

Lead speaker: Henrik Valeur, China

Henrik Valeur, Curator of CO-EVOLUTION and Creative Director of UiD, Shanghai 2007.

Abstract: Lost in Transition

While Mao Zedong sent millions of people to the countryside, his successor, Deng Xiaoping initiated an even more frenetic movement in the opposite direction. In the past 20 years some 400 million Chinese people have moved to the cities, and in the next 20 years an additional 400 million people are expected to follow suit. Even if China is still the World's number one manufacturing country, and its apparently inexhaustible pool of cheap labor is still the main driver of the globalization of trade, the manufacturing industry is no longer the main driver of economic development in China.

Today, the real driver of economic development in China is the speculative investments in capital and real estate markets. These massive – if somehow intangible – investments are accompanied by huge public spending on urban and infrastructural projects. Together they lead to the explosive growth of service industries and the build-up of entirely new industries, which in turn lead to individual prosperity and dramatic improvements of the living conditions for some 20 million urban immigrants each year.

It is urbanization that drives economic development. And it is through urbanization that the Chinese government seeks to fulfill its promise of significantly improving the living conditions of the Chinese people. But it is urbanization conducted as a kind of emergency planning. For instance, it is said that more square meters are constructed in a single Chinese mega city per year, than in all of Europe. Yet, the number of architects in Europe vastly exceeds the number in China.

No surprise, these processes of rapid and extensive urbanization and the associated new urban lifestyles, exert tremendous pressure on both local and global environments. But they also produce an urban population somehow lost in transition. Lost between a past, that was effectively erased by the Communist regime, and a future that apparently only consists of the developer's meaningless slogans. Lost as the migrant worker, between the desperate situation in the countryside and the miserable lives of the so-called floating population, who in many cases constitute $\frac{1}{4}$ of the populations in the new cities. Or as the nouveaux rich stuck in a traffic jam in her Mercedes on the elevated highway, somewhere between her luxurious apartment on 37th floor in the gated compound and the air-conditioned studio on 52nd floor in the new Central Business District. Are these cities, as it has been suggested, a mix of Blade Runner and Disneyland? They are - even if largely the results of speculation - very real to a huge proportion of the world's population.

Session OR-16: Construction of Urban Identity

Place: Joint Session, School of Architecture

Date: Monday 24 September

Time: 16:00-18:00