How Not to Urbanise

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Xi'an, in central China, is a city with long historical roots, dating at least three millennia. For much of its history it has also been of exceptional contemporary importance, as thirteen different (and significant) dynasties made it their capital. The current site is close to the city of the first Qin Emperor of China in the first century BC, whose awe-inspiring (and mostly still buried) mausoleum with thousands of terracotta figures of humans and animals remains one of the most remarkable wonders of the world. In the 7th century C.E. it was (as Changan) the capital of the extensive and prosperous empire created by the Tang Dynasty, one of the largest metropolises of that time, home to at least a million people, the vibrant end point of the famous Silk Route.

In China Xi'an is known as the eternal city, and it has indeed recorded the great changes that have swept the country over thousands of years. Visitors are inevitably attracted to the site of the terracotta warriors, as they are known, but they also come to see some of the remaining famous relicts of the Tang era: the Changan city walls, the Bell Tower and Drum Tower, the Wild Goose Pagoda built to house the Sanskrit and Prakrit manuscripts brought from India back to China by the Buddhist traveller Xuanzang.

With such a long and variegated history, visitors can be forgiven for expecting to see at least some of the various historical phases reflected in the architecture of the city, with perhaps an "old town" that preserves some of the flavour of the past and certainly monuments and buildings of varied vintages dotting the city. But such expectations will be disappointed, even in a place so full of potential heritage locations. Other than a few individual monuments randomly surrounded by the usual urban confusion and one charming "Muslim street" full of traditional street food and craft, Xi'an bears little trace of its once glorious past.

Instead, the city is typical of most of urban China today: endless skylines of high rise buildings of almost unrelenting sameness and persistent ugliness. The greyness of the concrete structures is matched by the greyness of the polluted air, as huge but congested avenues of concentric ring roads intersecting radial grids mark out separated areas for different districts that all still look just the same. The only colour comes from neon signs, as green spaces are few and far between, and the very vastness of the proliferating monotony of the buildings creates a sense of constriction.

The model of urban development that has been recently adopted in China takes little from the preserving and conserving approaches found in Europe that provide aesthetic value, pleasant public spaces for residents, variation and mixed use of urban locations. Instead, it copies the model of the United States where entire cities of segregated segments were created out of dusty plains where there was little to preserve in the first place. In contemporary China, modern and urban are seen as necessarily "new", which typically implies the destruction of older buildings without much regard for their individuality and little desire to create more variegated and heterogeneous urban settlements rather than one standard pattern.

Because of this orientation, the drabness and uniformity of the greater number of spanking new cities and towns in China today is startling. But this may reflect the sheer scale and rapidity of the entire project of urbanisation. It coincides with one of the most rapid and extensive processes of urbanisation in human history. Since 1980, more than 500 million people in China have moved to cities and towns. By 2011, more than half of China's population lived in urban areas, a transition that occurred much more quickly than anyone expected. At current rates, it is projected that more than a billion people will live in urban China by 2030.

This reflects a major policy change, from the state strictly controlling migration to gradually loosening the internal controls that have prevented people moving from their place of birth. For much of its post-revolution history, the Chinese government (unlike in India where people were always free to move across states and urban and rural areas) used the household registration system or hukou as residence permits that served to define people's rights, including the right to reside in particular localities and their abilities to access their entitlements as citizens. From the 1980s some controls on movement of people to live and work in other areas were progressively lifted, although rural migrants still typically lack many of the rights and public entitlements that those with urban hukou take for granted.

In the 1980s and 1990s urbanisation was allowed rather than encouraged. It was only in the 2000s that the massive public investments that generated the newer expansion of cities and towns really flourished. The current ruling regime is explicitly pro-urbanisation, and has taken it as both a goal and a challenge.

It is hard to separate the processes of urbanisation and industrialisation in China: the two have definitely fed off each other, making demand and supply variables also hard to distinguish as the urban construction boom in turn led to more migrant jobs. The cities of the south eastern coast were the first to experience the great waves of rural-urban migration associated with industrialisation. The architecture reflected this, mimicking what was seen as the most "modern" in the developed western world in the form of a concentration of upward thrusting buildings, often so similar in imitative design as to seem like optical illusions.

The past decade has seen a significant geographical spread across the country of this relatively unimaginative design of urban spaces. Whether it is Harbin in the cold northeast of China or Chongqing in the west-central region or Tianjin near the capital Beijing, all new urban development is similar, based on the proliferation of repetitive concrete structures (with the occasional glass building) so that it is really hard to distinguish one city from another. In the process, the past has been unceremoniously trashed, except for a few iconic buildings here and there, and the less regimented and more colourful neighbourhoods that characterised the residential patterns of the working class have been bulldozed and turned into a series of new Lego-lookalikes.

A new book by Tom Miller (China's Urban Billion: The story behind the biggest migration in human history, Zed Books 2012) captures this extraordinary process that is simultaneously impressive and depressing. Miller notes that in terms of both speed and extent, the urbanisation of land has far outpaced the urbanisation of people: since 1980 the urban population has increased by 120 per cent, but the amount of land that can be classified as urban because it is built-up has increased by more than 300 per cent.

A lot of this is occurring at breakneck speed. For example, Pudong - the megacity across the river from older Shanghai - emerged into a full-fledged and densely populated urban conglomeration modelled physically on Manhattan in less than a decade. Some cities are expanding so rapidly that they are doubling their population in a decade and their land area in even less time. This has definitely been associated with declining income poverty and improved economic conditions for millions of people. But there is a downside as well.

Urban ugliness and unremitting architectural monotony are only some of the negative fallouts of this speedy transition. While the rural-urban migration has lifted many boats, it has done so unevenly, and involved deteriorating or more fragile conditions for many, both older residents and newer (typically younger) migrants. The economic model generates problems of pollution, congestion and over-extraction of natural resources that are making this process unsustainable. And this boom is also closely associated with rapidly increasing inequalities and a growing urban underclass.

To the casual visitor to China, this may seem surprising. Chinese cities do not seem to have the festering slums and destitute urban underclass that are so openly evident in countries like Brazil or Nigeria, and do not show the obvious contrasts between glittering opulence and degraded squalor that characterise Indian cities. But in fact China's urbanisation has also generated slums, albeit those that are more effectively hidden from public view and more confined to a shifting migrant category. Some are shanty areas, others are crowded and hastily built apartment blocks, but the control over movement and social mobility render them more amenable to repression and easier to keep out of public sight. This may be another reason why Miller argues that "China's cities will continue to shock and awe – but they will struggle to inspire hearts and minds."

Clearly, a more inclusive, less polluting and congested, and more healthy and pleasant model of urban development is required. Otherwise, China risks becoming a country where the inequality gets solidified in its urban structures: with "pockets of extreme wealth and an educated middle class, but whose cities teem with enormous slums and suppurate with entrenched social divisions". In turn, what happens in China matters not only for that country, since China is currently seen as a model worthy of emulation by so many developing countries. For a really sustainable and attractive urban future, we all need a very different model.

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