

The Noble, the Traditional and the Cosmopolite: Globalization and Changes of Urban Landscapes in Beijing

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In Beijing, magazines for expatriates frequently publish advertisements for “exclusive” gated communities located in the suburbs. The ad for The Emerald offers for example more than two hundred spacious villas built in “north American style” and a comprehensive range of services and amenities. The residence is further publicized for its standard of living and comfort, which “not only approximates that of North America, but perhaps exceeds it”.

The existence of such kind of gated communities in Beijing is not surprising, as most of the newly globalized cities have witnessed their emergence in recent years. If we consider them in the broader context of changes characterizing the city’s morphology, though, this phenomenon raises two important issues: what kinds of new urban landscapes are emerging in Beijing and how are globalizing processes integrated into their formation?

In Beijing, changes to the built environment have been particularly salient as the city follows its rapid path towards the Olympics and a newly achieved global city status. The pace and the extent of changes in the urban morphology have attracted a world wide attention, while its urban heritage dramatically disappears under the bulldozers of modernity and famous flagship projects materialize the city’s new image.

The relatively uniform and monotonous landscape of a Beijing formerly controlled by socialist urban policies has been increasingly diversifying with the emergence of new urban elements – such as high-rises and villas – that are often considered as the logical outcome of economic reforms and globalization. As Meinig (in Knox 1991: 181) reminds us, though, urban built environment can not be reduced to questions of art, technique and economics, but should be considered as a “mold and mirror” of the social, political and cultural values of its time. This paper focuses thus on the way in which different agencies, scales, and images are materially and discursively drawn into the formation of the new built environment.

Some studies on urban landscapes

The American geographer Paul Knox (1991) explores the cityscapes transformations that characterized Washington D.C. during the 1980s. As he convincingly argues, the emergence of postmo-

dern architecture and distinctive urban settings can be interpreted as an outcome of the transition from a Fordist economy to a flexible regime of accumulation and, on a cultural perspective, to the transition from modernism to postmodernism.

Knox also points to the necessity to consider both production and consumption patterns: as he explains, the emergence of a “new bourgeoisie” seeking distinction through consumption, leads to a strong demand for aestheticized and commodified built elements. On the production side, he takes into consideration the new economic patterns but also the professional orientation of architects and urban planners in order to understand the different processes leading to specific urban patterns.

China has witnessed similar reconfigurations of its cityscapes and Knox’s approach provides useful directions to grasp them. Wu (1998: 281) suggests, however, that further enquiry is needed to identify the relevant agencies engaged in shaping Chinese cityscapes.

This paper focuses on a specific kind of urban space that emerged with the reforms: the ‘global residential spaces’. Initially built to provide suitable spaces to accommodate managers of trans-national corporations, these residences have rapidly developed in recent years, following the city’s increasing involvement in global affairs. These spaces are particularly interesting because they form a distinctive urban landscape in both ar-

chitectural styles and urban form and are thus one of the visible expressions of the city’s changing social and economic context.

Strongly related to globalization, they also allow us to explore the different processes through which globalization is materializing in Beijing. As the concept of transnational urbanism suggests, contemporary cities are increasingly being shaped by agencies located in distant places and flows of different nature – including financial, human, but also images and ideas that circulate in the world (Cartier 2002). This is not to say that local agencies are insignificant or that they play a passive role in the globalizing processes; rather, globalization is considered here as a matter of scale, indicating that cities think themselves as part of the world and play an active part in producing and integrating the global scale into their formation.

In this study, three different urban and architectural styles - the noble, the traditional and the cosmopolite - have been identified, each of them embodying a particular way to conceive, practice and materialize the global scale into the built environment.

Based on interviews conducted with real estate producers and observations of the commodity housing compounds, this research takes also into account the advertising material that is produced by the residences’ marketing departments, which proved to be a rich source of information.



Example for the Noble Style

The noble and classic style

The first style that has been identified is the ‘noble and classic’ style, which takes inspiration from ‘classical references’ in order to convey a sense of luxury and distinction to high-rise residences. What is considered as ‘classic’, though, is a rather flexible category including ancient Greco-roman elements, gothic style and neo-classic references, suggesting that the accuracy of references is less important than the symbolic imaginary they offer.

“The overall architectural design is contemporary, luxurious and glorious. The design of the superstructure is inspired by the Gothic style of classical Europe” (Palm Springs, ad).

From an architectural point of view, classical references materialize in very diverse ways. This may be limited to small building details or, on the contrary, be expressed through an ostentatious post-modern style in the façade or in the interior design. Chateau Glory has, for example, a “breathtaking domed Caesars Hall lobby lounge clad in chiselled Italian marble”.

For the villas, references to classic and Western imagery are physically much more evident. Villa’s style is clearly inspired by Western models, ranging from “classic European and Mediterranean with a roman style portico” to “suburban American style villas”. Notwithstanding the diversity of references, aside from a

few exceptions, the residences look very similar and the style barely matches what is being referred to. The link between the images and the way they materialize may thus be better understood as an attempt to create connections between the residences and the ‘spirit’ associated to the places evoked. This is particularly manifest in the residences’ names, linking them to well-known places: Palm Springs, Upper East Side, etc.

While the emergence of such residences undoubtedly is an expression of the increasingly globalized status of the city, it also suggests that there are locally specific ways of taking part in the globalization process. Here, globalization essentially offers a pool of images that respond to Beijing’s emerging middle class, who has a strong demand for distinction and for a new lifestyle. Late socialist China lacked such images of wealth and elitism (Wu 2004: 230), and real estate developers turned to global references to provide the material and immaterial expressions of the white collars’ new status. In order to understand why they refer precisely to Western images, it is useful to turn to the city’s specific development of luxury housing.

As mentioned earlier, the first commodified, high-end residences that appeared on the real estate market were supplied to accommodate foreigners and thus tried to reproduce Western characteristics and standards of living. Being one of the first expressions of luxury, such forms continue to pervade present developments.

The traditional style

In recent years, developers have been particularly keen to deploy forms inspired by traditional architecture. Cathay View is the villa compound that perhaps best illustrates a new tendency concerning, to differing degrees, an increasing number of newly built residences.

The originality of Cathay View lies in its hybrid architecture featuring both Chinese and Western characteristics.

“Cathay View embarks on the cultural renaissance of Chinese traditional architecture and combines it with a Western interior design optimizing the spatial and structural layout. The concept blends the traditional with the contemporary, allows the East to mingle with the West” (Cathay View, ad).

The villas’ architecture consequently reproduces the shape of the local traditional courtyard house and the layout of the residence follows fengshui rules. The interior layout, however, is adapted to modern life requirements and the master plan reproduces the usual features characteristic of Beijing high-end gated communities: highly controlled access, with leisure amenities and shopping spaces. While residences embarking on a reproduction of traditional shapes are still very few, a growing number of compounds have integrated various ‘local’ concepts into their general design, ranging from garden layout to interior design.

In the promotional discourse, invoking tradition appears as a way to convey a sense of historicity and identity capable of satisfying expatriate’s desire for exoticism, the overseas Chinese’s search for an idealised tradition, and a growing body of Chinese consumers who consider Western developments to be *yongsu* – literally, revealing bad taste. Although the ‘traditional turn’ displayed by developers seems to be no more than another strategy to capture a niche market in a highly competitive environment, it is also symptomatic of the tensions characterizing contemporary Beijing. Chinese society is undergoing a rapid modernization process and this doesn’t go without raising important issues. The question as to how to develop a modern Chinese identity



Examples for the Traditional Style from Cathay View Commodity Housing Compound

and how to materialize it is being extensively discussed in the architectural milieu. As several interviewees suggested, there is also an increasing public interest in local history and heritage (see also article on the development of the hutongs in Beijing of this issue), which combines with global imperatives to promote “authentic spaces” in order to create a distinctive identity and attract tourism. Up to a few years ago, it would not have been conceivable to draw on traditional or local styles to build high end residences, but developers have been quick to grasp the new trend and turn it into valuable residential projects.

Cosmopolite style

In 2004, Jianwai Soho appeared on Beijing’s real estate market as a small revolution, which owed its success largely to a design concept that epitomizes the latest style characterizing the cityscape: the cosmopolite.

Jianwai Soho distinguishes itself for its multifunctionality – which mixes residential, office and commercial activities – and for its open and accessible spaces, which are in stark contrast to the central garden and boundary wall model deployed by Beijing’s standard residential communities. This layout characterises an increasing number of large scale pro-

jects, whose emergence is also the result of a growing interest raised by international investors looking for high quality spaces to expand fast developing activities such as luxury brands shopping.

The developers are mainly calling to a clientele that distinguishes itself through fashionable consumption: “white collar workers who are chaser of fashion, and have strong consumption ability and enthusiasm” (Fortune Plaza, ad). This is a young, cosmopolitan and ideally mobile clientele, which likes to travel, spend time at trendy places and buy famous and expensive brands.

While consumption styles are gaining an important status in contemporary Chinese cities, design has recently become very popular, reflecting the increasing consumer’s interest in aspects previously effaced by socialist uniformity. Accordingly, this trend is materialized in a more modern and fashionable architectural style, in opposition to the postmodern references used in the “noble style”: “an avant-garde design, a design free of the norm, a design conducive to investment”, “concise, clear, modern and stylish” or “smooth and plane, and harmonizes with CCTV headquarters” (Jianwai Soho, Cosmopolite and Fortune Plaza, ads).

In this context, to involve foreign architects and designers in the project is considered as essential to guarantee an international, high end and trendy image. Indeed, the developers of Jianwai Soho worked with a Japanese architect; and China Central Place was designed by KPF, an American globally recognized company. The multiplication of such “signature projects” (Dovey, 1999: 159) is certainly also related to the recent tendency of Beijing Municipal authorities to rely on starchitects to design the city’s new symbols such as the Olympic Stadium or Rem Koolhaas’ CCTV-Tower.

The cosmopolite style illustrates that the links between globalization and the

built environment are not only mediated through flows of images, but also through the participation of global agencies such as international investors and professionals working on a global scale. On the consumption side, cosmopolitan spaces furnish consumers with the opportunity to “transgress the constraints of locality” (Schein 1999: 345) to synchronize with the world of global cities and to define their own identity as part of the world community.

Final thoughts

As this concise exploration of Beijing new urban landscapes suggests, reading the built environment offers interesting insights to capture the complexity of a fast changing city. What emerges is that the existence of various architectural styles does not simply involve a ‘physical’ distinction between the residences. Each of them, in reality, epitomizes a particular way to articulate local imperatives with global flows, following the evolution of the city’s political, social and economical conditions.

This paper has focused on Beijing global residential spaces as a way to account for the city’s increasing inscription in the global space of flows and to understand how this condition is affecting its materialities. This is not to say that globalization is an overwhelming factor. Rather, globalization is regarded as a set of complex processes that are not only intertwining with particular local conditions but are actually being shaped by them (Wu 2006).

What has been highlighted, though, are only some of the processes characterizing Beijing. To get a deeper picture of the urban transformations, this study should be extended to the whole city in order to identify and describe the new landscapes constituting it and to understand the various ways these spaces are being produced and consumed.



Examples for the Cosmopolitan Style

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