which government at all levels, and thus the capital aligned with it, is often untrammelled by the political constraints that can make large scale development in the Western world particularly difficult to realize. These factors create the possibility of realizing ambitious or unconventional projects that might not be viable in another environment. Critics of this perspective decry the disingenuous opportunism that they perceive on the part of designers, often foreign but increasingly Chinese, who pursue grandiose but frequently ill-conceived projects, arguing that the unique conditions that make such projects possible in China do little if anything to ensure that these designs are in fact good, and that the Chinese people ought not be made into laboratory subjects (Xue et al, 2012).

In this paper we seek to examine the shifting status of community in the contemporary Chinese city through the lens of specific New Town projects, to propose another means of evaluating some of the more contentious developments that have been written off as failed experiments. Community is today an issue of particular importance in Chinese urban formations because of the transition that has occurred over the last two decades from danwei housing to a market-based system. This transition has undermined the relatively cohesive and self-enclosed, work-unit based identity that served to establish community in urban China prior to reform in the 1980s. Specifically, we address the criticism that Chinese developers are importing Western models as a form of self-colonization,



and argue that derivatives of non-indigenous vernaculars may be understood to produce a narrative basis upon which to establish community. The construction of such narratives has become an important and productive aspect of community building that deserves attention, in particular in relation to the social transformation that the waning of the danwei structure has catalyzed. While China's rapid urbanization has provided opportunities to test new forms of urbanism, the results have met with mixed response. Some of the most favorable receptions have been reserved for projects that adopt an eco-technical narrative, such as Tianjin Eco-City, designed by the Singaporean Urban Planning Group Surbana. Tianjin Eco-City is planned to be ecologically friendly, with reduced carbon emissions, renewable energy production, responsible waste management, and a varied network of low-energy transport systems (Tianjin Eco-City website, 2012). At the same time, many Chinese developments have met with responses from critics and observers ranging from mild bemusement to condescending disdain for the stylistic eclecticism and appropriation that characterizes widely cited projects such as Orange County, Vancouver Forest, Thames Town in Songjiang, Venice Aquatic City in Hangzhou, and Anting, a 'German town' designed by Albert Speer Jr. Through an examination of contemporary housing developments in China, we evaluate some of the critical underpinnings of the analyses that have dismissed such developments against historical factors specific to the Chinese built environment, questioning their reflexive dismissal as cheap copies or examples of theme-park urbanism. We contend that these contemporary housing developments in fact address a specific need to develop new tools with which to foster urban communities that is rooted in recent Chinese history.

BACKGROUND: THE DANWEI

The danwei is the administrative-social-spatial unit that formed the basis of urban development in socialist China. Originally conceived of as a unit of production, the danwei gradually developed into the basic unit of collective consumption that integrated workplace, residence and social services. These state-owned workplace units offered city dwellers secure jobs, affordable housing, medical care, and subsidies including transportation and retirement pensions. The profound influence that the danwei had on planning correlated with its virtually universal adoption by the Chinese state as the

Figure 1: Aerial of Thames Town, photo courtesy of Shanghai Henghe Real Estate Co Ltd.

primary model of social organization; by 1978, 95% of Chinese belonged to a danwei (Lu, 2006). “The work unit was once so essential to daily life in urban China that people would say one could be without a job, but not without a danwei. An individual belonged to a danwei, which was responsible for the political and social well-being of its members” (Lü , 1997). The integration of workplace, residence and social facilities in close proximity enabled residents to conduct the bulk of their daily activities within the walls of the compound.

Over the last fifty years or so, different models have developed for the actual design of a work unit. First fully emerging in the 1950’s, based on the concept of the neighborhood unit, the principles of hierarchical spatial structure, the integration of housing and facilities, and service distances optimized for a pedestrian oriented development all essentially remained true. Tweaks over the years to the danwei’s spatial organization have incorporated Soviet planning influences at times and subsequently evolved to reflect more particular and contemporary Chinese influences (Lu, 2006). While the danwei model has declined in use, a casualty of Chinese social renovation, an impartial graphic analysis of the contemporary housing development Thames Town reveals that many of these same principles concerning spatial hierarchy, pedestrian accessibility, and mixed-use integration are still largely intact despite the major shift from the state-owned danwei system to a privatized, free market. Such a discovery suggests that projects like Thames Town, despite aesthetic particularities, are not necessarily complete ruptures with the past and therefore require deeper investigation.



Figure 2: Caoyangxincun Village, Shanghai 1953 and Thames Town, Songjiang City, 2008, diagrams by authors.

PRIVATIZATION

The state-sanctioned transformation from a majority-rural to a majority-urban population undertaken at the turn of this century is a physical and social realignment of such enormous scale that the massive internal changes that concurrently reshaped urban China in the last two decades of the 20th C are sometimes overlooked. As markets opened and privatization was embraced (first tentatively in the Special Economic Zones and then more broadly throughout all of China) the

centrally planned socialist economic system was dismantled. The danwei system eroded as state-owned work units were either broken up and privatized or simply shuttered, unable to compete with the domestic and foreign corporations that began to reshape the Chinese economy. In the process, employees lost not only their jobs but the organization that had largely structured their lives, an organization that reached into all aspects of daily life, far beyond the relatively proscribed boundaries of the workplace as it is understood in modern capitalist countries. While the term danwei is still used today in China, its referent now is specifically the workplace rather than the wider community that it would have indicated in earlier decades.

Much has been written about the resulting transformation of work and labor in China, yet the social transformation of home and community has been equally profound. As the nucleus of not just work, but also education, healthcare, commodities and goods distribution, social services and infrastructure, the danwei, it could be argued, structured what we in the West would think of as community within the social sphere of China's centrally planned economy before privatization. Indeed, prior to liberalization and the opening of Chinese society, many workers rarely traveled outside the boundaries of their danwei. Inevitably, a fence bound the grounds of the danwei; entry and exit were controlled at a handful of points. Community, such as it was, was located within these walls.

Today, housing is treated as a commodity rather than a social benefit, at least in urban areas. In fact, the real estate market in Beijing and a number of other cities has been described as a bubble, real estate being one of the few avenues for large-scale investment available to Mainland Chinese citizens. Although commercially developed housing maintains some of the structural characteristics and social infrastructure, the virtual congruency between work and home that characterized the danwei has evaporated. Neighbors now are likely to have quite little in common with one another, and little shared basis to help them build a bond other than the fact of their proximity. In summary, the social structure that organized community in 20th-century urban China was effectively dismantled beginning in the 1980s. Today, in its place, the market has stepped in. Whereas community was once structured by the state and articulated downward, it is today formulated and focus group tested. Rather than a single, state-sanctioned community, multiple visions are on offer, competing against one another for the attention, and the capital, of contemporary Chinese.

THEME-PARK URBANISM

Images of Orange County in Beijing and Thames Town outside of Shanghai make evident that the construction of narrative via lifestyle offers a powerful device for community formation. On Orange County, Elizabeth Rosenthal wrote in the *New York Times*: "It is clear that their offering has tapped into a well of desire. Though an hour out of Beijing, all of the homes in Orange County, or Ju Jun in Chinese, were sold within a month" (Rosenthal, 2003). Due to its commercial success, the Beijing media dubbed the community the Orange Storm.

And yet, despite the fact that Orange County and other such communities have succeeded in tapping into a specific and powerful desire on the part of consumers, critics have tended toward perfunctory dismissal. In the same article by Rosenthal, Orange County is described as "the epicenter of faux L.A. in China." Artist Henry Tsang goes further stating, "what the Chinese have done is copy a copy—simulate a simulacra [sic], to use the correct postmodern

terminology—and transplant a uniquely a-historical architectural vernacular into the country that hosted Mao’s cultural revolution” (Ziegler, 2003). According to a photo caption in a 2007 Washington Post article by Ariana Cha, “In the ersatz Thames Town, even the security guards in red uniforms are part of the illusion. These so-called theme cities give testament to the great power that has fueled China’s economic boom and that the country has become infamous for: making copies.” To dismiss Thames Town because it is a ‘fake’ is perhaps too facile, and ultimately unproductive. It is tempting to link Sharon Zukin’s theorization of the theme park in her book *The Culture of Cities* (1995) to these Chinese projects and identify such developments as prime examples of Chinese ‘Disneyfication.’ In Zukin’s argument, the theme park is personified through Disney, the perfect conflation of commerce and culture. “... the theme park is a tightly structured discourse about society. It represents a fictive narrative of social identity - not real history, but a collective image of what modern people are and should be - and it exercises the spatial controls that reinforce this identity” (Zukin, 1995). Perhaps Thames Town is not the collective image that most readily brings to mind “what modern people are and should be,” but as noted in the Washington Post, “Thames Town... features Tudor houses surrounding a town square decorated by a statue of Winston Churchill. Developers of these themed communities sell not just the homes to future residents, but the lifestyle” (Cha, 2007).



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To be clear, Zukin herself does not address the Chinese context; she writes about late 20th C. American cities. We must bear in mind that Zukin’s criticism is rooted in this Western context, one that cannot be readily posited in contemporary China. Nevertheless, identity-formation through consumption is very much at play in contemporary China, as it is in the West, and as a result it is dangerous to dismiss offhandedly arguments along the lines of Zukin’s. We must ask, rather, whether there is not some potential beyond this sort of consumption that, in a Chinese context, can be used strategically. According to Arjun Appadurai, “consumption begets pleasure and pleasure begets agency.” Understanding the significance that cultural and aesthetic borrowing holds in present-day China is crucial. There is, in a sense, what Zukin (2007) calls a “fictive narrative of social identity” in play at Thames Town, perhaps a hyper-fictive narrative.

Figure 3: Thames Town Street Corner, photo by Mari A Fujita.

Whereas Zukin decries the falsification of history and identity in the theme park, in the context of a broad and multiform public sphere that is being constricted (via Hannah Arendt), could it not be argued that such falsifications, in the quasi-vacuum created by the wholesale abandonment of the formerly dominant social structure of work and home life over the course of recent Chinese development, are in fact creative and productive, rather than stultifying? Whereas in Zukin's work, and in much of the popular writing about themed developments, falsification or copying has been critiqued or simply dismissed according to a set of assumed universal values, we remind readers to consider the contemporary Chinese context. At the crux of much of this criticism is a deep-rooted, unexamined predisposition to prize some notion of the authentic that is clearly problematic in present-day China.



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THE AUTHENTIC AND THE COPY

Despite Walter Benjamin's famous heralding of the ultimate erosion of aura in the face of new techniques of reproduction and dissemination in his 1935 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (or, more recently, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"), notions of the primacy of authenticity and originality persist in cultural debates concerning aesthetic and social value. Increasingly, as architectural production globalizes, these aesthetic rubrics are overlaid on contexts outside of the Western humanistic tradition in which they were developed. In the context of China, this debate has become particularly focused on a perception that there is a pervasive and, in some readings, amoral cultural acceptance of and even dependence on copying. Often this line of argument has served a somewhat retrograde function, seeking to assuage renewed fears of a "Yellow Peril" by pointing to perceived shortcomings of contemporary Chinese cultural and technological production in order to reassure the West of its continued relevance in the face of declining dominance. It has been observed, in response, that the concept of the copy in traditional Chinese thought is distinct from Western notions. Bianca Bosker, in her recent book, "Original Copies: Architectural Mimicry in Contemporary China," delineates a long and distinguished artistic tradition of copying in classical Chinese arts including landscape painting, sculpture, and garden design. Citing the culture

Figure 4: Wedding Photo Shoot in Thames Town, photo by Mari A Fujita.

of the shanzhai and distinctions that are drawn in Chinese language between different grades of copy, among other evidence, Bosker argues that the reflexively pejorative connotations that are often attached to the copy in the West do not pertain in contemporary China. Bosker's discussion of shanzhai products is of particular interest. "The term ...refers to the production of counterfeit name-brand goods, from cars to television shows, apparel to electronics, that often offer features that the originals lack..." (Bosker, 2013). Noting that the term has come to connote a particularly Chinese type of inventiveness, Bosker quotes Liu Binjie, the director of China's National Copyright Administration stating that shanzhai culture "fits a market need" and offers "sign of the cultural creativity of the common people" (Bosker, 2013).

This recognition of the creative potential inherent in a particular type of copying that "offers features that the originals lack," and that eschews the facsimile in favor of recombination and innovation is worth noting in reference to the notion of the derivative. Certainly this attitude toward appropriation and reproduction exhibits a pronounced lack of concern for the aura that Benjamin was eager to wave off of the cultural stage. If there exists a predisposition in contemporary discussions of the copy to understand the idea of the derivative in the pejorative sense of the term, connoting a reductive or oversimplified replica that lacks to richness of the original, the Chinese shanzhai culture might be more fruitfully considered in light of chemical sense of the word, referring to a compound that is related to and derivable from another through a chemical or physical process. In this sense, the derivative always requires not simply reproduction but, crucially, transformation. Certainly, there are examples of copying in contemporary Chinese culture that fail to produce any sort of novel or innovative outcome through the sort of recombination discussed above. Indeed, Thames Town itself faced a lawsuit from a British shop owner over the literal reproduction of a façade complete with the (misspelled) name of the business. At the individual level, none of the buildings in Thames Town could be pointed to as representative examples of this sort of transformative copying. Rather, we would argue that the banality of the architectural product precipitates a reflexive critical dismissal that serves to obscure the truly interesting part of the project and others like it, the admixture of British stylistic tropes and Chinese urban development that fabricates a novel narrative of community open to inhabitation and appropriation.

Rather than a form of self-colonization, as some would argue (Lim, 2006 and Cha, 2007), this sort of recombination can be understood as a creative and productive act. Beijing World Park, now widely known outside of China due to director Jia Zhangke's 2004 film *The World*, offers a useful example of a narrative construction that has been frequently analogized to this sort of self-colonization. The park is often understood as an attempt to miniaturize architectural and cultural highlights from across the world, eliminating, in a sense, the necessity to travel abroad to see these sights. While visiting a mini Eiffel Tower and a mini Leaning Tower of Pisa is certainly part of the attraction, and indeed, Jia's film hinges on the thinness of this notion and the opportunity that it offers, it is less frequently noted that Beijing World Park, in addition to such foreign sites, includes a number of Chinese wonders, featuring even a reproduction of the Great Wall, which passes just outside of Beijing and can be visited within an hour's drive from the park itself. The inclusion of the Great Wall suggests that the park, rather than serving simply as a menagerie of once-inaccessible foreign wonders, works to construct a cultural narrative that situates Chinese culture alongside rather than subordinate to Western culture, in an integrated fashion. It is an act of

self-narration, rather than self-colonization. There is an interesting parallel between this sort of appropriation and Bosker's discussion of the Chinese imperial practice of constructing replicas of vassal's castles or landmarks as a symbol of conquest (Bosker, 2013). Both serve to undermine the assumption that Thames Town belongs in England and that Venice Aquatic City belongs in Italy. Admiring Thames Town itself, rather than its particular aesthetic, we can point, instead, to the disregard for 'authenticity' that is embodied in the project's break from aesthetic norms, and to the unlikely attempt to create an intensely fake and novel narrative in a context fundamentally in need of precisely this sort of creativity. Ultimately, we hope to see more such ruptures in the development of China; breaks that move beyond the aesthetic and reach for broader demographics, inclusive forms of community, critical practice, experimental practice, regional practice and more.



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CONSUMPTION

In *Making Leisure Work*, Brian Lonsway charts the history of architecture's role in the development of what has been termed the Experience Economy. The desire to "literally build consumer experience into the everyday retail transaction" produces an "architecture of persuasion" through which visitors are compelled to consume (Lonsway, 2009). Consumers at coffee shops, grocery stores, gas stations, and hospitals, enter these designed experiences and stay longer, spending more and becoming repeat customers. For Lonsway, the problem with products of the Experience Economy is that they produce "a codification of the socio-physical volume of space and its compression into a linear, didactic space which intentionally removes certain degrees of freedom from inhabitation." Arjun Appadurai's more nuanced approach to contemporary consumption draws a line between consumption and agency. While not promising the materialization of freedom, he suggests that one's experiences in spaces of the Experience Economy are not always uniformly bad and that the act of consumption can embody an act of choice that is potentially empowering.

Most spaces within the Experience Economy are inhabited for a limited period of time: the coffee shop for an hour, the theme park for a day, the hospital hopefully

Figure 5: Thames Town Bed and Breakfast With Construction Workers Biking Home, photo by Mari A Fujita.

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no longer than overnight. Developments like Thames Town are fundamentally different; occupants will live out their day-to-day lives in these spaces. Thames Town, built for 10,000 inhabitants whose own narratives are not uniform or static, cannot reliably replicate the linearity and didacticism that Lonsway fears. In an article for NPR, a resident of Thames Town is quoted: "I like it because it's like a foreign country here" (Lim, 2006). While property owners in Thames Town may have been initially attracted to the narrative of Thames Town, over time they will interweave their own experiences and perspectives, creating something that is ultimately distinct and specific. Paul Rice, one of the architects, reports that the client imagined that residents would change the names of buildings once they moved in (Lim, 2006), thus overlaying their own desires onto the narrative. While architecture has indeed contributed to the development of the Experience Economy, the extended time-scale over which a community constantly forms and evolves distinguishes the town from other architectural articulations of the Experience Economy. Thus in this instance the derivative is capable of continually transforming and diverging, giving rise to further derivations.

CONCLUSION

Developments like Orange County or Thames Town depend on their narrative-creating potential to draw interest. In both the Western and Eastern press, these themed communities have received a thrashing. Even Ben Wood, the architect of the nostalgic, theme-park-like Xintiandi development in Shanghai, describes themed communities, somewhat hypocritically, as "... farcical. Why pretend you are living in some fantasy land?" (Lu, 2006). But in looking toward the future and the unfolding of new urbanisms in China, it is crucial that architects and planners weigh design and planning implications as much on the basis of performative aspects as upon aesthetic criteria. While New Towns may appear to be a rupture from the recent past in China, many bear the DNA of their danwei predecessors. Critique cannot end at the veneer but must instead engage more deeply, examining how the productive derivatives emerging from China's urban laboratory enable and foster appropriation and reinterpretation; at what forms of community are engendered. This will be the next important research agenda emerging in China, as focus swings from building to occupying.