

QUESTIONS FOR URBAN DESIGN:

Lessons from China

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Renee Y. Chow

UC Berkeley, USA

e-mail: rychow@studiourbis.com

Abstract

During a strategic planning session of our urban design program at Berkeley, a group of faculty reflected upon the critical issues for cities and future pedagogies. There were the expected concerns -- fluctuating densities, changing climate change and sea level rise, resource conservation and equity, public health, and so on. Then someone asked, is urban design succeeding? Are we winning battles but losing the war?

In one arena in particular, urban design seems to be failing -- we lack compelling strategies for building a connected and continuous urbanism. This continuity is characterized by a sense of "insideness" that is captured in everyday phrases: in a room, in a building, in a street, in a neighborhood, and in a city. A common metaphor of this kind of urbanism is a fabric, an interweaving of shared spatial relations with variation and distinctions. Instead of continuity, discrete and singular objects that Koolhaas called "auto-monuments" now dominate our cities. Every component is a "figure," intentionally dissociated from its context to draw attention to its uniqueness. Urbanism is bifurcated between interior realms and exterior dross that winds between a cacophony of competing markers. Identity has shifted from the fabric of neighborhoods to iconic parts -- buildings, parks, and infrastructures -- with a resulting loss of unique urban legibilities within and among cities.

Part of this failure is due to the lack of design paradigms that address contemporary scales of development. For superprojects in Asian superblocks, designers cannot just borrow from planning, emer landscape and architecture design. These superprojects are not small cities, miniature ecologies nor extra large buildings. Traditional tools of urban designers -- master plans, land use plans and design guidelines -- are insufficient, often perceived as too restrictive toward creativity or profit. While new analytic tools have advanced, new generative tools lag behind development.

This lack of compelling urban design paradigms for continuity most recently and most strikingly affects Chinese cities. The fragmenting of Chinese urbanism by automonuments is neither an imposition by foreign designers on Chinese cities nor an inherent pattern of Chinese settlement. It is caused by a convergence of anomalous concentrations of capital wealth, political ambitions, historical urban sizes, and cultural practices of space with global starchitecture. With its emerging economic power, China embarked on a rampant razing of urban legibilities that took centuries to build. While preservation and reuse are beginning to emerge as ways to retain heritage in China, this is neither enough nor the intent of this presentation. Instead, this talk asks what is a progressive urbanism that supports an interwoven, connected and extended experience of cities? And, how can it be achieved?

The talk asks four questions for urban design:

01 *How can designers better understand locales? Global practice does not mean the end of local differences. Since cultural practices are intertwined with the particulars of locale, what is needed are professional competences in reading local conditions with the goal of connecting to that which makes cities unique.*

02 *How does a connected, continuous character of place get developed? Horizontal relations and ground continuities are particularly important to bring pieces of a city together in legible ways. This is not the ground plane but a zone or thick mat associated with the ground -- at grade, below grade and above grade. This is the continuously shared experience of the city. In urban design, large must be integrated with small, public with collective and private, the efficiencies of repetition with the complexity of diversity, and the thematic qualities of identifiable places with the richness of variety.*

03 *How can design actions be better integrated? With the disappearance of development through type, most superprojects in China emerge from the hand of a single designer as a megaproject, megaform, or master plan. In a good design hand, this is a daunting task; in lesser hands, this leads to repetition and uniformity. Alternate tactics are needed to coordinate and integrate the rich diversity and complexity that comes from multiple voices and agents that still hold coherence among the parts. Urban design should enable the emergence of form -- both as collaboration and over time.*

04 *How can we build better design tools that make urban forms not object forms more compelling?*

Our dependence on master plans and design guidelines is not sufficient. Holding continuity solely in the public realm is also not sufficient. To understand urban design as contributing to an extended setting, we need strategies to integrate urban and building systems that do not control by pre-figuring architecture within building envelopes but, instead, allow urbanism to emerge. This is a convergence of city relations with building relations.