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URBAN NOMADS BUILDING SHANGHAI

Migrant Workers and the Construction Process

[transcript] urban studies
This book takes a close look at the interrelated phenomena of international business migrants and rural migrant workers in Shanghai. Through separate case studies it observes them in parallel and sheds light on the spatial implications of both groups' migrant status. The authors' uncovering of harsh and inadequate living and working conditions affecting rural migrant workers in the construction industry in Shanghai leads to the development of a concept of «Fair Building», a socially-conscious architecture that calls for accountability in ensuring that stakeholders involved in the construction process contribute to a sustainable urbanization.

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Introduction

This is not an analysis, nor is it a narration or description of events that breaks down the Chinese urbanization process into small details. In many ways urban phenomena are too complex, too big, and too fast to be fully understood or to be made explainable by breaking them down into comprehensible elements. The development of megacities is a global phenomenon that is particularly visible in contemporary China. In no other country is the process of urbanization occurring at such a large scale and with such speed. Urban transformation is taking place at a pace that has not been seen before and we as observers can only try breathlessly to keep up. Mostly, we follow the results and evaluate them after they have happened rather than while they are occurring. Fascinated by this rapid urbanization, we came to Beijing and Shanghai to study and work for several times between 2008 and 2015. During our working experience in the field of architecture we repeatedly witnessed things that appeared puzzling within the construction process and the question “weishenme?” 为什么 – why? – constantly aroused our curiosity. When visiting construction sites we were unpleasantly surprised to see laundry hanging in half demolished houses and building shells. Why do Chinese construction workers live on the construction site? Why are so many architects moving to Shanghai? Why are so many poor-quality buildings erected so quickly? Weishenme – 为什么.

This book is a collection of snapshots, of close-ups of urban transformation – but it is not about the city itself as an object of study, but rather is about the countless people who make this transformation possible. What makes them move to the city? And what does it mean for them to be in a new environment far away from family and friends? This is about their circumstances and capabilities, their personal motives and their dreams.
“We don’t pay enough tribute to the backbone of Shanghai’s construction fervor, as unhappy as Shanghai residents seem to be by all the Expo-driven noise and air pollution. We crane our necks to identify the peaks of skyscrapers that overrun the city but tend to sweep over the ubiquitous orange and red helmets dotting the sides of streets – hauling concrete, climbing into sewers and soldering windows in unfinished buildings. They are migrant labor that are building the China dream but are rarely able to enjoy the luxurious fruits which the well-off take for granted. They are also the unrecognized residents of Shanghai, and in many cases, looked down upon because they are mostly from out of the city, or 外地人 (wai di ren) from poorer and far-flung provinces of China. Perhaps they make enough to help the family back home to buy a pig or send their children to school. If they are lucky, they can help their families buy a television with the help of generous rural subsidies that the government recently introduced.

This gentleman, in a group of mingling workers, was most pleased to have his portrait taken in front of the Shanghai World Financial Centre (SWFC) as his workplace backdrop. Upon looking at the resulting image, he scratched his head and stared back at the building, as if it had never occurred to him to do so. For having poured their blood, sweat and tears into building Shanghai’s skyline for minimum wage, they ultimately have no ownership or belonging in that part of China’s dream.” (Sue Anne Tay 2009: The face of Shanghai’s skyline)
“In Shanghai today, opportunity seems to vibrate on the streets. It reads on people’s faces as they go about their business or walk the river embankment and the commercial sidewalks. And part of the opportunity – and the fun – lies in the city’s enormous diversity. In 2003, Robert Venturi and I were invited to China to lecture and consult on campus planning and architecture. We accepted the invitation in order to see the country and to work as architects, but also to indulge our fascination with China’s culture and with its centuries of cultural interaction, worldwide.

[...]
And I fantasized about coming to Shanghai on a voyage of discovery – in search of new urban prototypes and spending a working vacation in the city, in a spa hotel attached to a scholar’s garden. Every morning, after my sauna, I would follow the way of the ancient scholar, down his paths, up his little hill, to his small summer house with a long view, and set myself up in there and do my work.” (Denise Scott Brown in Gil 2008: 71-87)
As different as these two perspectives on Shanghai might be, they both describe phenomena of the construction process. Both are part of a complex system of urbanization and part of the Chinese construction boom, which in addition to its speed and dynamics is also thrilling and exciting for various other reasons. But while the mushrooming high-rises are being celebrated as still-life art work through representative architectural photography in glossy magazines on modern city life, the process of planning and erecting the buildings is relegated to the background. The whole system of construction that lies behind this production of space is not visible and the role of the architect as planner in this turbo-urbanism as well as the magnitude of the task taken on by the executing parties is not given sufficient attention.

Proceeding from pure curiosity about the puzzles of city development and urban transformation we soon found that certain supposedly universally recognized principles of equality and self-determination of people are missing from the construction business. As early as 1996, UN Habitat declared that “urban poverty and its attendant human cost is perhaps the single greatest challenge of our time” (UN Habitat 1996). On a global level cities have become increasingly homogenous and have grown together, but internally they are more and more divided by increasing inequality and spatial fragmentation. By focusing on the building process and construction sites we want to look behind the scenes and illuminate the “backstage activities” that are part of shiny, large-scale projects. In various snapshots of the spatial and social DNA of Shanghai we aim to show the links between the physical and the social in cities.

This book is an examination of a very specific group of people: individuals who are involved in various construction processes over time. The ongoing building boom in China has caused them to follow their work without settling permanently due to the temporary nature of building projects. Among the people involved in the construction process in China, two groups must be emphasized – because they include such a large number of people that it is important to investigate their role in the construction process. But there are several additional reasons to pay close attention to these groups – torn away from their homes, they have many things in common while remaining completely different. And while their existence is recognized by the media, scholarly research has not paid them sufficient attention.

This work is based on research conducted between 2008 and 2015 in Shanghai; inter alia supported by the Technical University of Vienna and Tongji University. The goal of this participatory observation was to examine flows of working migrants in Shanghai’s building and construction processes. The main task of the on-site investigation was visiting various construction sites in and around
Shanghai and observing the workings of several private planning offices and gain direct insights from migrant workers.

What is happening in Chinese cities today is of historic importance. However, finding a language that does justice to the city’s social, economic, and political landscape is challenging. Our study begins on various different but interrelated levels and attempts to grasp the complexity of the current urban transformations going on in China.

The first part of the book, Interacting With Urban China, begins with a discussion of our understanding of city development and urban planning. Besides the familiar debate on the quality of buildings erected at such enormous speed in Chinese cities, it is often forgotten that construction is more than the materialized final result. In the language of critical urban studies, space is neither just a materialized end result nor a pure concept, but rather is a social process of production. The chapter on the Production Of Space is mainly based on Lefebvre’s theories when describing the relationships between the production of the built environment and societal processes.

The following chapter, Construction – A Process, focuses on construction phases as described in the disciplines of project management and project development by highlighting the relationships and dependencies that are part of the construction process. From the beginning of a project until the building is actually used and reused, many different groups with various professional and even cultural backgrounds are involved. We refer to the minimum standards of human rights according to the UN and the International Labour Organization (ILO) and use this as a benchmark for all actors involved.

After introducing the broad range of actors involved in building projects, we refer to the assumption that migrant workers play a specific role in construction processes in China in general and in Shanghai in particular. In the chapter People In Motion we demonstrate how mobile migrant workers strongly affect China’s development and how rural-to-urban migration is rapidly reshaping the spatial, economic, demographic, and social landscapes of the Chinese city and countryside. Giving a historical overview of migration in China during Mao Zedong’s regime and during the post-Mao period enables us to consider the new phase of urbanization in contemporary China in a historical context. These observations are complemented by our analysis of another group of migrants, for whom the key driver of migration is also employment: International business migrants. Even though the circumstances surrounding these two migration flows are completely different, they do share various characteristics.

Much of the chapter Urban Nomads details our goal of helping to shift the perception of the migrant workers from passive, victimized migrants to active
participants in urban life. Similar to traditional nomads, the two groups usually lead a temporary existence over a long period of time and instead of losing their identity by virtue of this migrancy they should be empowered to strengthen their potential within the urban realm. Rural migrant workers and international business migrants who are temporarily involved in construction processes in China are participants in city life. While they actively shape the city through the projects they are working on, they are also individuals living in the city. The naming of the observed groups as urban nomads thus clarifies their special role as permanently temporary individuals as opposed to a mere analysis of the involved migrant workers. The chapter closes with the core arguments for our further investigation on three different levels, as described in three hypotheses.

In Shanghai – Head Of The Concrete Dragon we introduce our approach to our two case studies on international and internal working migrants as an integrative interpretation of urban transformations over time. Shanghai is a global city with over 23 million inhabitants, of whom around 40 percent are a floating population without proper registration, a city that is constantly negotiating what it means to be modern and what it means to be Chinese. The transformation of urban space is manifested not only in a flood of new construction, but also in the changing urban culture and lifestyles of residents. When looking closely at the objects of our research – construction sites in and around Shanghai – some special features become apparent. Construction sites are situated in the setting of existing urban development, dominating the changing urban landscape and at the same time contributing to the rapid transformation of these spaces. Like the transitory people we are observing, the place itself is impermanent and undergoing constant change.

In our first case study we describe what this means in detail for the sphere of global urban nomads, where we, as international business migrants, were also part of the observed group. We highlight the dynamics of urban change in Shanghai under foreign influence, which includes service packages provided by support companies and various networks of belonging in the form of clubs, associations, and internet communities especially for expatriates. Further observations relate to the spatial conditions of international business migrants in Shanghai. Originally restricted to living in hotel-style apartments in approved areas, the international community has now exerted a strong influence upon the real estate market. When we shift our attention to the challenges of working, it becomes clear that working in China is difficult in many ways, but it also offers nearly infinite opportunities for Western professional planners.

In a second case study with a slightly different research approach, we focus on the circumstances of rural migrant construction workers. In the chapter Rural
Urban Nomads we first analyse working conditions, including the structure of working relationships on site, demographic characteristics of workers such as level of education and age, and difficulties they encounter relating to job security, working hours, wage levels, and insurance. Based on several construction site visits we have further observed the spatial configurations of migrant workers and present a detailed breakdown of housing conditions, which are usually less than desirable with prefabricated dormitories situated directly on the construction site. Our analysis finds that the typical patterns of family life are quite scattered and that individual freedom is extremely limited as a result of working and living on site. The final section contextualises for our observations by describing the social, political and legal situation that influences the lives of rural migrant workers in the city. In various debates the social status within the Chinese society is defined through the registration system (*hukou*).

After an interpretation of our findings, we reflect on the techniques used in both case studies. Further, we compare the conclusions of other related research to those made in our study and point out gaps in our research that require further investigation. Finally, we highlight a number of prospects for future action with regard to these socio-spatial transformations. We address several central arguments for a socially just and sustainable form of urbanization by offering possible strategies for future construction. We propose scenarios wherein urban planners, designers, and architects could include fair building processes in their concepts and builders, contractors, and construction managers could support the fair realization of projects. The arguments for *Fair Building* ultimately form the framework for our concluding section – a mobile vocational school for migrant construction workers. This educational programme works toward a solution by addressing all participants in construction to support a building process that goes beyond the traditional audience and contributes to a socially conscious architecture.