

Facing new horizons of domesticity in evolving market

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How to preserve (or not) what we have inherited is a critical contemporary issue that significantly influences the shaping of a sustainable and desirable future. In a world grappling with the challenge of conserving our cultural heritage for the years to come, the boundaries defining what constitutes heritage have grown increasingly nuanced.

This booklet delves into the ongoing international discourse surrounding the preservation (or not) of the built legacy. By examining how even unacknowledged aspects of our inheritance play an integral role in the broader conversation, this publication offers insights into the evolving perspectives shaping the potential futures of our built legacy.

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Designing the future of the past

# Designing the future of the past

A survey across the contemporary international debate



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The contributions, spanning critical heritage, architecture of reuse, future literature studies, post-preservation, and counter-preservation, outline the dual nature of the built legacy of the past—both a positive and negative commons influenced by social, cultural, economic, and environmental contexts.

By providing a comprehensive overview of leading international theories, the book aims to foster interdisciplinary dialogue on the adaptation of urban legacy, heritage, and landscape.

This publication takes inspiration from the 2022 Intensive Seminar ‘Designing the Future of The Past’ and the concurrent PhD Excellence Course 2022-2023 at Politecnico di Torino. The records from the seminar guest lecturers point out diverse ways of approaching the Future of the Past, while PhD students’ works developed in the course assess the topic in the framework of their ongoing PhD research. In the end, the Q & A section addresses a few questions that have emerged from the seminar discussion.



# Designing the future of the past

A survey across the contemporary international debate

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EDITED BY

Elena Guidetti  
Matteo Robiglio

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EDITOR

Politecnico di Torino

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CONTRIBUTORS (in alphabetical order)

Caitlin DeSilvey, Elena Guidetti, Alexandre Monnin,  
Cornelius Holtorf, Bie Plevoets, Matteo Robiglio,  
Daniela Sandler with Riccardo Biondi, Simona  
Canepa, Francisco Díaz, Francesca la Monaca,  
Giulia Montanaro, Riccardo Ronzani,  
Xiao Xiao

---

OPERATIONAL SUPPORT

Lucio Beltrami

---

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Elena Guidetti, Alessandra Leone

---



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di Torino

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Lab

This volume collects the outcomes of the International Seminar “Designing the Future of the Past,” held on 17-18<sup>th</sup> February 2022 in Turin. The event was conducted in collaboration with the Doctoral programs in “Architecture: History and Project” and featured the participation of the PhD program in “Architectural and Landscape Heritage” at Politecnico di Torino. This intensive seminar served as an integral component of the DASP PhD Course titled “Designing the Future of the Past” for the academic year 2022-2023.

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**Author:** Francesca La Monaca

**PhD Student:** 37th Cycle, DASP

**PhD Research Title:** China dwelling  
landscape

# FACING NEW HORIZONS OF DOMESTICITY IN EVOLVING MARKET

## Abstract

The evolution of China's real estate market is intricately linked to the country's multifaceted political and social transformations amidst rapid development. China's swift ascent to economic superpower status has not only fueled domestic and international trade but has also significantly impacted the lifestyle of its populace. Western influences have played a pivotal role, reshaping individuals' perspectives on domestic living.

Current trends underscore a heightened emphasis on home designs catering to dynamic and comfortable lifestyles, reflecting the rising standards driven by an expanding middle class. Dwellings now prioritize flexibility in space, furnished amenities, aesthetic appeal, and technology and privacy considerations, aligning with evolving family life needs.

However, the relentless urbanization has led to a pronounced disconnect between urban centers and rural areas, resulting in both social and environmental challenges. Government initiatives outlined in the 2013 and 2017 countryside plans advocate for village redevelopment, judicious resource utilization, and the creation of environments attractive to individuals seeking refuge from urban chaos.

In response to these directives, a burgeoning sector within the real estate market has emerged, characterized by private villas, resorts, and tourist facilities situated outside urban hubs. These developments adhere to standardized city models while incorporating elements of traditional architecture, creating a new paradigm in rural and natural settings. This interplay between urbanization, government policies, and evolving societal needs highlights the intricate dynamics shaping China's real estate landscape.

## Domesticity in evolving market

China's tremendous development in recent decades has led to a major social and economic change, which in turn has changed the needs and lifestyle of the inhabitants. Needs have grown. The desire for more affluent living conditions has led to a net market response in terms of comfort, variety, selectivity, and adaptability.

Real estate trends in contemporary China now reflect not only the desire for efficiency in the home, but also the need to find renewed solutions for the design of residential spaces. Technology, sustainability, environment, and society are the hot topics in today's debate.<sup>1</sup>

The 21st century has led to an in-depth exploration of the topic of living with countless experiments both in the marketplace and in academia, culminating in the promulgation of guidelines for the design of residential systems.

Today's housing standards proposed by the Department of Buildings concretely reflect the dramatic change that has taken place in recent decades. Comparing the "Evaluation Method and Index System of Commercial Housing" with the average housing standards of the previous century, it is evident that newly constructed buildings "have adequately increased floor area, have improved housing functions, are fully equipped with support facilities, and have a better environment."<sup>2</sup>

In particular, in enunciating the housing standards, described in the document "Active Building Evaluation Standard" approved by "The Architectural Society of China" it is interesting to note that the issue of improving the environment is also taken into account, which is understood both in terms of light, ventilation, livability of the house, and in its relationship with the outside space.

This last issue in particular is the one that I consider pregnant in thinking about new proposals for living spaces today.<sup>3</sup>

The relationship between domestic space and the natural context

<sup>1</sup> Zhang Lei, *Contemporary Architecture in China – Houses*, translated by Yan Ge (LST Publishing House, 2013) p.3

<sup>2</sup> Wu Liangyong, Kim Seok Chul, *China Housing 2000, Cité de l'architecture & du Patrimoine Bibliothèque, Outer-City: Creative Housing City for Beijing Area at BDA*

has often taken a back seat in residential design from the post-war period to the present, in favor of solutions that would solve the problems of overcrowding in cities.

Due to dramatic urban development and population concentration, the real estate industry has experienced a dramatic increase in demand, as a result, real estate developers have found themselves having to erect more clustered housing in order to match supply to demand.<sup>4</sup>

From the traditional residential complexes there has been a shift to the western model, with results that are often “poor” and lacking in architectural value. The solutions are often only a superficial imitation of foreign styles, with a systematic attention to the functionalization of spaces.

This type of construction actually reflects the economic, technical and cultural conditions in the boom from the 70s. High-density housing was the answer to a strong need of the Chinese population and for this reason it was finally embraced despite the distance from previous housing models.

Certainly the race for profit and uncontrolled urbanization led to an almost total disregard for aesthetics and context in the previous century, however sustainable, cultural and modern ways of living are beginning to appear on the market now that housing needs are moving towards diversified contemporary models that are more careful and demanding in their relationship with the environment.

However, in order to understand how the current housing standard in contemporary China was achieved, it is necessary to quickly summarize the rapid changes in Chinese society in 160 of modernization, 1840 to 2000. This particular period can be divided into three recognizable phases.<sup>5</sup>

In the first phase, from 1840 to 1949, China underwent great change at the urban level, housing was associated with a semi-feudal and semi-colonial society. In particular, from 1840 to 1842, China was forced to open its borders, thus causing the first commercial cities to spring up. Increased in those years the

<sup>3</sup> Assessment Standard for Active House, 20 Dicembre 2020 (approval department: Architectural Society of China) Beijing 2020

<sup>4</sup> Zhu Qiana, Hongyan Li, Urban morphology and local citizens in China's historic neighborhoods: A case study of the Stele Forest Neighborhood in Xi'an, *Cities, The International Journal of Urban Policy and Planning*, 2017

sale of opium. The product was in such high demand as to cause the conflict which would lead to the defeat of the Qing dynasty. This was followed, over the years, by the Westernization Movement, the Reform Movement of 1890 and the Revolution of 1911. During this time, capitalist industry and commerce began to flourish, causing rapid development of both commercial and inland industrial and commercial cities, and also causing a shift in China's social structure.

The War of Resistance against Japan, which lasted from 1937 to 1945, and the War of Liberation, which took place between 1945 and 1949, ended this first period, a period of relative immobility in urban construction. The century that followed, however, brought the rise of urban housing in the modern sense. This caused changes in living patterns, housing styles and building systems.

Looking at the first thirty years after the founding of the People's Republic of China (New China), from 1949 to 1978, the socialist planned economy led to a prevalence of public housing. This period was affected not only by the People's Revolution and the Great Leap Forward, but also by the external influence of the former Soviet Union. All of this provoked continuous changes in housing policy, despite the political turbulence and economic fluctuations.

While the Chinese state decided to shoulder the heavy burden of providing housing to increase social welfare, it proved powerless to monitor the deteriorating living conditions of residents.

About two decades after China adopted the reform and open-door policies, that is, from 1979 to 2000, there was increasing economic growth and rapidly developing housing reform, geared toward the emerging market and promoting housing development in Chinese cities.<sup>6</sup>

These years in particular saw an unprecedented market development in China, which allowed for an explosion in the construction of new residences and a significant increase in the middle class. The real estate agencies and open construction sites mirrored the post-Mao policies that had led to economic

<sup>5</sup> Lu Junhua, Peter G. Rowe, Zhang Jie, *Modern Urban Housing in China 1840-2000*, Prestel, 2001, p.38

growth and capital accumulation in the country, a sign of the nation's economic rise to superpower status.<sup>7</sup>

It was during those years that the modernization of the real estate sector was put on the national agenda as a major component of economic growth.

In the 1990s, the state spread the propaganda of making housing the new consumer good. These changes in the social structure, the economy, the stratification of city dwellers, and the diversification of needs led housing to change its form, moving toward a desire to meet market demands.

In the last 160 years of urban development, two major changes in Chinese housing types have emerged: the first occurred within the organization itself, where from a complex (or floor) occupied by one family, there has been a shift to diversified housing forms, dominated by multi-story structured residential buildings. This initial change began in commercial cities, later expanding gradually to other centers. It was a slow change, occurring over a period of more than fifty years, which was not consolidated until the beginning of the twentieth century. The second change came after the founding of New China when, along with the implementation of the First Five-Year Plan that took place from 1956 to 1960, standardized multi-story residential buildings were developed in cities (large, medium and small) and residential districts in mining areas.

At the end of the 1970s, the first skyscrapers were built in large cities such as Shanghai and Beijing. This was a rapid and influential change that continued into contemporary times, but although the national drive was directed towards reform and openness, promoting a diversification of housing types, multi-storey buildings remained the main form of construction.

Analyzing the evolution in both social life and political-economic visions, we can come to the conclusion that this dual trajectory has played a fundamental role, further changing people's life patterns, as well as the outward appearance of urban areas.

According to a broader view, the process of development

<sup>6</sup> Junhua Lu, Rowe Peter G., Zhang Jie, *Modern Urban Housing in China 1840-2000*, Prestel, 2001, p.39

<sup>7</sup> Zhang Li, in *Search of Paradise: Middle-Class Living in a Chinese Metropoli*, Cornell University Press, 2019, p 211

described above occurred independently of individual will, it was and still is an inevitable dynamic, occurring in a specific place and at a specific time. The two major transformations of housing typology, fast or slow, seem to have followed, through the continuous adjustments and adaptations, a fairly fluid development. Social modernization, in particular the rise of the real estate sector, can be considered as the reason for the first change, since at that time industrial and commercial owners, as well as country nobility, were looking for development opportunities, or - alternatively - took refuge in commercial areas, while merchants and workers reached urban areas, looking for a different lifestyle.

Nowadays, Linongs<sup>8</sup> have become part of the tradition in cities such as Shanghai and Tianjin, while the second transformation of the housing typology, on the other hand, was a direct consequence of the change in the political system, particularly the transfer of housing to public ownership. Although many complexes were occupied by numerous families and Linong housing had, jokingly, the reputation of housing “seventy-two tenants,” prior to the founding of the People’s Republic of China, complexes consisting of courtyards or Lilong housing were initially designed for a Ningle family. The founding of New China led the state to place a higher priority on solving the workers’ housing problem; in fact, in the 1950s and 1960s, newly constructed housing areas found in areas such as Shanghai were called “new workers’ villages.” In light of the alternatives, a factory worker was quite happy to get a small unit of publicly owned housing. Also - during the same period - old courtyard complexes were given their first introduction in Beijing.<sup>9</sup>

As seen in this brief summary of the phases of the residential market, real estate development has undergone a drastic change that brings with it both improvements in the living conditions of the inhabitants and a significant loss in the population’s ability for contact with the land.

When talking about traditional Chinese architecture, the

<sup>8</sup> According to the definition of Françoise Ged, 1989, p. 57: “A lilong is a coherent set of strip dwellings served by a network of hierarchical inner alleys. The lilong appeared within Shanghai’s concessions and primarily because of the construction fever and real estate speculation that marked this city at different times, and especially in the 1860s and 1920s”

reference to the issue of the relationship with the natural and social landscape is not new. The architectural tradition of feudal China is replete with examples where sensitivity to the environment is an integral part of the design of spaces.

I find the courtyard to be an excellent example of a residence typology that embodies those values enunciated at the beginning of the paper whereby housing must take into account its surroundings.

Sustainable ways of life, cultural and modern, are beginning to appear on the market now that the housing needs are directing towards contemporary models diversified but more careful and demanding in the relationship with the environment.

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<sup>9</sup> Lu Junhua, Peter G. Rowe, Zhang Jie, *Modern Urban Housing in China 1840-2000*, Prestel, 2001, p.81