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Harry den Hartog (ed), *Shanghai New Towns: Searching for Community and Identity in a Sprawling Metropolis*,

Rotterdam, 010 Publishers, 2010, 416 pp.

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- 1 *Shanghai New Towns*, edited by the Dutch architect Harry den Hartog, is interesting on two counts. To begin with, the 2010 book is the first – apart from individual articles – in English (it is bilingual, with Chinese text) to analytically deal with the Western-imitating architecture proliferating on the Chinese mainland since the early 2000s. Second, the book brings together articles by academics and experts all drawn from the domain of architecture and town planning.

- 2 However, the issue tackled is not that of architectural imports in China. What interests the authors is that of new towns, especially those built within Shanghai municipality. Analysing this urban object, the authors have tried to give an account of China's current urbanisation, highlighting characteristics such as the context of state control during their construction, legacies from the past and their present influence, the working style of Chinese town planners, economic and urban planning ideologies, as well as the intricacies of the decision-making and planning processes. The book has both a theoretical aspect as well as practical and pedagogic ambition: minutely observed new towns are elevated

to the rank of case studies; and the information the authors draw from the construction process should help Western architects and town planners to learn how to work with their Chinese counterparts, on what basis, using which theories and ideologies, and thus how to cooperate with them.

- 3 The book contains 11 articles, four of them written by den Hartog, grouped in four parts separated by mostly photographic dossiers including two by professional photographers. This multiplicity of contributors and forms of analysis, both written and visual, lends to the study a rich source of information, crucial for anyone interested, within the field of urban studies, in the initial process of urbanisation, projects, plans, decisions, and the start of construction. The trans-disciplinary studies thus seek to bring exhaustive knowledge of the subject, but the final product is an uneven work due to the differences between contributions.
- 4 The first three chapters act as an introduction to the whole book. Den Hartog begins by presenting the subject – new towns defined as administrative units planned and built in a short time, based on a key economic function (tourism, industry, and education sectors) as the basis for development. The particularity of the Chinese case, according to the author, lies in the fact that while the new towns enjoy authority over surrounding areas, they are part of a metropolitan system aimed at the development of the whole region and the main city. These entities, he holds, are the means by which Chinese cities – especially Shanghai – are attempting to address the problems they are facing, such as congestion, uncontrolled sprawl, and loss of farmland. The author proceeds to a brief presentation of the urbanisation phases in Shanghai from its origins until the 1990s and the decision to develop the municipality following apolycentric logic. He says its originality lies in the new towns' architectural characteristics, most of them being built in foreign styles, i.e., European or North American. From this observation, den Hartog's problematic shifts towards issues of loss of cultural benchmarks of research and fabrication of identity through localities, to match the book's subtitle.
- 5 Chapter 2, by Chinese architect and academic Jiang Jun, seeks to explain the current urbanisation process – and its success – invoking the heritage of Chinese civilisation. The current state is seen as resulting from both a perfect and ancient harmony between civilisation and its ecological space and the succession to the present day of major unifying policies. Relying on a geographic determinism stretched to the limits, the author develops a Sino-oriented discourse explaining away all aspects of China, presented as a society of diversity under political unity, of tolerance, and of independent and never interrupted self-development.
- 6 In Chapter 3, den Hartog gives a short and general overview of some problems in China's urbanisation process, mainly related to local authorities' lack of control. The divergent interests of various agents (the authorities, promoters, and buyers) have led to the construction of houses that fail to attract demand, leaving behind only ghost towns.
- 7 Then follows the first dossier of images depicting the towns. Among the ten towns covered, seven are part of the *One City, Nine Towns* project envisaging the development of ten new towns in Shanghai municipality (the main one being Songjiang and each containing an experimental zone of themed architecture). However, the shared characteristic of these projects was that teams of foreign designers worked on them. It is perhaps regrettable that the emphasis is often only on projects featuring Western architectural style, giving the erroneous impression that experimental thematic areas represent the larger new town projects as a whole.
- 8 The second group of articles compares at several levels the urbanisation process in Shanghai and other world cities. In Chapter 4, den Hartog explains the function of actors involved in

town planning projects. He shows that communication problems and incomprehension that foreign architects and town planners face with their Chinese interlocutors have led to unsatisfactory projects and to the former's frustration. Often such problems are linked to a lack of understanding of the Chinese context, he says. Thus, architectural imports multiply to the detriment of Chinese lifestyles and surroundings.

- 9 Chapter 5 is more analytical. Li Xiangning, who teaches at Tongji University, focuses on themed spaces in the *One City, Nine Towns* programme, comparing them with projects found in the United States. His idea, following a postmodernist reading, is that such symbolic productions fail to create identity through the thematic zones and remain merely capitalist operations devoid of any cultural depth. In his conclusion, he tempers his viewpoint by saying that such imports are preferable to copying Chinese traditional architecture, as current values hardly correspond to those of the past.
- 10 The last chapter in this part, by Laurence Liauw Wie Wu, professor of architecture at the University of Hong Kong, compares new towns in Shanghai and Hong Kong, keeping in view the issue of constructing identical or differentiated housing (i.e., imitated architecture). In his view, the two cities' models are radically different, be it in terms of government decision-making, underlying political and economic ideology, residents' aims, number of housing units planned, or architectural style. The author takes a dim view of the situation in Shanghai, finding it ironic that houses are being built in the style of the Concessions era.
- 11 The second dossier is entirely photographic. All except one of the eight pictures were taken in the European architecture zones. The vision conveyed is quite critical of the project: the copies of Western architectures reveal the immoderation, absurdity, and vapidness of those spaces. Photographer Richard Rowland's vision follows a path: the first image shows workers, perhaps the zone's only residents. In the second, there are just four of them amidst empty buildings. Then follow five images of villas, buildings, and roads showing vast empty spaces. The last image shows two porches of semi-detached houses, but the possible presence of residents is denied by the imitation feeling not only provided by architectural details but also transmitted through the represented lifestyle: same cars of the same brand and colour parked in front of gates with identical decorations. The photographer's intention is clear: it is all fiction.
- 12 Part three focuses more closely on how the *One City, Nine Towns* project has been implemented. Focusing on Songjiang new town, Zhou Jing explains the role of the different agents (various government levels, semi-public construction companies, and private investors and promoters) engaged in developing the project as well as the advantages or problems arising from the cooperation between public instances directing plan implementation and private partners driven by the profit motive.
- 13 Marijn Nieuwenhuis for his part reflects on the reasons that might have led to the realisation of a project so culturally decontextualised as regards the different forms that the Chinese city has taken over the centuries and despite the upheavals and ideological changes over the past century and a half. His analysis, for which empirical data gathered from residents seem to be lacking, is that the thematic zones are manifestations of the city's "Disneyfication": spatial marks have no signification other than that of capitalist consumption. According to Nieuwenhuis, with the opening up, the Chinese city's walls have disappeared and the only logic of daily life is consumption.
- 14 In this part's last chapter, architect Mari Fujita analyses the links between the new neighbourhoods and the former *danweis* or work units as well as the transformations in daily life stemming from the passage from one form of habitation to the other. In her view, not only has the disappearance of the *danweis* led to the loss of a sense of belonging, but the thematic

zones have engendered a confusion of cultural limits (generating much criticism by Chinese architects).

- 15 The last dossier offers a brief look at the life of seven families living in the new towns of Shanghai. Photographer Chen Taiming has sought to bring out a certain diversity among residents – from members of the middle class to families of relocated farmers. The differences between the families are noted in brief stories and in the décor of each apartment.
  - 16 Two chapters by den Hartog conclude the book. The first is a reflection on changes in the city leading on from transformations in administrative levels, especially residents committees within changing administrative units, segregation, and new modes of urban life linked to thematic areas. The second exposes the strengths but much more the weaknesses of the new town model applied in China, especially in Shanghai.
  - 17 Den Hartog's work brings together a large amount of data and interesting analyses on town planning and urbanisation under way in Shanghai. Nevertheless, analysis of the Chinese new town model is often relegated to second place either because of the undeclared focus on one subject – architectural imitation neighbourhoods – which leads to an analysis that is biased towards questioning cultural hybridisation; or because of an attempt to cover all aspects of the issue of Chinese towns, which is seen in several photographic dossiers seeking to give a glimpse of the Chinese urban situation, but which end up being decontextualised. However, readers knowledgeable about China will be able to see beyond these strong images.
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