Research and the Latent Metropolis

"Enumerators [of the 1953 Chinese census] were also instructed to record on the top of the form whether the community was urban or rural."

— John S. Aird, *The Preparations for China's 1982 Census*

LANCE CHARLES WALTERS

University of Hawaii at Manoa

As the world becomes less rural, the relationship between people and the built environment gains complexity and importance, warranting new academic exploration. In China this complexity of urbanism is particularly nuanced, a fact owing to the countries deep cultural history more than its often cited pace of recent urbanization. Rather than focusing on historically static urban nodes, China may be better understood through its peripheral areas. The fluctuating boundaries surrounding these dense points contains a rich history of the Sino-urban condition.

In modern China there is a renewed interest in stemming the sprawling growth of its megacities, and with this a refocusing of its growth management strategies in order to do so. This goal, nor the search for a solution, is not unprecedented, it is in fact deeply ingrained into the countries civic history. This evolving search, consisting primarily of controlled migrations and transmuted definitions, constitutes a significant manipulation of the peripheral urban areas that surround the most populous nodes.

The true diversity and character of city life in China is visible in these places, shown in the stratification of its components. As one representative example, the possibilities of large population shifts combined with the speed of modern development have formed a new design type: the latent metropolis is an unprecedented and transitory modern condition defined by its present state and future aspirations; a temporary type not identified by its form or function but by its potential to be a fully functioning urban space.

This paper examines peripheral urban areas in China and their underlying complexities, as well as the particular nuances of studying urbanism in China. Building on the study of these peripheral areas, a Shanghai-based design studio is used as a case study to outline this research work. While the notion of the 'latent metropolis' was the basis for speculative design project, this paper primarily stresses the relationship of the structure of the studio to studying peripheral regions in China.

STUDIO

Operating out of Shanghai for 17 weeks, four University of Hawaii Manoa students and one Tongji University student explored sub conditions of peripheral urban China. The students were asked to analyze the design premise, current use, and future potential of real projects around Shanghai. In the context of modern and historical Chinese cities, and contemporary design typologies each student selected a development from Shanghai's now famous One City/Nine Town project. Though these 'towns' are known for their sensational architecture and apparent lack of inhabitants, they also may provide insight into a much more complex urban scenario.[1]

The studio promoted an understanding the varying context of city life and life behind the architectural facade. For the students it was an opportunity to not only design in a new environment but think about what it means to work on top of projects that have been developed with a very strong intent. The backstory eventually leading to the creation of the towns provides substantial insight into China as well.

THE FIVE YEAR PLANS AND MODERN MIGRATION IN CHINA

The projects the students chose from were conceived under the Shanghai Planning Commission's One-City Nine-Town initiative, a program itself linked to the 10th of the Peoples Republic of China's Five-Year Plans. These plans have strongly influenced the movement of people around the metropolitan areas of
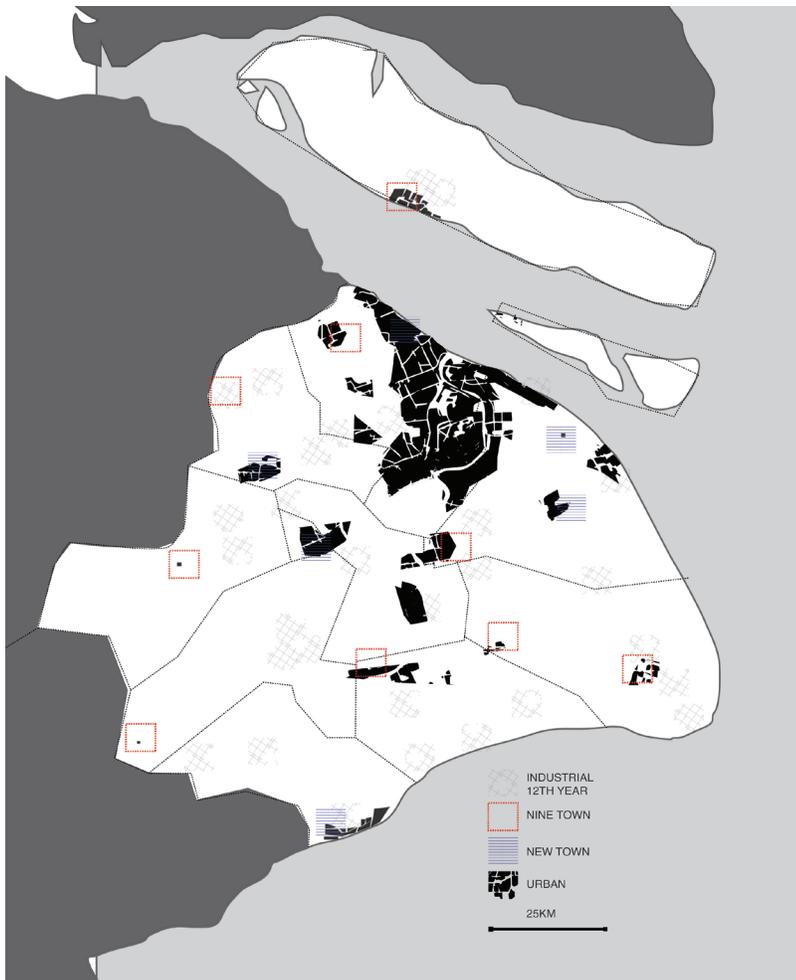

Figure 1: Shanghai- Districts, Urban areas, Nine Towns, New Towns (Author).

China for the last 60 years.

The first Five Year Plan was issued four years after the Communist Party first took control of the country in 1949 and focused on socialist ideals and industrialization.[2] However, because China had been isolated from many aspects of globalization there was little experience with how to go about industrialization and to a large extent, at least early on, soviet industrial models which emphasized heavy industry were used.[3] Prioritizing industrialization over urbanization, only the transformation of cities into industrial areas was promoted and little consideration was given to distinguishing between any variants of non-rural growth types.

The second Five Year Plan (officially the *Great Leap Forward*) began in 1956 and directly addressed growth by promoting industrialization in both urban and rural areas and to put a "steel mill in every backyard".[4] These "backyards" can be seen as the precursor to the municipal perimeters we see today. Official administrative city regions were created to delineate the new and large urban areas. This divisioning localized and empowered planning efforts, which began fortifying "satellite" industrial communities.[5]

In modern China the 10th such Plan was initiated in 2001 through the Jiang Zemin/ Zhu Rongji administration.[6] Against the backdrop of ultra fast development, this plan explicitly addressed the expansion of the largest urban nodes. It promoted new city and town-based urbanization in the areas around megacities as a way to curb megacity sprawl. Part of this included the conversion of ag land to town and industrial park construction land and led to projects like the One City Nine town program.

Amongst other things, the most recent (12th) Five Year Guideline addresses megacity expansion as well. In a strategic shift, this initiative promotes growth and expansion across the country and the development of a well balanced array of 'medium' sized cities well beyond the major metropolitan areas.[7] This decentralization has been courted by political leaders through major rural development initiatives such as the Building of a New Socialist Countryside (BNSC) program.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

In addition to population flows, the study of urban areas is greatly affected by their perceived boundaries. The apparent population of a urban area may seem

Figure 2: Kurt Chiusolo. "The Thread". The University of Hawaii Manoa, 2013.

universally understandable, however the definition of an 'urban area' and 'population' actually varies widely according to individual, country and time period. Within China the definitions of urban areas, cities and towns are unique and especially varied. These equivocations also create major challenges when analyzing historical data and present day China. Chinese definitions also differ from many western definitions, posing challenges when making international comparisons.

From shi to shining chengshi "⬜"(shì):

In modern China there is a complex layering of administrative divisions and it's important to avoid using generalized terms when discussing demographics there. By law there are three major divisions but in practice there are five, each with its own set of subdivisions.[8] These primary administrative subdivisions float independent of other territorial designations. For example, because the official designation of 'city' does not confer any official 'urban' status Shanghai may be said to be the largest 'city' in China by population, but Chonqing is actually larger by the population of its administrative area.[9]

This evolving organizational structure developed as a response to many national economic and social policies, however Chinese conceptions of urban bounds are founded in ancient tradition. Historically, its walled cities were established primarily for administrative reasons (as opposed to delineating social, economic or geographic areas).[10] With few exceptions, administration remains the reason most areas are defined today.

In 1953 China classified 1600 places as 'urban' and included some industrial districts and 'towns'. Included in this figure were 193 'cities', the definition for which was any place with a population over 100,000. [11] Soon other criteria that could lead to city status was added and before long other areas, some of which may have had populations less than 50,000, were given 'city' status. This accounts for some of the dramatic swings in city counts between census. Though one of several possible criteria for 'city' status remains a population of over 100,000, the PRC has redefined the other criteria for becoming a 'city' three times since 1953. At first an easing, then tightening and subsequently easing , changes to 'city' status criteria such as the number of certain government officials who live there and various population ratios can radically alter figures.[12]

Adding complexity matter of definitions, demographics in China are often tied to socioeconomic factors. In the US most urban areas are primarily comprised of a non-agricultural population, however in China the agricultural population even in the most dense areas is large and is considered a critical component of their population statistics. Agricultural figures are separated from permanent residents figures in several different ways. For the 1964 census China changed two criteria to becoming a recognized city- the minimum non-ag population was raised, and the non-ag percentage of a places 'overall' population was raised.[13] In other words, a place could become a 'city' by achieving a certain non-ag population, or by having a certain percentage of its 'overall' population be non-agricultural. 'Overall" must be specified, because in the census results the numerical population ascribed to a 'city' did not include its agricultural inhabitants. All of this criteria was revised again in 1982 and the 'total population' for a city now includes most agricultural residents within given geographic boundaries.[14]

Today the Province-level Municipality of Shanghai contains 16 County-level Districts and 1 County-level County [sic]. Each of the 17 County-level divisions has its own urban core which are independent of Shanghai's 210 Township-level subdistricts and towns.[15]

3

Figure 3: Gaoqiao New Town (Holland Town), Pudong New Area, Shanghai, China, 2013 (Author).

4

Figure 4: Zhujiajiao ancient water town. Not all of the Nine Towns are new or have a western theme.
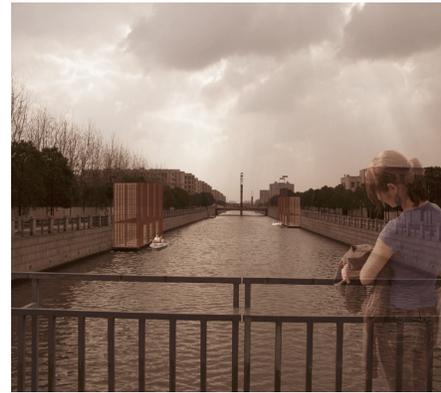
ENDNOTES

1. For more on the developments of the Nine Towns, One City program see Harry den Hartog, ed. *Shanghai New Towns.* (010 Publishers, 2010).

2. *Communist China 1955-1956 Policy Documents with Analysis*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

3. Leo A. Orleans. *"The 1953 Chinese Census in Perspective". The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 16, No. 4.* (Association for Asian Studies, 1957).

4. Choh-Ming Li. *"China's Industrial Development, 1958-63".* The China Quarterly (1964).

5. K. Fung. *"Satellite Town Development in the Shanghai City Region." The Town Planning Review, Vol. 52, No. 1* (Jan., 1981).

REQUISITIONING URBANISM

The One City, Nine Town projects lay within Shanghai's metropolitan area, spread across 6 of its County-level districts. The studio explored several of these recent towns and, unavoidably, the dichotomy between architecture and urban issues. Titled *Requisitioning Urbanism* the speculative project engaged a very real prospect- what happens to these places when they do become inhabited?

Though they originated from the same program, the backstory of each development varies and the data pertaining to them is often disputed. There is an ongoing debate between many interested parties as to how occupied they are. CBS has claimed that 65% of new developments are unoccupied, while some academic and business researchers have refuted those figures.[16, 17]

While it's unclear whether these speculative cities will become vibrant, localized-towns, it is very possible that they will come to be inhabited in the near future. Three of these Nine Town projects lay to the east, in Shanghai's Pudong district. Though it once was largely comprised of massive construction projects which initially sat empty, now much of this area is a functioning civic region. In the areas around the Nine Towns projects there is also evidence that other demand-driven development projects are being established. New rail lines and Special Economic Zones will likely draw more people to these areas. Experimenting with the adapting of existing development models is not unprecedented in China. Perhaps on another scale, Pere Calthorpe has called this type of work a "new model of urban planning".[18] Even as they are under construction, the redesigning huge blocks of land has already started.

By taking advantage of a unique and temporary condition within urban design, such as the latent metropolis, design students may at the very least avoid a generic confrontation with the common or trending design prospects involving modern China (sustainable, landscape, utopian, etc). But there is a sensitivity to working here, especially for the outsider. Using developments with such dramatic and sensational architecture for an urban focused project did create its own challenges. The spectacular forms and concepts can in the end be an advantageous hurdle for the students if it can be overcome. Asking them to look beyond their

preconceptions of a designed space, students initially sensitive to the prospect of having to 'criticize' something in China may come to realize the possibilities for discussion here are better than expected.

CONCLUSION

In Culture for Sale, Fan suggests that, for "the creators of new classical forms, architecture itself is not the goal; rather, that architecture is a tool to serve other more immediate purposes."[19] It is important to inspect those purposes- the meaning and intentions behind the architecture. The students were made to question their initial assumptions in order to connect with an idea that underlies so much of the built environment in China. Independent of the gleaming and utopian design projects in China students were encouraged to step back from sensationalized aspects of the place and consider how to integrate and evolve with an existing site condition. One possible takeaway from the studio was a shift in critical thinking, namely that there is value in exploring the many microcosms of the built environment.

Though Decentralization through rural development may help to reduce the influx of residents in the megacities, it will not eliminate growth of the metropolis entirely and will certainly continue to affect the shape and condition of peripheral areas that exist outside of the most populous city nodes. While China intends test new growth strategies for the country as a whole it remains vitally important to think about the future of the existing places in the urban periphery. Although some may be not yet be fully established, with our continued attention they all have potential to be responsive, vital environments in the near future.

4

Figure 5: Josh Shishido. "Found in Translation." The University of Hawaii at Manoa, 2013.

6. As part of the evolution of the country's political structure, the 10th five-year initiative was also the last time it was referred to as a 'plan'. Each initiative is now officially titled a 'guideline.'

7. China's 12th Five-Year Plan (2011-2015), (Chinese translation by The Delegation of the European Union in China, 2012).

8. China's Pollical System. China.org.cn (accessed 02/10/2014).

9. Kam Wing Chan. *"Misconceptions and Complexities in the stufy of China's Cities: Definitions, Statistics and Implications." Eurasian Geography and Economics, Vol. 48, No. 4* (July-August, 2008).

10. Wolfram Eberhard explains this early relationship of boundaries and governance while discussing the Chou dynasty of the first century BC: " in the dogma of the Chinese religion of Heaven, all the countries of the world were subject to the Chinese emperor, the son of heaven. thus there could be no such thing as other independent states. in practice the dependence of various regions on the ruler naturally varied: near the centre, that is to say near the rulers place of residence, it was most pronounced; then gradually diminished in the direction of the periphery'. Eberhard. *A History of China. 3rd Ed.* (California: University of California Press. 1969).

11. Theodore Shabad. *"The Population of China's Cities"*. *Geographical Review Vol. 49, No. 1*. (American Geographical Society, Jan 1959).

12. Reejtsu Kojima. *"Urbanization in China". The Developing Economies, XXXIII-2* (June 1995).

13. John S. Aird. *"The Preparations for China's 1982 Census". The China Quarterly, No 91* (Cambridge University Press, Sept 1982).

14. Chan. *Misconceptions and Complexities*.

15. www.Shanghai.gov.cn (accessed 02/10/2014).

16. 60 Minutes. *"China's real estate bubble,"* CBS 2013.

17. Getting your hands on specific data remains difficult. see: (http://english.caixin.com/2010-08-26/100174332.html Jul. 2010).

18. Peter Calthorpe. *"The Real Problem with China's Ghost Towns".* *Metropolis 01 Sept 2013. www.metropolis.com* Web. 01 Sept 2013.

19. K. Sizheng Fan. *"Culture for Sale". Journal of Architectural Education, Vol. 63, No. 1, Vernaculars in the Age of Digital Reproduction* (Taylor & Francis, Ltd. Oct., 2009).