

China Brand Homes: Business history and projects; analysis of China Vanke Co. Ltd., 1988-2016

Original

China Brand Homes: Business history and projects; analysis of China Vanke Co. Ltd., 1988-2016 / Carota, Francesco. - (2019 Jul 08), pp. 1-390.

Availability:

This version is available at: 11583/2742534 since: 2019-07-17T09:25:32Z

Publisher:

Politecnico di Torino

Published

DOI:

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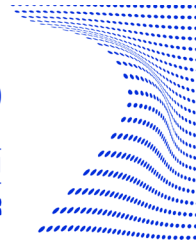
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Doctoral Dissertation

Doctoral Program in Architecture, History and Project (31th Cycle)

China Brand Homes

Business history and projects' analysis of China Vanke Co. Ltd., 1988-2016

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Summary

This dissertation focuses on the design, concepts and practices regarding housing supply developed by private real estate companies in China.

Between 1979 and 2016, China experienced a period of rapid urbanization, accompanied by the introduction of numerous economic and institutional reforms impacting the nation's model of housing supply. Significant changes disrupted the urban housing sector in the country, shifting the main supply system from a public welfare model to a market-driven one. Within this time span, most new residential properties were developed and marketed by large real estate enterprises; these firms became crucial players in establishing the new housing market.

While there is an extensive body of literature examining China's housing market formation and progression, most of these studies focus on the economic and social aspects of housing, including factors such as affordability, inequality, governance, preferences and choices. However, the architectural and urban design of those houses, as well as the links between housing designs and market supply and demand, have yet to be thoroughly explored. This latter area represents thus the main focus of this dissertation.

To examine this complex issue, this research is based on an historical analysis of one specific real estate company, namely China Vanke Co. Ltd., as well as an architectural and urban analysis applied to some of this firm's residential projects. Founded in Shenzhen Special Economic Zone in 1984, Vanke was one of the first companies to enter the housing industry and is currently the leading firm in the mainstream residential sector. The relationship between Vanke's business and broader trends in China clearly emerges through a variety of materials and sources which have never before been collected, analyzed and revealed to the international academic community.

The primary aim of this research is the organization of these heterogeneous materials and their presentation in a series of coherent narratives. Second, the application of business history to the study of a home provider attempts to challenge conventional historical perspectives, thus considering China's housing market formation and transformation through a new lens. In this sense, an historical approach provides us with the possibility of acknowledging trajectories and patterns of housing adaptation within complex socio-economic contexts in continuous transformation without tracking merely a disparate set of artifacts.

Finally, expanding from the specific case of Vanke, this dissertation seeks to discuss two broader academic issues. The first issue considers the innovative processes of a real estate enterprise and the role of a single company in shaping new housing designs, based on supply and demand transformations. The second issue, drawing from the review of the concepts of housing and architectural commodification, argues that real estate developers have shifted from approaching housing projects as commodities to considering them as brands of a business enterprise. Indeed, my research shows evidences that both one single firm's processes of innovation and branding practices effectively influenced and shaped the design of the Chinese houses in the post-reform era.

This dissertation begins with an introduction to the research theme, methodology and the case of Vanke. From there, the core of the thesis makes use of the material elaborated and organized in the third part of the dissertation to critically argue the connection between housing design and the strategic positioning of a real estate company, in the frame of consolidated bodies of literature. Lastly, the third part includes an "original" repository about Vanke, comprising both an analysis of its projects and business history.

By examining the correlation between the historical narratives of a real estate company and the design of its residential projects, this thesis contributes further to our understanding of China's contemporary houses designs and their production over the time.