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Urban Design in China

Aside from the COVID-19 pandemic, rapid urbanization, booming economy, and the conservation of historic urban heritage continuously put China in the spotlight. This issue of Urban Design International concentrates on a few articles that highlight various aspects of the urban design agenda in China. China's booming economy and rapid development have, in recent decades, captured the attention of urban design and planning academics and professionals alike. The breadth and depth of the publications on some of these development models showcase the similarities and differences between them and the so-called western development models. This issue highlights five specific themes that, to some extent, shed light on some interesting aspects of these discussions.

The first article entitled *"Knowledge evolution in Transit-Oriented Development: A comparative bibliometric analysis of international vs. Chinese publications"* by Ang Hu asserts that the iconic lofty projects flanking main streets per se, do not aptly capture all of China's new development paradigm. Transit-oriented developments (TODs), represent a fairly popular design pattern in China over the last two decades. This article compares and contrasts TOD research outputs published in China vs. those published internationally. While the author offers a typology of the TOD projects in China, this classification also detects a dilemma facing current Chinese urban governance. That is, the incongruity between transportation and land use planning on the one hand, and shortage of land in historic cities on the other, has led many Chinese scholars to focus on TODs as a means toward the implementation of balanced growth, thereby, diminishing rampant suburban sprawl.

The second article entitled *"A typological approach to the transformation of cave dwellings in Baisha Village, Shaanxi, China"* by Longpeng Cui, et al., critically examines the status of booming rural tourism in China. That rampant tourism-based development could potentially jeopardize and compromise the organic and indigenous villages in China is not new. However, Cui et al., delve deeper into cave dwellings in the Loess Plateau of China that have survived the test of time despite the existential threats posed against their authentic rustic lifestyles. The authors conducted a number of interviews and administered a survey questionnaire. Data analysis and synthesis guided them to propose a typological approach for possible future interventions in the face of these looming uncertainties that trump tourism over cultural heritage. They ultimately recommend a people-oriented approach that would guarantee and protect the local authentic cave dwelling life styles in that region of China.

In the third article *"Image-oriented design control in China: a case study from Nanjing,"* Fei Chen examines the new town in Nanjing, China South Railway Station (SRS) known for its prominent large urban park flanked by high-rise commercial buildings. The design concept

used in this project emanates from the long-standing Chinese planning concept surrounding creating long linear axes flanked by “cosmological high-profile” starchitecture buildings. The author critically examines this type of iconic view toward urban design by adopting various research methods including participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The study findings clearly show doubts expressed upon sacrosanct design and planning principles that result in prioritizing image making over functional demands or sanitization of people’s everyday life. While definitely difficult and iconoclastic at first blush, the author suggests that the misgivings about the virtues of erecting the so-called “paradigm cities” and pursuing “equality and livability” instead, constitute a step in the right direction by supporting everyday life at the expense of portraying a hypermodern image of the city with high-rise landmarks.

In the fourth article entitled *“Measuring street restorative expectations in Shanghai: Using restorative component scale as an explorative approach,”* Kevin Thwaites seeks to expand and broaden the scope of street “restorativeness” beyond its obvious natural and environmental attributes. As such, the author defines and operationalizes street restorativeness under four specific classifications. Using an online survey questionnaire with WeChat, the author explores the concept of street restoration in a crowded city like Shanghai, and identifies the following four categories: landscape and leisure, commercial, living and service, and traffic-oriented. While landscape and leisure, expectedly, offers the highest restorative benefits (i.e., relaxation and entertainment), traffic-oriented streets live up to people’s lowest expectations. Between these two high and low performing attributes of restorativeness, lie users’ fascination with commercial streets’ frontages and the service functionalities of living and service streets. As such, the author broadens street restorativeness beyond the obvious natural and environmental attributes.

The last article entitled *“The controversial impacts of pedestrian guardrails on road crossing behaviors: evidence from Hong Kong,”* Gianni Talamini et al., explore another dimension of street-pedestrian interface. Talamini et al., measure the effectiveness of pedestrian guardrails in Hong Kong. This multi-method research presents a before and after observation of street crossing guardrails at intersections. While guardrails obviously serve to protect the pedestrians from vehicular traffic, observation shows certain aberrations (i.e., informality). Be that as it may, the authors recommend a paradigm shift where pedestrians exert more control at busy intersections compared to vehicles. This study seems opportune, especially in light of recent public unrests in Hong Kong, which resulted in damages to street furniture and railings demanding new design thinking.

Mahyar Arefi
Patricia Aelbrecht
Co-Editors,
Urban Design International

Cover photo:



Figure 3 from the article below:

Image-oriented design control in China: a case study from Nanjing by Fei Chen

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1. Knowledge evolution in Transit-Oriented Development: A comparative bibliometric analysis of international vs. Chinese publications by Ang Hu
2. A typological approach to the transformation of cave dwellings in Baishe Village, Shaanxi, China by Longpeng Cui, Y. Zhao, et. al.
3. Image-oriented design control in China: a case study from Nanjing by Fei Chen

4. Measuring street restorative expectations in Shanghai: Using restorative component scale as an explorative approach by Kevin Thwaites (In Prepare Content)
5. The controversial impacts of pedestrian guardrails on road crossing behaviors: evidence from Hong Kong by Gianni Talamini et al.