



CHINA: NEW ARCHITECTURES OF SCALE



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In recent years, American and European architects have collectively scrambled to be part of the so-called “China phenomenon”. While the economic world had been observing the changes in China for quite some time, architects began taking note sometime around 2002, with the planning of the Beijing Olympics. The next major sign of things to come was Koolhaas’ CCTV building, which is perhaps the most vulgar, but also the most bold attempt to give representation to the superimposition of market and State-party powers. For architects and developers, it started a bad epidemic of building envy. What has followed is a blind scramble for projects in China, one that is nothing less than a gold rush, fueled by the promise of cash, lax regulations, willing clients, and the blind impetus to BUILD. And with that scramble came the anxieties of the instability and confusion of the situation in China, superseded perhaps only by the even greater anxiety of being left behind.

The scale and nature of development in China is unprecedented, but it cannot be easily explained with linear and progressivist forms of historical narrative. Anglo-American free market ideology, which would condescendingly describe China as “catching up with the west”, cannot be applied wholesale to the deeper historical and cultural nature of contemporary China. One thing that perplexes many people in the West is being able to imagine the apparently paradoxical situation of a free market coexisting with a highly controlled, near totalitarian Party-state. At the moment it seems like nobody really knows what this looks like, or will look like. The other epistemic challenge is even a basic grasp of the scale of changes and exchanges in materials, populations, and economies taking place, which is difficult for many Chinese to even grasp, let alone Europeans or Americans.

Architectures of Scale

The depth of changes in China can be found in several large-scale processes taking place right now. These are: 1. the assemblage and organization of materials in the form of massive construction projects, 2. the concentration of populations in cities, 3. the displacement of populations, materials, and industries due to the force of development, and finally, 4. the exclusion, socially and politically, of populations due to the cultural changes brought about by migration.

Assemblage

Construction in China is taking place at a speed and a level that is unprecedented and almost incomprehensible. These are architectural projects of the superlative. For example: The Shanghai South railways station has the world's biggest transparent roof, with a diameter of 278 meters

The Hangzhou Bay Bridge, which is currently under construction, will be the longest cross-sea bridge in the world when it is finished.

Norman Foster's airport project for Beijing will be the largest airport building in the world. The Three Gorges Dam will be the world's largest hydroelectric dam. At 2km across it is five times wider than the Hoover dam. This project is estimated to cost as much as \$75 billion before it is completed.

The city of Sonbei, outside of Harbin, which is currently under construction. This development project is the size of all 5 boroughs of New York.



Norman Foster, Beijing Airport, under construction October 2005

Concentration

Along with large scale construction, there is a dramatic shift taking place in the movement and concentration of China's population:

Since the 1990s, 200 million people, or roughly 2/3 of the population of the United States, have moved from rural areas in China to the cities. This is more than 10 times the population that passed through Ellis Island in the 19th century. In the next 20 years, that number will reach 440 million, or one and a half times the population of the United States. This is considered the largest migration of human beings in history.

Of these, about half are part of a so-called floating population - migrant workers who travel back and forth from cities to rural areas, and are usually employed in manufacturing and construction

Currently, China has 166 cities with a population of over 1 million, while by comparison the U.S. has only 9. While much attention has been paid recently to the global megalopolis phenomenon, the trend in China is towards slightly smaller cities of several million. But there are many of these cities, and they tend to be geographically concentrated.

Living space in China has quadrupled since the 1980s. People live in bigger apartments that are approximately 4 times the size of what they were 20 years ago.

People are moving within city as well. One-third of Shanghai's population changed residences in the 1980s, and half of people living in Chinese cities live in buildings built after 1980.

Displacement

These changes don't take place in void. These projects are not built on a tabula rasa. For everything that is assembled, something is disassembled, moved, destroyed, processed, bought, sold, imported, or mined. While much of the focus in the media has been on architecture, in China there has been an even greater investment in the infrastructures, industries, and products (such as automobiles) that support those architectures.

For example:

In order to construct the 3 Gorges Dam, 1.2 million people have been displaced. This includes 13 major cities, 140 towns, over 1300 villages, and at least 1600 factories and mines.

Old industries and factories throughout China are closing on a large scale to make way for new ones.

People are being moved, especially the floating population and others who get in the way of development. The city of Beijing expelled 400,000 people in preparation for the Olympics. More of Beijing's old city has been recently destroyed because of development than in any other historical period - including the Japanese invasion, and the rule of Mao.

There are also great material displacements. China is currently using half of the world's annual production of concrete. It is using 1/3 of the world's steel output, tripling global prices and affecting economies everywhere. Steel production, and its environmental consequences, has vastly and maybe permanently landscape the landscape and ecology of China.

There are material displacements via offshoot industries like shipping and metal salvaging. The shift in materials and processing marks whole landscape, and has created numerous ecological disasters, like the recent benzene spill in the Songhua River.

Exclusion

Finally, a less quantifiable shift, though perhaps the most significant one, is the social effect that this new phase of development has brought about. Migrant workers, the so-called “floating population”, provide most of the labor for new construction projects. In Chinese cities there is a system called Hukou, a household registration protocol that operates somewhat like an urban “passport” entitling residents to privileges like education and healthcare. Developed during Mao’s rule, the system was used as a way of controlling the growth of urban populations, and managing labor and resources. Today, it persists, though in a less rigorous form, and has mutated, with the help of market forces, into a process that produces a privileged urban minority. The growing consumer class increasingly lives in self-contained and gated communities. Non-urban migrant residents live in what are basically slums on the borders of the city, or even on the construction sites themselves. They have almost no rights in the cities that they are building, and as a result are regularly subject to exploitation. The problem is not just that they are paid low wages, but that they are often not paid at all. The construction industry in China owes workers \$15 billion in unpaid wages.



Construction Worker, Beijing, October 2005

The Chinese government’s authoritarian rule, and the still lingering registration system, make it virtually impossible for these workers, and for urban residents, to make claims for nonpayment, to defend themselves against having their homes bulldozed, or to resist being ousted from the city, as Beijing did with before the visit of the Olympic committee. This has created a fertile and predatory environment for real estate development.

Where will it lead? Economists agree that the real estate bubble will burst (Shanghai now has a vacancy rate of 25%), the question is just when, and with what consequences. What happens when the building stops?

If the so-called West is indeed interested in being part of the processes taking place in China, what is its role? Is it really our desire to export the most vulgar, most expensive, most spectacular, and BIGGEST types of architectures just because we can? Do we really have nothing better to offer than scale? There is architecture being built in China that can't be built anywhere else; the question is - does that mean it needs to be built? Perhaps, at least for architecture, there is a thing as having "too much freedom".

2005. Daniela Fabricius

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