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BIRKHÄUSER

The City after Chinese New Towns

Spaces and Imaginaries from Contemporary Urban China

Michele Bonino
Francesca Governa
Maria Paola Repellino
Angelo Sampieri (eds.)

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Spaces and Imaginaries from Contemporary Urban China

Birkhäuser
Basel

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IV. Openings

When new towns are considered from the point of view of their relationship with the whole urbanisation process of contemporary China, they appear more interesting than when they are viewed from within their boundaries. This is not due to any original traits they may have when compared to the space around them, but rather to the way in which their contradictory assertion pries open a world, and with it the language to describe it. Considered thus, yes, new towns are new. They oblige us to radically rethink how to interpret and make the city.

The City Is Available. Chinese New Towns as a Backup Space

Angelo Sampieri

This chapter will discuss some of the characteristic features of new towns compared to the much broader issue of the transformation of contemporary urban China. Do new towns have specific characteristics? Is it possible to pinpoint recurrent features or general traits, for example, the rationale behind design choices as well as settlement principles and logic? This chapter argues that regularity is not created by morphological principles or the repetition of spatial structures, much less by the search for *symbolic spatial strategies*, as interpreted in relation to the *production of the transnational architecture* of the first decade of the twenty-first century (Ren, 2011, p. 171). The latter trend mushroomed in the second decade when new towns were branded as eco, hi-tech or science cities, once again in search of symbols for a local and global market (Williams, 2017, p. 20). To understand the system governing Chinese new towns and their relationship with the space around them, this chapter will not focus on issues such as form, organisation, functioning and symbolic traits, because an interpretation based on these issues all too quickly leads to a traditional urban concept. Chinese new towns are different to the city as we have known it so far; they are different to a space that is important in terms of population rebalancing, that represents a settled society, that builds densities and is the end product of a specific design culture. In the first part of this chapter, we will argue that Chinese new towns are small as far as cities go, at least looking at the three significant but not representative places taken into consideration.[1] However, these new towns reveal themselves to be rather interesting spaces if we avoid interpretations that either link them to cities (thus exposing them to ruthless criticism), or consider them to be afflicted in an even worse manner by the same dysfunctional dystopias of urban expansion Mumford noted almost one hundred years ago. The second part of the chapter studies the way in which these bordered spaces are scattered throughout the larger urbanised area in China, but also the features of their infrastructuring and as yet undecided development programmes. A study based on these few distinctive traits leaves them open to interpretations that not only subvert many of the more common criticisms, but also paves the way for an unexpressed potential. Ultimately, most new towns are empty spaces. Big and small backup spaces ready to be inhabited. Based on this simple fact, we may perhaps be able to build a discourse and project around this ambiguous form of urbanisation and use it to challenge many other discourses and projects regarding cities elsewhere.

Just Small Stuff

New towns are just some of the many spaces that are changing the face of urban China. A drop in the ocean compared to the incredible urbanisation process that has swept across the country in the last few decades. A process that has reshaped the urban boom of the nineties (Ren, 2013, p. 25) into increasingly well ordered *from below* composi-

tions (Ma and Lin, 1993; Lin, 2007 and 2011), abandoning Special Economic Zones and open cities and pulverising the new urban space into a sea of development zones, new districts, new areas and new towns, brandished like weapons in the competition between old cities (Wu, 2015 a). Even without encroaching on the countryside, and thus maintaining a traditional division between city and countryside which in contemporary China has become completely non-spatial, there's so much more than these big and small, well-defined spaces and infrastructures.[2] So, what exactly are new towns, this "stardust" of projects variously organised in confined spaces? How important are they? Ultimately, how important are one hundred, two hundred, four hundred new towns in a country where one billion people will soon live in urban areas?[3] How important are they compared to the many other forms of expansion either stretching out from urban centres along infrastructure routes towards new train stations and airports, or grouped around main hubs and satellite cities hooked onto neighbouring cities; forms that densify and saturate the central and peripheral fabric of existing cities? They are a drop in the ocean in terms of population, surfaces, volumes, investments, etc.

Tongzhou New Town covers an area of 155 square kilometres; plans specify that over one million new inhabitants are envisaged to take up residence before 2020.[4] In the meantime, buildings are demolished and rebuilt; in fact, the new town represents a large slice of Beijing's real estate market, in particular its residential real estate market (Zhou, 2012). Although these figures are undoubtedly impressive, the new buildings are part of an urban continuum spilling over the borders of the area envisaged in the plan as well as over district and municipal boundaries until they flow into a sea of much more important figures: 110 million inhabitants in the Jing-Jin-Ji Metropolitan Region covering a 200,000-square-kilometre inhabited area of land. What does Tongzhou represent in the middle of this built-up area that continues to grow and increase in size? A drop in the ocean. Similar to Zhaoqing New Area: 115 square kilometres inhabited by 600,000 people drowning in a conurbation – the Pearl River Delta – with figures far greater than the region stretching from Beijing to the sea. The new town is currently under construction. In the meantime, the old town and smaller neighbouring districts outside its boundary expand as far as they can and occupy all available flat space.[5] Zhengdong covers an area of 150 square kilometres and has 1.5 million inhabitants, an important slice of the population of Zhengzhou. Here, much of the new town is almost complete and people are moving in. But that's not all. Zhengbian extends and breaks it down into a *composite city* (Wu, 2015 a, p. 96) or a *galaxy* (the term used by Isozaki, 2012, p. 170) stretching for almost 100 kilometres eastwards to Kaifeng (40,000 square kilometres), a space where almost five million people have to be relocated. Once again, this space pales compared to the much bigger conurbation of Zhongyuan (nearly fifty million inhabitants) compared to which Zhengbian will be just a sort of rarefied core.[6] Again I ask: ultimately, what role does the well-organised perimeter of Zhengdong play within this hypertrophic external space?

However, it's not just a question of numbers (and rough numbers at that), since they basically refer to forecasts that further complicate already imprecise censuses (Chan, 2010 a; Ren, 2013; Fang and Yu, 2016). In addition, the design of new towns is also

insignificant, i.e., not one of them uses a contemporary Chinese city model, nor do they exemplify any specific prevailing design culture. The new towns under construction are only a few of the transformation scenarios from amongst the endless other scenarios currently present in China where – here as elsewhere – tests are being run on the many ideas influencing the supply and demand of space (cfr. Zhu, 2009). After all, "Chinese cities are deeply embedded in transnational flows of capital, information, and expertise, and they will be continually shaped by these forces" (Ren, 2013, p. 115). Conservation and destruction co-exist in contemporary China; people love metropolises and the countryside; the smooth, pristine and well-regulated spaces of new suburban neighbourhoods, and the old spaces in consolidated cities; they celebrate living both in villages and towers, in *hutong, danwei and xiaoqu*.[7] Furthermore, new towns are all different, so much so that it's difficult for one new town to be a model for another. In each instance, what is more important is the search for new imagery, picked freely from here and there (Bosker, 2013). Fate is more important than choice. The less alike new towns are, the more they are competitive and successful. "Difference sells. When it comes down to it these places are more of a marketing tactic than any kind of social statement" (Sheppard, 2015, p. 155). Increased variety means that each one will receive more attention. Hence, new towns are not exemplary places that materially represent a city concept, much less are they a model of a settled society unlike, for example, the new towns built during the construction of modern cities in the West.[8] Chinese new towns are therefore insignificant in terms of design, not because their spaces are uninteresting or badly built, but because they do not exemplify anything, nor do they create any advanced urban project, unless one believes that advancement lies in technological innovation or ecological performance.[9]

In Tongzhou, the new town adapts to, and sometimes replaces, a rather large part of the existing city. Basically, however, nothing disrupts the current layout of big blocks nestling between mobility infrastructure, rivers and the Grand Canal. Although these dense blocks are mostly towers, their interiors vary enormously. The built space is surrounded by a complex pattern of public open spaces, roads, gardens and numerous parks along the waterways; every lake or river has its own waterfront. Unless the 2016 competition for the new town takes us all by surprise (the results have not yet been made public), the city under construction will be made up of urban blocks which will stop when they reach the more important buildings and green areas: the CBD, the new Beijing Municipality, parks and a few pre-existing buildings, including a *hutong* which is to be preserved. A new town? Perhaps. Some of its parts may possibly be new, for example, the ones built according to a plan that engulfs and reorganises what it finds, that respects nature and history and sometimes even turns them into heritage. But not in Zhaoqing. Here everything is new. The sprawling agricultural land where the new town is to be built has already been cleared to make way for new infrastructure: three main systems which, at least on paper, merge and are superimposed. They recall the archetypical town of Milton Keynes and its polyfocal grid influenced by context, morphology and function (Walker, 1982): the waterways create a jagged, open shape before flowing into the Xi Jiang River while roads and railways, i.e., mobility infrastructure, carve out regular blocks in a rather non-hierarchical grid that bends with

the river (despite a certain emphasis on the central axis). Finally, the system of natural open spaces breaths life into the city-park and acts as its support.[10] In Zhengdong, the new town isn't a park, it's a machine. It's the homage to Kikutake's *Marine City* (1958) that Kurokawa did not pay when he designed the Yamagata Hawaii Dreamland resort (1966), a little more than a "miniaturist caricature" of the model (Banham, 1976), much less the Hishimo New Town project he designed that same year, or the Fujisawa New Town produced a year later (Xue, Sun and Tsai, 2011; Xue, Wang and Tsai, 2013; Wakeman, 2016, p. 266). These machines are also organised in clusters, islands which, when grouped together, create archipelagos. Zhengdong is the new town which, fifty years later, pays homage to the old metabolist maestro; it is reminiscent not only of the Japanese matrix, but also of several local approaches, for example an alleged socialist-style urban planning tradition made up of elementary compositions of separate units, or cells (Liang, 2014). What the project says about the present is not important; what's important is that *it functions*. A few years later this "good" *functioning* was implemented in Zhengbian by freely exploiting other traditional models, for example, the entire heritage of linear cities developed in the West: first the Leonidov and Soria y Mata projects and then Hilberseimer's New Regional Pattern (1949) and Malcomson's Linear Metropolis (1956). By stripping the already abstract patterns of the original projects as much as possible, the new Chinese linear city project is reduced to a skeleton with "flesh on its bones" only in separate locations within areas that prevent interaction between the parts. A new town? A new town project? Or the minimum amount of infrastructure needed to organise a space that continues to dilate, dissolve and destroy all ties with old urban configurations?

The new town is a park, a machine, an organism in the form of an archipelago or a galaxy; it is an entire region. All the many projects underway are very different. Numbers vary, as do the design cultures that inspired them – so much so that it's difficult to consider new towns as an ensemble. As an ensemble they are about to represent numbers that make a difference and establish themselves as projects representative of their age. But there's something else that makes new towns a "drop in the ocean", better still, that makes this kind of urbanisation an ambiguous, insubstantial phenomenon with little inertia: the continuous changes made to their plans. Today new towns are under construction, i.e., they are a space that is developing. However, this space cannot be considered as final. Likewise their continuously changing plans (Wu, 2015 a, pp. 192–196). Apart from a few general settlement principles, a few measurements, and a few boundaries, who really knows how new towns will develop? Public and private urban planning exhibition halls illustrate the layouts, as do the brochures of developers and those of general and specialised marketers (Fan, 2015). However, we are all too aware that these repeatedly presented layouts will be radically revamped by programmes and investments. After all, we've been told time and again that urban planning in contemporary China "is instrumental in promoting developments rather than in regulating urban constructions" (Liang, 2014, p. 41).[11] The results of the Tongzhou competition are shrouded in mist; some renders show the towers as the most muscular landmarks in the city, in others they dissolve into parks. The plans for Zhaoqing are based on some (a few) invariants immersed in a fluid space capable of creating an

atmosphere rather than a system of rules. The original plans drafted for Zhengdong and Zhengbian were extremely detailed, millimetrically defining forms and spatial measurements. However, these plans were radically altered when the buildings were materially constructed. So what sort of spaces will be created by these new towns under construction? Clarification isn't provided by the constant flow of plans and projects. Like a game of mirrors, this flow multiplies and blurs the images, so much so that, until they are materially complete, these new towns basically remain a mystery, a prophecy.

What Sort of Space Is It?

Contemporary Chinese new towns represent a small space of transformation compared to the size of the cities under construction. They are endless, heterogeneous projects, ill-equipped to convey a precise idea of the city; the space they create basically remains formless until it materialises. It's difficult to say what exactly is this small space, without a project or form; it certainly doesn't correspond to anything we have so far called a city, even when it was a new town. The forms regarding new towns have always been important. They have always been not only a frontier compared to the cultures of urban projects, but also an attempt to produce a crystal-clear spatialisation of society. In addition, new towns have always strived to achieve a specific form, in other words specific projects to be completed within a set timescale (Secchi, 2005, pp. 133–147). Given the above, if we wished to define contemporary Chinese new towns and establish what sort of city they are, the first thing we could say is that they are not cities, at least not compared to the cities we have so far known and described. However, the issue here is not whether or not Chinese new towns are cities, and much less about which past ideas and forms of cities they retain. No, the issue here is to interpret these strange spaces we call new towns and establish why and if they are important. The way to achieve this goal is not to free these new towns from a trait ascribable to a city, but to free them from the explosive urbanisation process that in China involves building cities everywhere. Within this process, new towns create something different. A space primarily marked by three features: their perimeter, their infrastructure and the undecidability of their programme.

To begin with, new towns are a delimited space. This delimitation can vary either during the construction process, or depending on investments and demand; in general, new towns tend to increase in size (Fang and Yu, 2016, p. 37). Within the big, complex space transforming contemporary urban China, the space occupied by new towns has been carefully designed, at least on paper. However, as we are all too aware, reality is very different; the perimeter can become almost imperceptible or completely invisible each time it falls within the existing city or along one of its edges. Take, for example, Tongzhou or Zhengzhou. However, when the plan, surface area and programme of the new town is approved, we know more or less where this boundary lies. Beyond it, the scenario changes, so much so that what is outside the boundary usually has to review its figures and "adjust" its plans (Fang and Yu, 2016, pp. 36–37). The size of the space inside the boundary (usually rather large) is not in question (Cao, 2015, p. 105). It's useless to point out to what extent recent literature has insisted on the fact that new towns are

too big. It's also true that in many cases the figures were wrong, that some new towns are empty, that others – such as Zhengdong – have a hard time attracting inhabitants and that still others are small inhabited pieces of land scattered within an almost deserted perimeter, one which could remain deserted for quite some time (Zhaoqing or Zhengbian).[12] After all, "questions like how much is the reasonable size; how many people the new district will be accommodating, what will be the economic output, and whether there is appropriate resources and environment carrying capacity, etc., were either never asked or ignored because the government doesn't have sufficient knowledge to care" (Fang and Yu, 2016, pp. 41–42). Although we don't know when and how the new towns will be filled, what we can do is believe it is more than likely that they will be filled.[13] After all, how else could the following statement be reiterated: "urban housing in China has not yet reached the absolute oversupply. With natural population growth in the urban areas and migration in the hundreds of millions from the countryside, more housing is needed" (Cao, 2015, p. 106). These forecasts mitigate the strong criticism of speculation and land consumption and prompt debate regarding the need to leave space, even ample space, inside these perimeters, because the latter not only act as a constraint, but also as a limitation around a free field; urbanisation processes and dynamics change beyond this limit. Based on this logic, it shouldn't surprise us when new towns are left unfinished or half empty. Filling them will take time. "China's ghost cities are a temporary phenomenon" (Shepard, p. 200). "Projects are vacant but will be occupied in the future. The speed of occupation depends on the speed of local job creation and economic growth. (...) The two decades to sort out oversupply in Beihai City are a reminder of the patience needed" (Cao, 2015, p. 106). Who knows how long this initial phase will last, but during this time new towns will have to focus exclusively on investment, infrastructure and inhabitants.

The infrastructure of delimited space is important. It includes mobility infrastructure (railways, roads and bridges), energy infrastructure (electricity and gas), drinking water supply, the sewage system, the drainage and flood control system, communication infrastructure (telephone and television), waste collection and disposal, nature infrastructure (parks, gardens, the planting of avenues) and obviously basic public utilities (Dept. of General Finance, Ministry of Construction, 2002). The public-private agreements used in *reform era* China to build these infrastructures and systems basically reproduce the well-known dynamics of the "marketisation of urban infrastructure" (Wang *et al.*, 2011). Literature on this issue is chiefly concentrated on identifying the problems caused by the relations between the central government, municipalities, private financiers, banks, the taxation system and the generation of local debt which is increasing in many areas, primarily in smaller municipalities (Li and Lin, 2011; Tsui, 2011; Li, Song and Chen, 2017). It is much less attentive to the spatial outcome of this infrastructure-driven development strategy (Wu, Li and Lin, 2016, p. 55). The focus is on the inevitably high costs and consumption of space and only afterwards on its design. Instead, new towns are an extremely interesting topic with which to study the quality of current investments, their physical characteristics and their duration. The delimited space of new towns is, after all, a space primarily marked by infrastructures which gradually increase in number and work to attract investments: first the railways or the

subway and its stations, then roads and supply lines, new waterways, new landscape infrastructures, first public services, etc. This simple, albeit not linear, process changes according to the context and is governed not only by endless variants (Wang and Dubbeling, 2013, pp. 198–199), but also by plans which, as mentioned earlier, change continuously. In Zhaoqing, for example, infrastructuring is very clear-cut during this phase: free ground, devoid of everything (agriculture, vegetation, villages), crossed by roads and infrastructure which, starting with the new station, stimulate the land and bring it to life in several scattered areas (the convention centre, schools, the hospital, the stadium, the first residential buildings for the poor and rich alike). In Zhengdong, where the new town has been completed, infrastructuring is still the most incisive feature of the metabolist layout. In Tongzhou, it facilitates the reinvention of the existing city. Finally, the infrastructures being built in Zhengbian are spread across an enormous area, thereby preventing contiguity between the parts. Here, it's easy to see what remains of the city, of the space we considered to be a city: a huge, disjointed skeleton providing new, extensive availability of spaces that are not, however, interconnected. This situation testifies to the enormous detachment between this project and any myth or modern theory of continuity, permeability and isotropy.[14]

New towns are a delimited area governed by an infrastructure system generating inhabited spaces rather than relationships between spaces. Having defined the boundaries and framework, the area looks like an empty space ready to be occupied in many different ways, so long as all are compatible. Disconnection between the parts, and the fact they are often located at a distance from one another, helps ensure compatibility; in general, it creates a space full of empty spaces that can change quite freely. The undecidability of a programme and its possible reversal is the third strong feature of a new town, so much so that it resembles a production programme rather than an urban programme. The dynamic surface of new towns claims to change according to demand and opportunity, a little like the landscape theories and landscape urbanism of the late twentieth century (Corner, 1999; Berger, 2006; Waldheim, 2006), which stated that "the urban surface is similar to a dynamic agricultural field, assuming different functions, geometries, distributive arrangements, and appearances as changing circumstance demands" (Wall, 1999, p. 233). The unusual genealogies that were revived in those theories combined Victor Gruen and Ludwig Hilberseimer, the radical utopias of Archigram and Superstudio and the end-of-century programming by OMA, West 8 and FOA. They re-evoked Derrida's conceptualisations by appealing to people to reason not in terms "of flexibility (...), [but] in terms of scales of undecidability, (...) with the right mixture of rigid structures, supple structures and self-organizing processes" (DeLanda, 1992, p. 153; Berrizbeitia, 2001, p. 124). In many ways, new towns appear to be a belated spatialisation of what was said at that time.

The criticism expressed during that era also applies to new towns, especially the increased uncertainty of the programmes, their vague configurations and the fact that the market influenced planning: "uncertainty should not be confused with lack of clarity. (...) In the so-called structure plans, uncertainty is coupled with the difficulty created by the many players in the decision-making process. Objectives remain so gen-

eral and so superficial that no one can be against them. In fact, such planning methods have very little effect on the actual physical development that follows" (Smets, 2002, p. 90). These past concerns and urgings are ill-suited to contemporary China, where the link between programmes and spatial impact appears to have broken down completely (cfr. Wu, 2015 a). In fact, an undecided programme continually produces new and different morphologies. When figures, events and investments change, the relationship between programme and morphology breaks down into thousands of images of a gradually developing city; each image is equally plausible.[15] This doesn't mean that a programme is irrelevant while the physical space of new towns is being built, but simply that it is not measured and does not function in terms of morphological constructions. It simply uses them, when necessary, as verification and as a persuasive expedient. As far as everything else is concerned, the programme focuses exclusively on being consistent with a more general functioning of space and its ability to accommodate as many forms as possible.[16]

The City Is Available

New towns create a rather insubstantial field for several reasons: what happens within new towns is insignificant in comparison to what happens outside their boundaries; the field is very heterogeneous, and new towns are so varied they cannot be part of a *New New Towns Movement* or a much broader project for contemporary Chinese cities. Furthermore, their forms and representations change constantly while being built. Apart from the few spatial features that make them interesting, nothing is static in new towns: they involve the construction of infrastructure, within a perimeter, governed by a very loose programme. If, on the one hand, the field appears to be insubstantial, its spatial features are interesting because they force us to rethink the city based on just a few traits devoid of symbolic elements, morphological patterns and principles of continuity. Zhengbian is perhaps the place where this is easiest to see. In Zhengbian, proximity between the parts is unimportant (the space is huge and rarefied), as are relationships, the morphological layouts of each inhabited district (or better still, all layouts are accepted) and the symbolic size of the city under construction. Instead, it's important that the city be less symbolic, neutral, and that housing be based on this neutrality. There are, however, features that add a symbolic capital, one which China presumes to assert internationally rather than locally (Ren, 2011; Lin, 2013): the adjectives *smart*, *eco*, *hi-tech*, *science* or *industrially themed*, along with towers, water parks, and monumental axes designed by international architects and engineers "in styles from the West, the East, the past and the future" (Shepard, 2015, p. 156). What is important locally is increased comfort, wealth and wellbeing. This is ensured by new, enormous spaces and housing infrastructure. In short, it means creating a huge technical space which will first and foremost solve problems: it will import inhabitants, jobs, institutions and everything that is needed for as long as time dictates. Because undoubtedly it will take time. It is a space that doesn't aspire to upset the existing equilibrium, generate friction, revamp ways of doing things, or assert a project. At this point, whether or not it will be inhabited, or perhaps be inhabited only partially, is irrelevant. What's important at this point is the construction – riddled with risks and contradictions – of an inhabitable space.[17]

The following are just some of the "urban pathologies" produced by the new availability of space (Sorace and Hurst 2016, p. 305): the destruction of ecosystems and consumption of land; environmental and economic unsustainability; accumulation of capital; uncontrolled urban expansion; subjugation of the market or, on the contrary, of the State; the dangers of miscalculation; the threat of the housing bubble; poor quality buildings; bad design ideas; social engineering; standardised lifestyles; the hard functionalism of the new built spaces; and the alienation it generates. In a nutshell, a sea of problems. And a sea of criticisms. But based on a weak argument not corroborated by reliable data, simply because the latter don't exist. "Without the myth of future waves of rural migrants who will some day by some unspecified means afford new urban housing, what remains is the proliferation of urban forms divorced from urban practices and uses" (Sorace and Hurst, 2016, p. 305). Of course, we don't know what will happen to new towns without new inhabitants. In the meantime, however, we are more than aware of the fact that rural migrants are anything but a "myth", that their numbers are as huge as those of new constructions, and that most of them will soon be granted an urban *hukou* (Liang *et al.*, 2016). Real figures will very probably remain a mystery, one of the many. The history of this incredible urbanisation process is likewise mysterious and incomplete; it is a history tainted by narratives that were (and still are) exceedingly influenced by "the Western environmental canon", "the mantra *small is beautiful*", the maxim *reduce, reuse, recycle*, and a more general scepticism of growth that eventually stigmatises everything (Ben-Ami, 2010, p. xi; Williams, 2017, p. 49). In fact, the issues that have influenced most of the recent debate about international urban design culture do not really apply to contemporary China: *Small Scale Big Change* (Lepik, 2010), *Design Like if You Give a Damn* (Architecture for Humanity, 2006 and 2012), participationism and elementarism in architecture (Elemental, 2012), *Informal Stance* (Federighi, 2018), and the trick of doing with less by using known codes, rules and simple grammar (Lehnerer, 2009). All this influences and builds sensitivity, as well as a few spaces. But what really counts in the transformations that are currently underway (in terms of numbers and the issues involved) *lies elsewhere*.

How can we narrate this *elsewhere* without being influenced by moralism, prejudice and impressions? It's very likely that this is the most important and difficult task we have to tackle. Starting with new towns, we have tried to provide a few interpretations, highlighting some of the features governing the spaces under construction. These basic features neither create a city nor ensure any form of future urbanity, at least as we know it. Instead, the features in question provocatively encourage us to assign the term "city" to a space in which dwelling primarily involves accepting radical uncertainty (which is also conflict, compromise and effort). Although we can disregard this provocation, and criticise everything used to defend other ways of considering the city and the softer, more measured methods used to build it, we cannot ignore that, new town after new town, this space that is *available to be inhabited* is materialising in the huge urbanised space in China. A huge, disjointed and multiform space in which new towns create a more orderly environment, almost *a backup space*. A space that sometimes fills up quickly, or on the contrary, struggles to find occupants, leaving most of it empty until such time as it is needed and useful. A backup space avail-

able to be used when necessary. A little like medieval fortresses, where a residual piece of agricultural land was always left unoccupied within the walls so that it could be used during war or famine. This space was considered a surplus space (when it wasn't needed), but in certain special circumstances it became a crucial feature and played a key role. In many ways, new towns appear to function as a backup space: disseminated, well bordered, and with minimum infrastructure, ready to be occupied in several different ways, when and if needed.

Using new towns to emphasise forms of caution and foresight in the choices regarding urbanisation processes is undoubtedly a bit of a stretch. The latter are described everywhere as being violent, unsustainable and subservient to a particularly aggressive market which is anything but well governed. The desire to interpret them as being friendly or helpful is equally exaggerated. Considering them as generous, albeit in many ways equivocal quantities of new, available inhabitable space, is likewise going too far (when stories about forced migration from the countryside to the city narrate tales of uprooting, social engineering and alienation). And yet, we are able to tell the story of new towns because we can observe their spaces under construction: it is the story of a city which, prudently, builds backup spaces and gradually equips them according to the needs that arise. It is a simple story, in many ways traditional and certainly incomplete (like many other stories about contemporary Chinese urbanisation); it does not claim to solve the complexity and contradictions of new towns in a few comprehensive images, e.g., that of new towns as a scattering of backup spaces that can be adapted and used in different ways. A story, and an image, which nevertheless are ambiguously fascinating because they can be used to rediscuss and dispel many contemporary mythographies about the city and its design. First and foremost the mythographies which – in the name of resilient, sustainable transformation processes, the cult of protection and generation of heritage, and in virtue of processes participated and conveyed by many different rationales – have turned the city into an immobile, inert, contracted and closed space. A space that contemplates undecidability neither as a basic element of said transformation nor as an unexpected glitch, unless the way to neutralise it has been planned beforehand. In other words, an inhospitable city. These bloodless mythographies shatter against the ambiguously generous space of Chinese new towns, and the city once again shows itself for what it has always been: an available space.

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1 The three new towns are: Tongzhou, in the Tongzhou district of Beijing; Zhaoqing New Area, 20 kilometres from the city of Zhaoqing in the Pearl River Delta; and Zhengdong, near Zhengzhou in Henan Province. **2** "Urban peripheries of Chinese cities, the areas sandwiched between historical urban cores and the rural hinterland, are mosaics of different social worlds. (...) On the Chinese urban periphery, one can find residential new towns of massive scale, exclusive European-themed villas, migrant villages, brand-new university campuses, military-style manufacturing facilities and workers' dorms, and oftentimes, agricultural fields in the midst of urban construction as well. Heterogeneity of socio-economic composition, high population density, and dependency on public mass transit characterize the nature and process of urban territorial expansion" (Ren, 2013, p. 104). On these issues, also consider the *post-suburbanization* processes studied by Fulong Wu in Shanghai and Beijing, and primarily examined regarding the urban sprawl in the West (Feng, Wu and Logan, 2008, pp. 482–498; Phelps and Wu, 2011); or again, the recent emergence of *urban clusters (chengshiqun)*, the problems regarding their management (Wu,

2016 a, pp. 1134–1151), and the spatial implications of the accumulation of capital in extra-urban areas (Shen and Wu, 2017, pp. 761–780). **3** The estimates by *Worldometers*, taken from surveys performed by the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/china-population) indicate 838 million "urban" inhabitants censused in January 2018 (57.9 % of the population; consider that in 2000 a little over half the inhabitants were censused: 459 million, 20.8 %). For at least a decade, forecasts strongly emphasised reaching one billion urban inhabitants, usually around the year 2030. However, migration trends could significantly bring this date forward (McKinsey Global Institute, 2009; Miller, 2012). **4** The *Beijing Masterplan (2004–2020)* drafted by the Beijing Municipal Institute of City & Design envisaged roughly 900,000 (Wu, 2015 a, p. 145). The competition launched in 2016 increased the number of inhabitants to 1,300,000 (Beijing People's Municipal Government, 2016 a). See Fiandanese in this book. **5** See Safina in this book. **6** The projects are illustrated in the five books entitled *Urban Planning and Architectural Design of Zhengdong New District in Zhengzhou City (2001–2009)* (Li, 2010 a). See Ramondetti in this book. **7** "The danwei is the compound in the pre-form era. The xiaqu is the commodity housing estate in the post-reform era" (Ren, 2013, p. 88). For a possible morphological classification of contemporary living spaces, see Rowe, Forsyth and Kan, 2016. **8** In actual fact, there are many attempts to build genealogies that include the West and the East, past and present. Consider, for example, the standpoints of the International New Town Institute: "We shall therefore try to compare the current batch of New Towns with three periods in the history of 20th-century urban planning and consider the validity of such a comparison. The first is the pioneering stage of Western urban planning between 1900 and 1930; the second is that of the post-war reconstruction of Europe between 1945 and 1960; and the third is the expansion of Western planning models to the colonial and postcolonial East and South between 1950 and 1970" (Provoost and Vanstiphout, 2011, p. 23). **9** Like many authors, INTI develops classifications aimed at recognising specific motives for new towns: "We have classified the cities in terms of the six main motives for the building of New Towns in recent decades: Eco-Cities: to achieve the best environmentally friendly performance; Political Cities: to represent (national or local) government; Enclave cities: to offer a retreat from the existing city; Economic Cities: to attract investment and kick-start the national economy; High-Tech Cities: to utilize technology as an attraction; Shelter Cities: to house the masses." (Provoost and Vanstiphout, 2011, pp. 14–17). Other associations use in particular *new towns* and *eco-cities* (Fook and Gang, 2010). A more interesting attempt was made by Austin Williams (2017), who tried to circumscribe, by associating new towns and eco-cities, a new field of research in order to critically examine more widespread forms of urbanisation. **10** The Zhaoqing New Area Development and Planning Bureau describes the project in a traditional manner by using the slogan "one axis, two corridors and three spatial patterns". See Safina in this book. **11** Regarding this issue, see Repellino in this book. **12** Regarding the *pathologies* of Chinese urbanisation (Sorace and Hurst, 2016), and in particular the housing bubble phenomenon, see the introduction in this book. For a critique of the phenomenon, see Shepard (2015); Woodworth and Wallace (2017). As concerns Zhengdong, although it has not yet been stigmatised like other cities, such as Ordos Kangbashi in Inner Mongolia, it has been extensively described in international publications and ads as *China's Largest Ghost City*, available at: http://www.vagabondjourney.com/zhengzhou-zhengdong-china-largest-ghost-city (accessed: 29 March 2017). **13** How to define a reasonable size vis-à-vis the number of inhabitants is the usual problem of censuses that are either not very reliable or out of date "A key point in such debates is whether urban housing as a whole has been oversupplied in the absolute sense, i.e. there is more urban housing than there is urban population. Interviews in China in 2013 to 2014 revealed that the number of housing units in urban China was enough to house all the urban families. However, there is a lack of authoritative data on how much housing exists in urban China. The latest release of total urban housing floor area data by the Ministry of Construction was in 2006, which indicates that in 2005 total housing floor area in cities and towns was 10.77 billion m^2 (MoC, 2006)". (Cao, 2015, p. 105). **14** As interpreted in modern cities in the West and (in many ways in continuity) with territories with dispersed settlements, where infrastructuring, in the form of an isotropic network, did not impose prevalent directions, but presumed to connect everything to everything, thus deteriorating the subaltern relationship between the parts (on this issue, see: Sieverts, 2003; Secchi, Viganò and Fabian, 2016). **15** On this issue, consider "the holistic approach of multiple scenario selection", promoted by Wang and Dubbeling (2013) and cited by Wu (2015 a, p. 194), in regards to overcoming a linear approach to planning: "The complexity of the city also requires the planning stages of survey, analysis and design to be combined rather than to be made one after the other. In linear planning, the existing and pervasive planning paradigm, surveys and analysis of the planning area usually oversimplify the delicate, cultural and complex reality of the city that eventually leads towards cities that all look the same" (Wang and Dubbeling, 2013, p. 198). **16** Consider the variety of urban settlements in the Zhengbian *galaxy*: urban communities organised along infrastructures, clusters of small centres grouped around a park, or the settlements built in regular grids of square lots, for example along the west border of Kaifeng. **17** A position which is similar in many ways was expressed by Austin Williams regarding the construction of eco-cities: "whether the Eco-label works, who cares? Eco-city construction might be for purely pragmatic economic reasons but through the process China is making and remaking the urban world into a possibility for millions of poor labouring peasants to be able to provide themselves and future generations with more opportunities" (Williams, 2017, p. 190).

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About the Authors

Alessandro Armando, Associate Professor of Architecture and Urban Design, Department of Architecture and Design (DAD), Politecnico di Torino.

Mauro Berta, Assistant Professor of Architecture and Urban Design, Department of Architecture and Design (DAD), Politecnico di Torino.

Michele Bonino, Associate Professor of Architecture and Urban Design, Department of Architecture and Design (DAD), Politecnico di Torino, Rector's Delegate for Relations with China.

Florence Graezer Bideau, Senior Scientist, College of Humanities, École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne.

Francesco Carota, PhD Candidate in the programme "Architecture. History and Project", Politecnico di Torino.

Filippo De Pieri, Associate Professor of History of Architecture, Department of Architecture and Design (DAD), Politecnico di Torino.

Valeria Federighi, Assistant Professor of Architecture and Urban Design, Department of Architecture and Design (DAD), Politecnico di Torino.

Filippo Fiandanese, PhD Candidate in the programme "Architecture. History and Project", Politecnico di Torino.

Francesca Frassoldati, Associate Professor of Architecture and Urban Design, Department of Architecture and Design (DAD) and F*UL*L Future *Urban Legacy* Lab, Politecnico di Torino.

Xu Gaofeng, PhD Candidate, School of Architecture, Tsinghua University.

Francesca Governa, Full Professor of Economic and Political Geography, Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning (DIST) and F*UL*L Future *Urban Legacy* Lab, Politecnico di Torino.

Liu Jian, Associate Professor of Urban Planning and Design, School of Architecture, Tsinghua University, Beijing.

Anna Pagani, PhD Candidate in the programme "Architecture and Sciences of the City", École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne.

Samuele Pellecchia, photographer and Director of Prospekt Photographers, Milano.

Leonardo Ramondetti, PhD Candidate in the programme "Urban and Regional Development", Politecnico di Torino.

Maria Paola Repellino, PhD in Architecture and Building Design, Politecnico di Torino. Currently Research Fellow at the Politecnico di Torino, Executive Director of China Room.

Bianca Maria Rinaldi, Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture, Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning (DIST), Politecnico di Torino.

Astrid Safina, PhD Candidate in the programme "Urban and Regional Development", Politecnico di Torino.

Angelo Sampieri, Associate Professor of Urban Planning and Design, Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning (DIST), Politecnico di Torino.

Davide Vero, PhD Candidate in the programme "Architecture. History and Project", Politecnico di Torino.

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By 2020, roughly 400 Chinese new towns will have been built, representing an unprecedented urban growth. The government is making a substantial effort to absorb up to 250 million people, chiefly migrants from rural parts of the country. Unlike in Europe and North America, where new towns grew in parallel with local economies, the construction of contemporary Chinese new towns is almost completed before people are allowed to move in. As a result, some of these massive developments are already inhabited while others are still empty.

This interdisciplinary publication explores the phenomenon of "Chinese new towns" based on international research carried out by architects, planners and geographers. It focuses on psychological and social ramifications, for instance how new towns change perceptions of the neighbourhood and proximity, and analyses how this new urbanity affects politics and the national narrative. The book examines the spaces of three new towns in detail – Tongzhou, Zhaoqing and Zhengdong – and then moves on to investigate both the exceptionality and the ordinariness of Chinese urbanisation. An inspiring photo essay captures the poignant and cheerful moments in the everyday lives of new town residents.

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