

The state of cities in China

The high-speed city building of reform-era China will soon yield an agglomeration of many large, non-agricultural settlements. China's massive, geographically clustered urban core will repeat itself via a common set of distinguishable spatial manifestations. The stories of individuals' plights and everyday life were irrelevant to the planning of this spatial spread. Instead, a totalising utopian vision, with the city itself as a subject, dominates the propagandistic narrative of urbanisation. Will the upgrade of infrastructure, some of which includes unprecedentedly fast high-speed rail, redeem conceptual planning biases by interconnecting the splatter-patterned urban spots across the country?

Bogdan Stamoran



THE MASSIVE, NEWLY BUILT ENVIRONMENT of China has appeared mostly at a low cost and at spectacularly high speed. The real loser in most of this urbanisation is farmland. It has been besieged by vertical cities, seemingly dropped from the sky.

Yongfu Li, Anron Dang and Hongyin Cao have analysed the spatial spread in the Yangtze River Delta over the past 30 years and shown that administrative status adjustments – the central-government-approved bureaucratic transformation from village into town – for locations becoming cities accelerated urban spread. Due to the dual-track legal system for urban and rural land, land was first transferred at a low rural value from the farmers working it and then commercialised at drastically higher values as urban land for construction. The result was an uncontrolled urban spread (Li, Dang and Cao: 993).

By 2020, a gigantic meta-city is poised to dominate the country, aggregated along its eastern coastal periphery, between the Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong metropolitan areas and their respective estuaries. Clockwise from the top of the map, the northeast and the Bohai coastal region in the north, the Yangtze River Delta further south, the Pearl River Delta in the southeast, as well as the industrial cluster around Xi'an and Chongqing in the west, will serve as outlines of the conurbation.

Piper Rae Gaubatz explains that the key underlying societal changes allowing for the new spatial fabric of post-Mao China are the specialisation and gradual commodification of land use (Gaubatz: 28). The changes to both specialisation and commodification of land use have delivered new textures and forms that have resulted in questionable sustainability for such a large, urbanised mass, which has been almost exclusively planned on a block-by-block basis (with large blocks as the basic units). Commutes between residence and work, or business district, educational district and administrative district, are carbon-intensive and often based on private car use. Before the specialisation of land use for residential, commercial and industrial use, Chinese citizens often resided close to or in their place of their work, eliminating the need for commuting. Furthermore, the loss of agricultural land in the areas surrounding the cities, becoming earmarked for industrial and/or urban development, lengthens the process of food procurement for the city dweller.

Better inter-connection, better life?

Of key importance, then, is China's emphasis on the building of a massive, high-volume and high-speed transport network.

The urban nodes within this evolving network are becoming integrated through a high-speed, large volume transport network of air, rail, expressway and water links. Different modes of transport are interlinked via multi-modular transport hubs.

Infrastructure is centrally coordinated and implemented: the national highway network plan, as well as high-speed rail development targets of the Ministries of Transport and Railways, respectively establish arteries for the relatively controlled but fast movement of people and goods. Additionally, the project resonates with political power through its sheer size and scale. The layout of the national expressway system sets out seven routes radiating from the capital, Beijing. These are enmeshed with nine longitudinal north-south corridors and 17 east-west horizontal routes. The total length of the system will exceed 100,000 km (62,000 miles) (see map).

According to the Chinese Ministry of Railways, currently China runs 86,000 km (54,000 miles) of rail, the second most extensive network in the world. 6,552 km of these are high-speed tracks, the longest amount in the world. Within two years, 42 dedicated high-speed rail tracks will be finished, bringing the total number of newly built high-speed rail tracks to 13,000 km. China's rail network will surpass 110,000 km. Of the new high-speed tracks, 5,000 km support transport speeds of 250 km/h and 8,000 km of them allow for transport at as much as 350 km/h. Arranged within a grid of four north-south and another four east-west corridors, the rail-transport network will include ring infrastructure for the Bohai Gulf and the Pearl and Yangtze River Deltas. High-speed rail is integrated with an emphasis on inter-modal terminals: high-speed rail terminals are placed adjacent to airports and expressways.

Movement is of paramount importance for the prosperity of the cities' and the country's – if not the whole planet's – sustainable future. The new fibres of transportation will need not only to connect but eventually integrate the urban spread of the last 30 years into a dense but functioning machine for living. China's productivity will be upgraded by the increased speed of movement of goods and people.

Taxonomies of urban landscape and building tactics in China Urban forms across China are not a monolithic whole. There is, however, a repertoire apparent in their manifestations. Recognisable city and city-fabric types are spreading across China, establishing an urban-rural sprawl. Kuang Xiaoming, editor of *Urban China* (城市中国), produced a compilation

Above:
Knocking down old structures on the way to *tabula rasa*. Photo by Scott Ballantyne

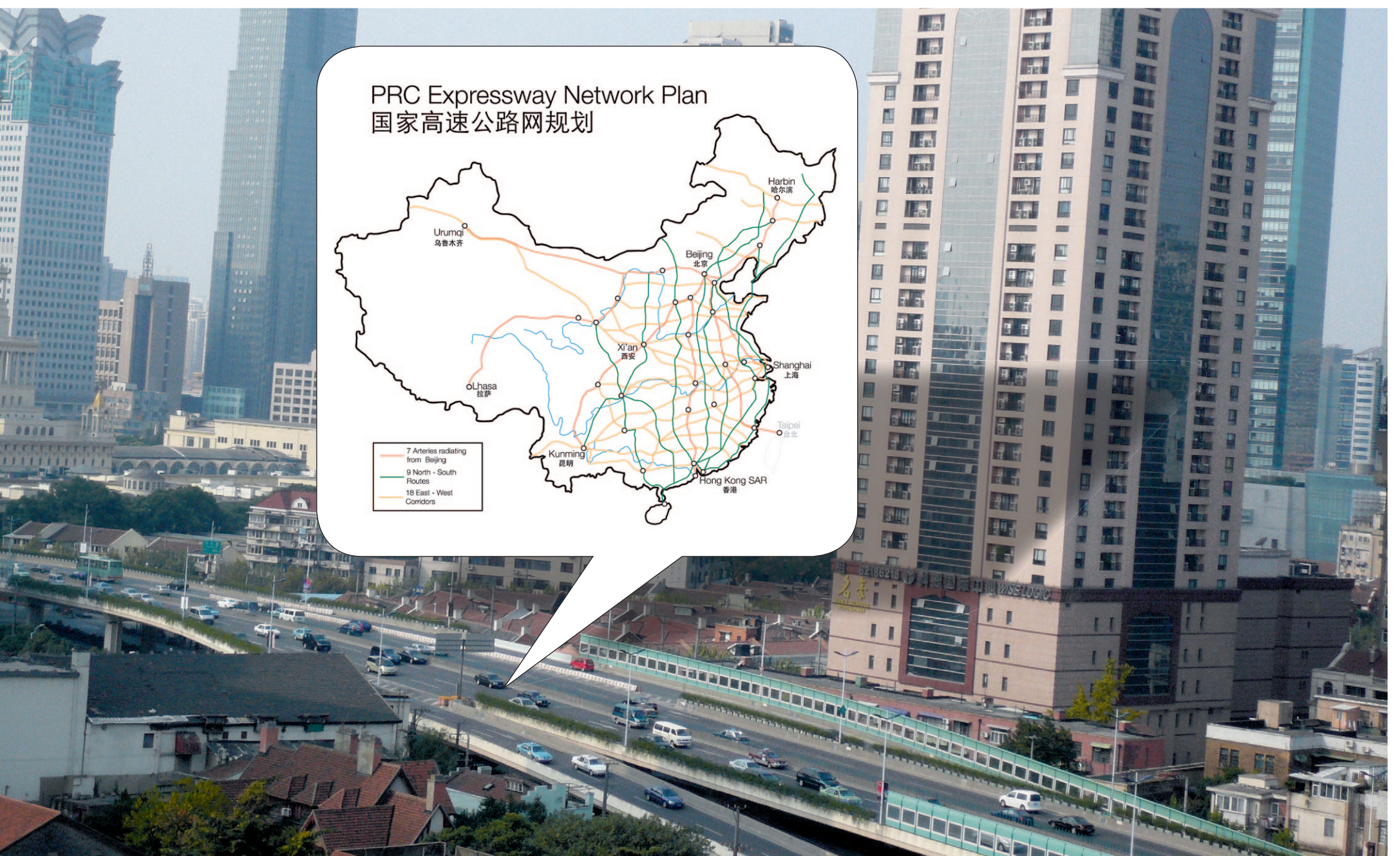
of inextricably interrelated physical patterns of city fabric across China. These are economic development zones, new city areas (城市新区), central business districts, central city areas, 'Old City' areas, university cities, mixed commercial areas, technology parks, residential areas and logistics areas. He concludes with a ten point list, which by its physical and methodological prevalence could define 'Chinese-style city-making' and which can be an analytical framework for understanding the streetscape in China:

- A (polarised) pattern of the two cities: new city – old city.
- An administrative centre that employs a limited range of designs and alignment for institutions.
- A city ring road (usually an elevated expressway).
- A wide city axis (often as part of the administrative centre).
- A central park (often adjacent to the administrative centre).
- Garden residential communities (gated).
- Elevated highways (and the interchanges they spawn).
- Waterfront developments.
- Symbolism (象征主义) and
- Fengshui doctrine (Kuang 12-14).

These recognisable instances of urban landscape in China hint to the prevalence of a *tabula rasa* development approach.

The new cities are shaped by building codes that uniformly orient the large alignments of blocks of Corbusian-style residential towers. These are set well away from large roads, grouped in (gated) residential compounds. Scores of cities in China have developed agglomerations of curtain-wall office tower clusters: the central business district (CBD). These are examples of Manhattanism, the culture of congestion identified by Rem Koolhaas in *Delirious New York* that has become the dominant form of the contemporary iconic, vernacular commercial district.

Wide, alienating boulevards (axes) in China are a combination of symbolic traditions, the need for strategic troop movement, as reasoned by Europe in the 19th century, and automobile-centric urban planning. The urban nightscape of extensive neon and LED displays necessarily infuse the modern city in China with a sprinkling of a fairy-like aura. Waterfront developments across the country often employ *fengshui* but distil it into commercial leverage in real-estate advertisement and, by extension, deal making. The city ring roads – usually elevated expressways – and their numerous vast interchanges shooting twirls of multiple ribbons command vast areas of urban space. They have pulverised the areas they run through but tend to be



tolerated because the high-volume expressway network is of great importance to the new cities in China.

Jiang Jun analyses in *Urban China* how cities are being rapidly built in China by describing 11 interrelated techniques: enclosing (land), reclaiming (land), linking (land), deconstructing (available forms), renovating, faking (using 'exotic' European styles), copying (multiplying designs across a plot), decorating, landscaping, collaging and mixing. The techniques involve the preparation of a real-estate site, as well as the laying out and composition of the new structures. Due to the availability of low-cost labour and large physical scales, high speeds can be achieved by an extremely short planning and design stage and the wide employment of readily available standard and modular designs.

Towards some conclusions

The ethos driving the spatial change is often relying on an abstract 'concept-city' contained within a mantra of progress. The consequences are radical transformations for the everyday practices of life. As part of the large-scale urbanisation movement, China's path provides an opportunity to reassess the practices of planning, building, and community development themselves.

Neville Mars' analysis on contemporary city-building is that two types of urban planning can be distinguished: one is founded on a belief in expertise and the power of ideas. The other distrusts grandiosity and abstraction, correct forms and only trusts individual solutions, based on the belief that man's genius is his adaptability. Their rift exposes the model as the crux of this divide. Type one favours institutionalised, large-scale responses; while type-two planning focuses on surveying, research and organic emergence (Mars: 220).

China is a hybrid of the results typically associated with these two types of planning, albeit overwhelmingly a type one with a very small input of type-two, its built urban spaces have the look and scale of abstract, visionary planning. In the urban landscape some organic emergence and informality prevails, but as research by Luofeng Qin on Shanghai's structural transformation shows, little to no community collaborative elements are fed into the planning process and its execution (Qin: 239). Only in exceptional cases is structural change not top-down. If it is not the central government that dictates and carries out the transformations, it is the local government. State capitalist market principles alone underpin residential and commercial development.

Above:
View of Jing An district, Shanghai.
Photo by Scott Ballantyne

There are, hence, clear implications in the new urban environment of China for design, architecture theory and planning: spatial planning interventions should be based on multidisciplinary input, community focused, and preferably lightweight. Furthermore, flexible frameworks should replace long-term planning. Yong He Chang, currently Dean of the Architecture Department at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, deplores the emphasis on symbolism versus experience in urban form in China and declares that such a 'city of objects' is 'the realisation of the anti-city texture city ideal'.

The narrated universal subject of the propaganda of urbanisation is the concept of the 'city' itself and not the sustainable upgrade of myriad individuals' daily art of life. The concept of the city, according to Michel de Certeau, is both a hero and machinery of modernity. We have seen that urbanites are simply objects of urbanisation rather than subjects in charge of transformation. Perhaps city dwellers, now or in the future, should gain the power and wisdom to constitute themselves as subjects in charge of sustainable urbanisation and not just objects affected by it.

This utopian notion of the urban reverses progress at the expense of casual time and makes space the subject of technology alone. The speculative, large-scale urbanisation of China is a corollary of the country's swift and sustained economic growth. The result is an internationally connected industrial exporter and socialist market consumer. The coming years will show whether planned density can evolve into something more than a quick and socially polarising industrialisation recipe.

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