



CHINA'S URBAN REVOLUTION

UNDERSTANDING CHINESE ECO-CITIES

AUSTIN
WILLIAMS

B L O O M S B U R Y

'Taking the reader on a journey through China's much misunderstood and often under-appreciated eco-cities, Williams delves into the testing grounds which are teaching the world how to – and how not to – build the cities of the 21st century.'

Wade Shepard, author of *Ghost Cities of China*

'An engaging, lively overview of Chinese urbanisation. The great strength of this work is the ways in which it describes – and takes seriously – the often profound differences between Chinese and Western views on the relationship between humanity and the environment. A key study of a key issue.'

Kerry Brown, Professor of Chinese Studies and Director of the Lau China Institute, King's College, UK

China is urbanizing faster than any other country in history. At the forefront of the 'Eco-city' boom, it professes to be building hundreds of clean, green, people-friendly, high-tech urban centres in the next five years. Commonly perceived as an environmental pariah, are we witnessing history's greatest environmental turnaround? Could China's urban experiment provide valuable lessons for cities worldwide?

Whether or not we choose to believe the hype, there is little doubt that this is a phenomenon that needs unpicking and understanding. In *China's Urban Revolution*, Austin Williams explores the progress and perils of China's vast Eco-city program, describing the complexities which emerge in the race to balance the environment with industry, rural life with urban growth, and the liberty of the individual with the authority of the Chinese state. Lifting the lid on the economic and social realities of the Chinese blueprint for eco-modernisation, Williams tells the story of the rise of urban China, and reveals the pragmatic, political and economic motives that lurk behind the successes and failures of its Eco-city agenda.

This is a timely and readable account which explores a range of themes – environmental, political, cultural and architectural – shedding fascinating light on contemporary Chinese society, and providing a lens through which to view the politics of sustainability closer to home.

AUSTIN WILLIAMS is Honorary Research Fellow in Architecture at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University in China, Senior Lecturer at Kingston University and Director of the Future Cities Project. He is the China correspondent for *The Architectural Review* and has written for a wide range of magazines and newspapers from *Nature* to *The Times Literary Supplement*.

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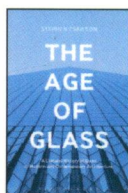
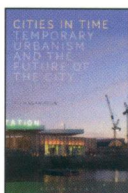


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China's Urban Revolution

To Martha

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Austin Williams, author, journalist and associate professor of architecture at XJTU in China, has visited many Chinese cities and Eco-cities and takes an honest view of their progress and perils. From traffic pollution to the liberation of mobility; from the dangers of deforestation to the wonders of industrialization; from rural sanctification to urban globalization, this book explores how these cities are creating—and also attempting to resolve—China's fundamental contradictions of development.

Williams is the China correspondent for *The Architectural Review*, contributing editor, AR (Pacific Region), and writes occasionally on Chinese architecture for *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* and *Asian Age*. This book is a development of the author's presentations made at CUNY (New York), the British Chamber of Commerce (Shanghai), University of Hawaii (Honolulu), Zhejiang University, Wuhu University, Anhui, the University of Hong Kong, Beijing University and the Battle of Ideas in London.

PREFACE

China is a country of contradictions. A place of rickshaws and space stations, of tropics and deserts, of dynamism and restraint, of yin and yang. Many have pointed out that China's social contradictions are inherently unsustainable, but the ultimate contradiction is that the Chinese state seems to be able to sustain them. How else can a country that seeks to be a player in the globalized world still blithely restrict access to ideas on the internet? How else might we explain the fact that its president celebrates China's 5,000-year-old civilization¹ even though the country had revolutions in 1911 and 1949. Or the fact that it is the world's second-richest nation that still self-identifies as an under-developed country. It's a liberalizing capitalist economy that has tightened the state ownership of giant corporations in order to ensure their "socialist direction of development."² And it is a patriotic and pious nation from which many people still seem keen to flee.³

This book is meant as a challenge to those who attempt to impose a Manichean worldview on China: who see it as either politically enervating or frighteningly authoritarian, an economic miracle or a historical tragedy, a Chinese Dream or a nightmare of conformism, because in reality all of these descriptions apply. Author Jonathan Fenby recommends that China watchers should be a little less glib in making immediate assessments of China and should not just take into account not just the China that hits the headlines but introduce a nuanced understanding of its underlying complexity.⁴ This book hopes to reflect that attitude. As such it is neither a relativist celebration of Oriental difference nor a paean to contemporary Western superiority.

If there is one thing that people know about China, it is its urban revolution. China has built more shopping malls, hotels, office buildings, housing estates (as well as golf courses and theme parks) than any other country in the world.⁵ According to some,

it is building twenty cities a year for twenty years, having already urbanized the equivalent of the entire US population in the first decade of this millennium. However, as a result of this urban explosion in which China is now said to be nearly 60 percent urbanized (up from 17 percent in 1976), many people see China's cities as merely a euphemism for the dangers of unrestrained growth and the problems of the modern world. Indeed, Tom Miller, author of *China's Urban Billion*, contends that "China's rapidly growing cities will remain ugly, congested and polluted."⁶ But less well known is that of all the new cities being created, the Chinese Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development has declared that many of these will be "Eco-cities." But given that, as author Wade Shepard points out, "the words 'eco' and 'city' combined together seems like an unabashed oxymoron,"⁷ for many this could be the ultimate Chinese contradiction.

China's thirteenth Five-Year Plan issued in 2015, laid down an unequivocal pledge that it would embrace a "green" development model over the following five years, leaving many Western commentators puzzled by China's ability to change course: one minute marginalized for allegedly polluting the planet, the next leading G20 talks on climate change. The resulting confusion led some to hail Chinese Eco-cities as either a fundamental change of heart in China's expansionist industrial policies or snipe that they are probably Chinese environmental cover-ups. Eco-cities are either overindulged or disbelieved. The Finnish environmentalist Eero Paloheimo calls Eco-cities "standard-setters,"⁸ whereas ex-*Huffington Post* author Bianca Bosker says that Chinese Eco-cities are "the same sprawling McMansions under a different name."⁹ American academic Julie Sze advocates "healthy skepticism (in) the eco-city"¹⁰ debate.

After living in China I have come to realize that this country is more fascinating and nuanced than Western-centric and the Sino-centric bias normally allows. As an academic and journalist, I hope to cast some light on some of its hidden stories. In doing so, I do not intend to shy away from bias but equally attempt to seek out the facts fairly. The award-winning commentator Hu Shuli, founder of Caixin Media, says that it is "a good time to be a journalist in China, because there is more news than there are journalists"¹¹ and nowhere is this more true than with reference to China's urbanization.

The debate has moved on from simply building new cities. Nowadays, Chinese urban commentators talk of “mega-cities,” “meta-cities” or even “hyper-cities” and of course “Eco-cities.” Allegedly, China will have fifteen new “supercities” by 2025 (each of 25 million people) not to mention giant urban corridors, regional powerhouses and 200 new “ordinary” cities. Will these new kinds of urban development be good, humane, healthy places? Undoubtedly, they will be well planned, but the rise of the Chinese middle classes means that urban residents are looking at a better quality of urban life, and the poor too want a piece of the action.

China’s urban condition is much pontificated, regularly criticized, frequently applauded but seldom (outside academic circles) openly investigated. The necessity for a political assessment of China’s relatively new Eco-urban phenomenon—which undoubtedly bears upon China’s place in a global environmental discourse—is the object of this book. It is a book that attempts to provide some insights, anecdotes and examples from which you, the reader, can make a more informed assessment.

That said, the subject of exploration may give rise to a number of contradictory viewpoints of my own, and I can only hope that these diverse observations, undoubted uncertainties and unresolved theories are accepted as part of an unvarnished critique of a vast, unfinished urban experiment. This book, like China, is a work in progress.

Notes

- 1 Jinping, Xi, Address at the Commemoration of The 70th Anniversary of The Victory of the Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and The World Anti-Fascist War, *Full text of Chinese president’s speech at commemoration of 70th anniversary of war victory*, Xinhuanet, September 3, 2015.
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- 2 Anderlini, Jamil, “Beijing Calls for Tighter Grip on State Groups,” *Financial Times*, September 21, 2015.
- 3 Domenach, J-L., *China’s Uncertain Future*. Columbia University Press, 2014, p. 117.

- 4 Fenby, Jonathan, *Tiger Head, Snake Tails: China Today, How It Got There and Why It Has to Change*. Simon & Schuster (London), 2013, p. xii.
- 5 Campanella, T.J., *The Concrete Dragon: China's Urban Revolution and What It Means for the World*. Princeton Architectural Press (New York), 2012, p. 14.
- 6 Miller, T., *China's Urban Billion: The Story Behind the Biggest Migration in Human History*. Asian Arguments, Zed Books (New York), 2012, p. 6.
- 7 Shepard, Wade, "China's Eco-cities Are Often Neither Ecologically Friendly, Nor Functional Cities," *The Great Debate*, Reuters, September 22, 2015. <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/> (accessed March 4, 2016).
- 8 Xiang, Li and Zheng, Xu (2011), "Eco-cities Are the Key to Conservation: Experts," *China Daily*, September 24, 2011.
- 9 Bosker, Bianca, *Original Copies: Architectural Mimicry in Contemporary China*. University of Hawaii Press, 2013.
- 10 Sze, Julie, *Fantasy Islands: Chinese Dreams and Ecological Fears in an Age of Climate Change*. University of California Press, 2015, p. 163.
- 11 Hu, S., Special Melbourne Lecture, Lowy Institute at the National Gallery of Victoria, July 11, 2016.

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I have never before had so many exciting arguments about architecture and urbanism as I have had since coming to China in 2011, where those I have met have been supremely informed, eager to talk, and forthright in their challenges. For all the reports of (undeniable) censorship, I have predominantly encountered only the

luxury of robust argument, dedicated inquiry and intellectual open-mindedness. I list here some of the most notable conversationalists: University of Tongji professors, Li Xiangning, Miao Pu, and Harry den Hartog; University of Hong Kong lecturers, Johnathan Lin and Joshua Bolchover, Professor Wang Yun at the Beijing University of Civil Engineering and Architecture, Maria Oenoto COP21 representative, Oxford University Professor Alan Hudson, Mary O'Donnell of Shenzhen Noted, and Future Cities Project director, Alastair Donald.

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