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Transplanting cityscapes: the use of imagined globalization in housing commodification in Beijing

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How does globalization unfold in the process of urban development? Rather than examine the impact of globalization on the city as if the former were independent of and superimposed on the latter, this paper aims to address how globalization can be imagined, pursued and exploited in the process of local growth. Through examining the emergence of Western architectural motifs in a late socialist capital, Beijing, it is shown that transplanting cityscapes is a conscious action by developers to exploit globalization and thereby overcome the constraints of local markets. By associating themselves with globalization, the development elite hope to sell the vision of the good life in the era of globalization.

Key words: *Beijing, housing development, global city, global imagination*

Introduction

Sixteen kilometres north of the Asian Games Village in a northern suburb of Beijing is located an exotic and luxury estate. Its name, like its original North American neo-traditional design, is 'Orange County'. The external design is typical of the fashionable style of up-market housing in Beijing: the 'townhouse' style and the internal decoration of show homes is equally impressive (Plate 1). The project boasts '100 percent authentic design' drawn from the same project in the USA. The original design, according to widely distributed brochures, won a prize for New Homes in the USA in 1999. Under the title of 'Beijing's pure European and American villa', another source emphasizes its authenticity: 'adopting the original American style, the Orange County project uses a blueprint that won the 1999 California Gold Medal' (Wang 2000, 14).

It is claimed that the project was the first to be jointly designed by three genuine American architectural firms, who 'inject many brand new and advanced international design *linian* into the project'. The word '*linian*' is indeed a selling point, employing jargon fashionable in property development in China nowadays. The word *linian*, coined from 'lixiang' (ideal) and 'gainian' (concept), can thus be best translated as 'visionary concept'. It represents a stark departure from the outdated idealism of communist utopianism. The emergence of the discourse thus suggests a profound transformation of cityscapes in the late socialist era. According to the article, the design uses a new visionary concept that helps to maintain an atmosphere of 'community' that indeed 'mimics a French town on the River Seine'. Therefore, it fully 'presents exotic characteristics of the foreign country', and the construction materials, including doors, windows and ventilation systems, are in fact imported from overseas.

This place, however, is not for 'ordinary' people. The total floor space of the project amounts to 120 000 square metres, and 100 of the 300 units are designed in the 'townhouse' style (Zhang 2001). The first phase was released to the market in

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Plate 1 The external design of the 'Orange County' (a) and the internal design (b)

December 2000, and sold out at an average price of 7800 Yuan per square metre. Since the average per capita annual disposable income in Beijing is 11 577 Yuan (Beijing Statistical Bureau 2002), this is equivalent to less than 2 square metres per person.

To what extent can we attribute the emergence of these alien residential landscapes to the discourse of 'globalization'? Recent conceptualization of urban development in the context of transitional economies has begun to focus on marketization and globalization as the major themes of transformation (e.g. Andrusz *et al.* 1996; Logan 2002). It is not uncommon to find these two aspects addressed separately, thus leaving a knowledge gap regarding their interaction. This deficiency is especially evident when attempts are made to explain these estates in terms of their both 'borrowed' and 'marketized' characteristics.

This study therefore pays attention to the particular history of global cities in the making (King 1990), in an attempt to understand the interrelated globalization and marketization processes in Beijing, a capital in late socialist transition. Rather than examine the impact of globalization on the city as if the former were independent of and superimposed on the latter, this paper aims to address how globalization can be imagined, pursued and exploited in the process of property development.

Theoretical perspective

According to Knox (1993), the built environment bears witness to the restless formation and reformation of landscapes in response to the imperatives and contradictions inherent in the dynamics of a capitalist economy and society. In his analysis of the 'restless urban landscape', Knox (1991 1993) tried to understand the production of 'packaged urban landscape', with development characterized by mixed densities, uses and amenities, through the imperative to capture profit in real estate development in the face of postmodern urban changes. In the residential sector, the packaged development often includes 'community amenities and expensive-looking materials, dramatic master bedroom/bathroom suites, and integrated but distinctive design based on traditional and vernacular styling' (Knox 1991, 186–7). He argued that specific outcomes such as new architectural styles and new forms of residential development must not be abstracted from the broader sweep of socio-spatial change.

To trace the forces driving the development of private and master-planned suburban and ex-urban communities in the USA, Knox (1991) explained the imperatives of the building industry to suit the needs of consumers who want style and distinctiveness. There is a new class fraction under advanced capitalism – the emergence of the 'new bourgeoisie' and, consequently, consumption based on commodity aesthetics has appeared. Urban gentrification, for example, is driven by the pursuit of a new lifestyle by the middle classes, which sponsors residential landscapes of loft living and historic preservation (Zukin 1988).

The emergence of new cityscapes in advanced capitalist societies has led to the claim of a new postmodern urbanism (Dear and Flusty 1998; Knox 1993). Harvey (1989) linked the underlying causes of the turn to postmodernism to the over-accumulation crisis and new post-fordist forms of accumulation. The transformation of the city is associated with the creation of 'the city of work' and 'the city of play', which aim to attract production capital and consumption capital (Short and Kim 1999).

Recently the formation of global cities in transitional economies has attracted research attention (Sykora 1994; Keivani *et al.* 2001). Most studies, however, pay attention mainly to the role of foreign investment (Sit and Yang 1997; Yeung and Li 1999). Some researchers also point out the importance of government policies and pro-growth development coalitions (Lin 2000; Shi and Hamnett 2002; Olds 2001; Wu 2000). The perspective adopted in this paper places emphasis on the imperatives of local context, in particular the practice of developers who imagine globalization as a 'new way of life'. By studying the transplantation of cityscapes in Beijing, we aim to understand how this process is constructed through conscious actions.

Globalization and transplanting cityscapes

In the advanced Western economies, postmodern urbanism provides a greater flexibility in landscape production and allows the artistic expression of lifestyles through the construction of distinctive cityscapes. One way for postmodernism to find inspiration is from history, creating neo-traditional urban design. The other way is to import design styles from other countries or cultures, creating 'the city as theme park'. Globalization now is at the centre of this change through providing 'time-space compression', and so high fluidity is seen in the design motifs.

Transplanting cityscapes can be understood as part of globalization, namely the globalization of culture. Globalization is frequently understood as an imposed process through which the core transforms the periphery. Such a hegemonic convergence is typically known as 'Americanization' (Hannerz 1997). Transplanting cityscapes, on the other hand, facilitates 'cultural affinities' which in turn pave the way to deepened globalization:

> when the peripheral culture absorbs the influx of meaning and symbolic forms from the center and transforms them to some considerable degree into something of their own, they may at the same time so increase the cultural affinities between the center and the periphery that the passage of more cultural imports is facilitated. (Hannerz 1997, 127)

However, globalization only provides the possibility of relocating/copycatting alien landscapes. The imperative of transplanting cityscapes must be understood in the local context. The notion of convergence is questionable, its trans-local nature being indicated in the literature of globalization and localization (Eade 1996; King 1997). Once the culture is 'deterritorialized', it is subject to transformation through the 'reterritorialization' process (Short and Kim 1999, 4), thus producing local forms. These local forms, although they demonstrate some superficial similarities with the local milieu where they originally developed, are embedded into the socio-cultural environment. Therefore, to understand the stretched global–local nexus (Beauregard 1995), we need to understand how 'global forces are sometimes embraced, sometimes resisted, and sometimes themselves exploited' (Short and Kim 1999, 129). In other words, the enabling local actors can solicit global forces to pursue a principally locally dependent agenda. For example, in Tokyo, globalization has been 'symbolically' used to support non-Westernization so as to promote the city as a 'global' city (Machimura 1998).

In the context of post-socialist cities, the antithesis of such convergence is 'path-dependence' (Smith and Swain 1998). Local institutions that are under market transition not only persist as a barrier to such hegemonic convergence but also are transformed and mobilized to meet the challenges of globalization. Transplanting cityscapes is a socially constructed process which envisages globalization as the core of social change. Property developers actively exploit the symbolism of globalization to overcome contradictions inherent in the post-socialist commodification of housing development. Like the manipulation of urban images through city marketing (Short *et al.* 1993; Kearns and Philo 1993; Hall and Hubbard 1998), the exploitation of global/Western/exotic lifestyles allows real estate developers to steer demand and consequently to capture the niche market. While foreign investment is the direct driving force in transitional economies, this 'soft' side of globalization as the inflow of symbols and ideologies is as significant as the 'hard' side of capital flows.

Transplanting cityscapes: 'townhouses' in Beijing

The concept of the 'townhouse' has been imported into Beijing since 2000. Unlike most imported foreign words, 'townhouse' is not translated according to its meaning, causing a great difficulty for local people in understanding it. Because the word is pronounced as *tang hao zhi*, meaning 'mouse in the soup' in literal pronunciation of Chinese characters, the term creates curiosity, sensation and cynicism.

There is, however, a reason behind the preservation of the English word in Chinese text, as a local journalist explains:

> If we want to understand the townhouse, we should first learn a bit of English. We should first understand that it is a popular term just like SOHO, CLD, Loft, CBD, and then try to appreciate its international origin.
>
> Townhouse targets the white collar office worker and successful people. Their English is not bad. They are naturally fond of these terms. Those who cannot understand foreign languages generally respect foreign words. Therefore, developers do not waste their efforts on translating the jargon into Chinese words. (Tang 2001, 2)

The townhouse is in fact a terraced or semi-detached house designed to high standards. Thus, local property agents explain that townhouses are 'terraced villas' or 'economic villas'. Most townhouse projects are located in the suburbs. The townhouse is called a villa because it is built at low density, in contrast with high-rise commodity housing. Because land prices dictate very high building density in Chinese cities, developers cannot afford to build low-density estates in the central area (e.g. the area within the third circular road in Beijing).

In 2001 about a dozen townhouse projects were constructed in Beijing. They are mainly distributed in the northern suburbs. Their names reflect the nature of transplanted cityscapes: 'Cambridge', the 'Asian-Olympic-Games-Garden', 'Lushan small new town', 'Times Manor', 'Foreign Villa' and 'Orange County'. The most expensive one is Asian-Olympic-Games-Garden, located between the fourth and fifth circular roads. The price is well above 10 000 Yuan per square metre. The main housing type has a floor space of 300 square metre, and the price for one townhouse is about 3 million Yuan. In general, however, the price of townhouses ranges from 800 000 to 1 million Yuan, lower than those of detached houses and villas. Even this price, however, is not affordable for ordinary people.

The emergence of the townhouse in Beijing should first be understood as product innovation, according to a senior real estate consultant (Interview, June 2001). In the pre-reform period the dominant form of housing was the flat in multi-story matchbox-style buildings. In the 1980s (the early stage of reform), high-rise high-density commodity housing estates began to emerge. These buildings are developed in the form of residential districts (micro-regions), a concept originating in Soviet residential planning (French and Hamilton 1979). While the 'modern' large housing estates developed in the 1980s are better than the workers' villages built in the 1950s, market reform has raised the expectations of higher standards of living among those who benefit from marketization.

As discussed above, the driving force for commodity housing lies in stratified demand. 'Fully commodified housing' (i.e. that sold on the open market to private purchasers) results from a demand for higher standards rather than a need for basic accommodation. Demand is driven by the desire for lower density, green space and private automobile ownership. In short, it is the demand for a new lifestyle, which has not been seen previously in China.

The customers for townhouses belong to the upper middle class. Many buy a townhouse as a second home in addition to their apartment in the city. This social group is at the stage of wealth accumulation and expects an increase in income. The townhouse is designed for those 'who want to own a plot of land under the feet and a piece of sky overhead', and the ownership of the townhouse will bring them 'land, sky, garden, and garage'.

The emergence of the townhouse in fact fills a gap in the niche market for high-quality properties. After its emergence in 1990, Beijing's villa market experienced a frenetic boom in the early 1990s. The market collapsed in 1994 in response to government tightening of bank loans. Since 1995 no new villa project has been approved. Thus the total supply of villas began to decrease in the late 1990s. Moreover, the design concept of villas developed in the early 1990s cannot meet the rising demand. In 1999, the villa market began to recover. The townhouse in fact emerged as an 'economic villa' to fill the gap between luxury properties and ordinary commodity housing.

The profit margin on townhouse projects is very high. Whilst the actual cost of construction ranges from 4000 to 5000 Yuan per square metre, the average selling price of townhouses stands at 7500 Yuan per square metre. With an average floor space of 200 square metres, the total price ranges from 1.35 million to 1.8 million Yuan. Because the townhouse occupies a large area of land, with a plot ratio controlled at 0.5 to 0.7, it is crucial to acquire cheap land. The difference between the construction cost and the selling price has led to a profit rate well above low-market commodity housing.

Commodification: production of housing in the post-reform era

Housing commodification was initiated to tackle the chronic housing shortage in the socialist era (Zhou and Logan 1996; Wang and Murie 1999; Li 2000). However, the building boom of the 1990s has resulted in a large number of vacant housing units. From then on, commodification of housing has begun to reveal its contradiction: the use of market-oriented approaches to mobilize investment in housing production against the constraint of effective demand due to economic restructuring.

The constraint of housing affordability has forced the government to adopt various *ad hoc* policies such as the 'affordable housing scheme' which is subsidized by the government and allocated to those who cannot afford full market prices. However, for most ordinary residents, the price of affordable housing is still far too expensive. Without an effective check on income qualification, the buyers of affordable housing are actually better-off households rather than middle- or low-income families for whom the scheme was designed. Similarly, housing funds established in order to provide financial resources to home buyers favour higher-income households. Wang suggests that

> it is not difficult to understand why only higher-income groups from the private or joint-venture sectors have borrowed large sums from these funds. Funds were collected from a large number of middle- to low-income groups, and the immediate benefits went to the high-income groups. (Wang 2001, 642)

Practically, the reform policy began to deviate from its original objective of solving housing shortage to stimulating economic growth. Since the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, sluggish demand and deflation have become major constraints on economic growth. Expanding domestic demand has become the top priority for the government. Real estate development is used as an instrument to promote the rate of economic growth. As a result, affordable housing and low-market commodity housing (housing developed without subsidies through the real estate market) are competing for the better-off clients who have purchasing capacity. This group of households, however, has a very different purpose in housing purchase. They are not satisfied with ordinary design standards, used in the mass production of socialist workers' housing, and are looking for a better living environment. In Beijing, high-standard urban residences are developed into secured estates with packaged amenities, similar to those found in the 'gated communities' of North America (Knox 1991).

Given the fact that commodity housing purchase nowadays is not concerned so much with acquiring basic accommodation but rather is increasingly associated with lifestyle, real estate developers have to make a great effort to understand the meaning of 'lifestyles' and even to invent a new lifestyle for customers. First and foremost, the developers have to understand who the customers are. A senior real estate consultant, representing the view of many developers, boldly suggested that 'the majority of the population is irrelevant to commodity housing development' (Interview, June 2001).

Rising social inequality and differentiated markets

Accompanying economic reform is increasing social stratification and spatial differentiation (Wu 2002). Hu and Kaplan (2001) describe the emergence of affluence in Beijing and suggest that there is an enlarged residential stratification. Despite the difficulty in estimating household income due to hidden subsidies and grey income, the official statistics begin to provide evidence of enlarging inequalities. Housing is one of the major indicators to reflect this trend. Table 1 shows the uneven distribution of income among households according to the Beijing Urban Households Survey annually conducted by the Beijing Statistical Bureau. The high income group has an average income at 183 per cent of the average income of all surveyed households. The official figures on high income families may not be accurate as there are other sources of hidden income from stocks, shares and properties. These high-income families have become the major customers of commodity housing. For up-market commodity housing, the profile of customers is skewed towards those households with an annual income of at least 100 000 Yuan. The best-selling housing type has three bedrooms and two receptions at a size of 150–170 square metres. The price for estates averages at 7000 Yuan per square metre, giving a total price per housing unit ranging from 1.05 to 1.19 million Yuan. Assuming a price to income ratio as high as seven times, this project is obviously targeting households with an annual income at 150 000 to 170 000 Yuan.

Table 1 Income distribution among urban households (annual cash income and disposable income per capita of 1000 surveyed households) in Beijing, 2001

	Cash income (Yuan)	% of average	Disposable income (Yuan)	% of average
Low income	7221.3	52.45	6270.7	54.16
Medium–low income	9556.3	69.41	8579.2	74.10
Medium income	12 179.8	88.46	10 631.3	91.82
Medium–high income	16 562.8	120.29	13 235.6	114.32
High income	25 215.4	183.13	20 652.5	178.38
Average	13 768.8	100.00	11 577.8	100.00

Source: Beijing Statistical Bureau (2002, 496)

The fully commodified housing market is very competitive. Property developers in this segment are forced to find a selling point to 'brand' their products, as housing demand is becoming diversified and differentiated. Under market-oriented urban development, housing construction is no longer driven by housing need for basic accommodation as defined in the socialist era but rather by demand for the ownership of lifestyles. Faced with an increasingly saturated market, the developers need to exploit the scope of niche markets by inventing new and ostentatious housing estates. Different tactics are used, one of which is to depict the high quality of the living environment. Fraser examined the advertisements for luxury housing and unpacked the 'romanticized discourse of oasification' by suggesting: 'the trees and flowers of the urban housing estate also mark the commodified borders of enhanced domesticity and the boundaries of a more private life style for those who can afford it and those who can dream of it' (2000, 53). In short, the emerging middle class is looking for the *good* life.

Using globalization to overcome local constraints

However, it is this conceptualization of the good life that is lacking in the late-socialist era. In the socialist era, the concept of a 'good life' was defined by communist utopianism. The overwhelming task was to combat material deprivation and, in housing consumption, the shortage of basic shelter. Now that this seems irrelevant to the upwardly mobile Chinese, consumers begin to look elsewhere for their vision and aspirations. In this sense, globalization becomes particularly relevant as it provides a new source of imagination to foster suppressed desires. Szelenyi (1996) argued that in Eastern Europe the major transformation in post-socialist cities is the re-emergence of diversity and greater 'urbanism', defined by the Chicago School as the 'way of life'. Alongside the highly controversial effect of the polarized labour market in the global city (Sassen 1991) – whereby the new white collar work in foreign companies attracts salaries that enable some Chinese to join the new rich – globalization helps to define different lifestyles and to differentiate consumption levels. But this does not occur automatically without conscious social action undertaken by local actors.

Globalization and marketization are now described as two major processes in economies under transition. These processes, however, are inseparable, as seen in the transplanting of cityscapes in Beijing. The microcosms here are not only the local forms that are assumed by globalization, but are themselves part of the globalization process. The claimed global reach allows the developers to sell a new vision of the good life. Basing their imagination on Western lifestyles seems a more effective way to open up the niche market. To boost authenticity, developers adopt various innovative measures including employing global architects, mimicking Western design motifs, naming the roads and buildings with famous foreign names that are familiar to the Chinese, and even forging a relationship of sister communities with foreign towns.

Transplanting the townhouse into Beijing's suburban residential landscape is, on the one hand, driven by globalization and the demand for high-quality properties and, on the other, results from the contradictions of housing commodification. The emphasis on market development plus stratified

housing demand has inevitably led to diversification of built forms. While the majority of urban residents still live in the traditional style of courtyard housing or workplace compounds, the rising upper middle class has begun to search for foreign lifestyles in this late-socialist era.

Conclusion

Globalization, rather than existing independently outside local territories, is a socially constructed process. This paper examines transplanted cityscapes as a result of the conscious action of local developers, which is further rooted in the contradiction of late-socialist housing commodification. Rather than study monumental urban projects financed by foreign investment (Olds 2001), I have chosen to depict the 'ordinary' cityscapes of residential developments for local consumers. These are atypical cases in the study of globalization in the sense that the developers are not multinationals and do not themselves operate at the global scale. The portrait of developers' global reach is at the least dubious and at the most extreme forged as a commercial marketing tool; the motifs of classical European architecture and townhouse landscaping are selective and imagined. But the phenomena really exist as part of globalization.

What is significant is the suggestion generated by these cases: that globalization is not simply imposed but rather is something that can be imagined, solicited and exploited. The global discourses here are manipulated to overcome market constraints by exploiting more effectively the niche market of the upwardly mobile urban rich. Such imaginative and selective use of globalization suggests that the globalizing city is bound to be 'unavoidably incomplete' (Beauregard and Haila 1997), in this context of transitional economies.

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