THE 21ST-CENTURY CITY AND ITS VALUES: URBANISM, TOLERATION, AND EQUALITY

October 1, 2004

SESSION 1: URBANISM

Hilary Ballon: It's worse than embarrassing. You see, it raises the expectations. It's that John Kerry problem.

I just want to salute Ira Katznelson with whom I organized this symposium and with whom I had the great pleasure of working on it for about a year. You'll see him later this afternoon.

"The Twenty-first Century City and its Values: Urbanism, Toleration, and Equality." Our symposium has a premise. It begins with a claim that diversity is a constitutive element of the city. Because people of different faiths, races, and viewpoints live in close proximity in the city, their differences are brought into pointed contact. They may collide and conflict, merge or melt away, fracture the social fabric or make it stronger. The heterogeneity of the city makes it a place of peril and potential, a place that tests the human capacity to coexist in harmony with those unlike ourselves. And because of this concentration of difference, certain values are especially critical to civic life. Our symposium puts three values on the table: urbanism, toleration, and equality—values which are fiercely tested and forged in the city and which we deem essential to the quality of urban life. Toleration and equality are the afternoon topics, this morning our subject is urbanism.

Now urbanism may not strike you as a value. The term is sometimes used loosely to encompass whatever building activity occurs in a city. So I should say what it means to construe urbanism as a value. The word is relatively new. The Oxford English Dictionary cites its first usage in 1889, but it was sufficiently unfamiliar in 1929 that the Times of London referred to urbanism as a newly coined word. Urbanism then passed into common parlance in conjunction with the rise of the planning profession, and it signified the work of professional planners. Urbanism has since lost this close connection with professional planning, but it still implies actions and building projects designed to organize and improve the city. Undirected growth or wanton development are not urbanism in the sense that we mean because urbanism implies a conscious effort to shape the city and make it a more habitable place, however that
goal may be defined, and it assumes that the spatial character of the city is not a passive backdrop to the play of social forces, but participates in and effects urban life. In short, urbanism seeks to manage the challenges of concentrated urban living through physical interventions.

The city as we know it, American and urban models, may hardly matter at all in the twenty-first century. Explosive growth, especially along the Asia-Pacific Rim, has brought about new forms of cities, often called megacities. They are characterized by enormous size, extreme density, and building projects at a vast scale. The urbanized areas in China, Indonesia, Malaysia, and elsewhere are expanding beyond the ability of governments to provide adequate housing, clean water and air, and basic infrastructure. In the next fifty years the urban experience of the majority of the world’s population will more closely resemble the urbanized areas of Asia than the cities of the United States and Europe. China already has 166 cities with a population over 1 million, compared to nine cities in the U.S. And cities in China are growing fast and creating extremely high densities. How do we cope with this intensive urbanization? What planning models are appropriate for these emerging cities? And how do you humanize super-density and make such a city livable?

Giant cities, cities commanding a large territorial region and possessing concentrated wealth and power are not new to history. Aristotle said that Babylon had the "compass of a nation" rather than a city. Alexandria, ancient Rome, nineteenth-century London also come quickly to mind. But however far-reaching the impact of those historical cities, they had a center and definable shape. The loss of a center, of centrality, and the rise of an unbounded spreading field of urbanization has been a theme of twentieth-century criticism. Indeed the mid-century writings about megalopolis seem relevant to discussions about the megacities of our new age.

The English urban planner Patrick Geddes introduced the term megalopolis in 1927 to describe what he viewed as overgrown cities. The word was picked by Jean Gottmann to describe the urbanized northeastern seaboard from Boston to Washington [D.C.] in a 1961 book he called Megalopolis. Gottman ultimately had a positive view of the spread of urbanization: "This particular type of region on the eastern seaboard is new," he observed, "but is the result of age old processes, such as the growth of cities, the division of labor within a civilized society, and the development of world resources. And this symbolizes the long tradition of human aspirations." He saw the city as a source of wealth and ideas. In the words of Jane Jacobs, whom I must invoke since she's smiling at us on our programs, "Without cities we would all be poor." Lewis Mumford had an opposing view of urban expansion. He viewed the city as a biological organism with natural limits.

"Megalopolis," he wrote in a 1962 essay, "is the breakdown of the most fundamental of all organic limitations, the functional limits of growth. When hamlets, villages, suburbs and cities, that is communities at different scales, fuse in a seamless conurbation distinct forms of social life are destroyed, like animal species that become extinct." To Mumford, megalopolis meant, "the annihilation of man." In his words, "the effacement of human culture." The megalopolis debate raises a question not to be addressed today about the structural similarities and differences between the urban growth we observe in the Pacific Rim today and intense urbanization in previous times. It also frames the issue of economic expansion versus human culture, which is a central question to urbanists.
Meanwhile, American press coverage highlights the design of glamorous buildings in China, the super-tall towers, Olympic facilities, and other monuments by famous Western designers, while I read on the Web [that] the China Daily questions China's reliance on foreign architects. What may not be clear to an American audience familiar with the more circumscribed role of architects here is that the mad pace of development in China gives architects a particularly weighty role. Rem Koolhaas's book in 2001 on development in China includes this striking definition of the Chinese architect: "The most important, influential and powerful architect on earth. The average lifetime construction volume of the Chinese architect in housing alone is approximately three dozen thirty-story high rise buildings, designing five times the project volume of an American architect in one-fifth of the time. For a thirty-story residential high rise it takes a Chinese architect seven days to finish the design and complete a set of drawings. A project of similar scale requires two to three months in an American architectural office." We have experts later who can attest to the degree this comment may be hyperbole or not. In any event, the expanded opportunities of architects makes it all the more urgent to ask what concepts make sense for the organization of urban life under conditions of hyper-density and super-growth? Do old models devised for different spatial patterns apply? How, in the face of extreme development pressure, do you respect, not destroy, the environment and preserve the tradition of historical architecture which connects a society to its past? Do planners even have the capacity to control this fierce growth?

Here's just an example. Shanghai is sinking. It is sinking at a rate of 1.5 centimeters a year. The financial district dropped three centimeters last year. The problem is aggravated by the need to tap water sources deep underground to provide Shanghai's 16 million people with clean water, and by the crush of construction. About 2,000 skyscrapers are reportedly in the planning stages. If they are built, the fear is the construction will cause more subsidence and threaten the subway system. One response to the problem has been legislation to restrict building height, like the zoning law that New York pioneered in 1916. Now some say this is default thinking. The Chinese are learning the worst lessons from Americans, an American architect active in China told a reporter. Height restrictions, they argue, would encourage sprawl and destroy historic neighborhoods. Concentration is wiser.

Our speakers today have confronted these issues head-on and will present different ways of thinking about these urban issues, about super-density, enormous scale, and the urban conditions of the twenty-first century. We begin with Yung Ho Chang, a global architect par excellence. He is based in Beijing and a native of Beijing, the founder of the Graduate Center of Architecture at Peking University, and an American. I just learned he can vote in America. Where he should vote is a crucial question. He has taught in a number of American universities, and he recognizes that architectural education is an especially urgent matter in China where the lure of high-tech modern has endangered the great tradition of Chinese architecture. In his own practice, Yung Ho Chang has wrestled with these issues and found a way to both respect the past and to modernize. Please join me in welcoming Yung Ho Chang.

Yung Ho Chang: Thank you, Hilary, very much for your introduction, not only of myself as a speaker but also of the onslaught of urbanism in China. So that was part of my speech you've already given.
Anyway, first of all I have to say that I haven't done any thirty-story residential towers; however, I am a practitioner, an architect. I have been practicing in China for the past ten, eleven years. So I do like to take on a number of issues relating urbanism through a three-year project in China. And before I start to show the project, one comment I'd like to make is that urbanization, this very rapid urbanization, does bring a kind of an uncertainty really to the way people live, or people should live, or people could live, in China. It opens up the Pandora's box as to new lifestyle and so on, so that I don't really think urbanism is only about space or about the physical environment, but really is this question of how people would inhabit space and time. And that's why perhaps I see urbanism as a way to program.

So the first project in fact, what we see, is what we have done is programming the landscape. And the project is outside of the city of Huinan, which is south of Shanghai, in an area which is wetland. And 40 percent of the land in fact is covered by the water. By a typical Chinese convention, a standard practice, will be [to] fill up all the wetland, the lakes, to make it a flat, solid pack. And meanwhile, of course, all the trees will be bulldozed, along with whatever else will be on there. So this making of tabula rasa is to me one of the greatest threats to the environment, to the ecology, and to our culture really, while making the new cities. And this kind of a city built upon the tabula rasa is what I call a flat city. In fact—I'm sorry, I'll backtrack later—I'm going to pick out three points. All of them are conventions of part of the Chinese urbanism. And then today I'd like to say one more time, because we have done that many times to the developers and the planning bureaus, that you can be certain and be wrong. I picked that up last night.

So here is the site map. As you can see it's quite legible. The darker blue is water as well as the lighter blue. This is more like a river system, and this is more like lakes. And again the common practice, in fact our neighbors, the other related developments, were all filling up, leveling the land and filling up the water area. So we decided the question really is not so much of conservation of the ecology because economically the development has to be part of the conservation; that's the only way to make it work. So really the challenge, the question is, Can development of certain density and the protection of nature or natural elements be balanced? So we developed a particular strategy which is shown here only in Chinese, but we thought there were six very important elements. This is the water, circulation, vegetation, and this is density. I'm really sorry about this particular logo we used. And building, and this is ecology, the Tai Chi sign. And the idea is that they are the most critical elements on the site. We wanted to study all of them in pairs in all the time so that with the hope we would develop a balance of these critical elements.

And then you can see this is water and circulation, and this is water and the ecology, water and density. And then, of course, building, and the vegetation, and the waterway are considered as equal throughout this process. And then building with water, and building with circulation, and so on.

So rather, I think it was very important. This is something we did like four years ago, this methodology. It's about design-as-analysis. So here you see it might look like a design decision. In fact it's a way for us to really understand what's there and what could be done. So here deals with water and density. The density again is buildings, but it could be just vegetation. And of course it's the density of human activities, and so on. So we have then the densities of different areas. Here is with more ponds and
lakes, as well as more waterways. They are just the example of the research and studies we did, and more of that. And then as you can see all the waterways—we're thinking if you're going to keep them, so potentially they could be a transportation system as it was before. What's really interesting for us is that the water was there all along, and then the local people, the southern people—because I'm a northerner in China—they actually had these traditions, heritage, of making water-towns. So another question we asked is, Can we still make water-towns with the kind of development and density we would desire today? So by the way, this project has about two hundred hectares of land, and with a floor-area ratio of 0.8. And then you can see here is the superimposition of the different layers, vegetation, different traffic. This is the pedestrians, that's for cars, and that's water, and this is a main waterway, and the lakes, and different buildings. And then here, of course, is vegetation all layered together. So for these projects eventually, of course, we had to propose a master plan which [is] based on the earlier analysis of the six elements. So here you're seeing an image of the other greenery. And here is the main scenery and views. And then here is circulation. There is a highway going through the site, as one of the existing conditions. And here are the different functions. Just [to] give you a sense, because I have 25 minutes—I have to rush a bit—but here is high-density walkups, you know, residential, here are the low-density villas, and here are the industries and work areas, and with a commercial center, and then also with some public facilities here and there, including commercial, and also educational facilities, schools, and so on.

And here is the height-control diagram. The highest and in fact the lowest, and the in-between levels. And then we connected all the watercourse, so [we] made this number, I think it's 13 islands. And so the watercourse now becomes a complete system, and then each individual island can be developed in its own way. Another thing we did is this notion of idea bank, so from the earlier studies instead of giving one fixed solution to an island, we say that it takes even in China eight to ten years to have this area fully developed. One fixed solution may seem to work, but if something, some factors, changes on the way that that solution may not actually work eventually. So the idea here is for each island morphologically we have different possibilities in case some fluxes would change so that a different alternative in fact is prepared. So the idea is instead of a single idea is we propose for each island and that would make a reservoir of potential designs. And then more of this notion.

So here I'd like to say that our office is relatively young, we have been in business for the past ten years. So what you can see here [is] not only that we have taken on some challenges, but also for ourselves there is kind of a process of becoming more mature slowly. This is a study of the population and how people would actually use the spaces, different people. And I show one example. This is like an executive type of person, and that would be during time[s] of day the places he would need to go, and the distance between all these points, and his relationship with all the spaces and other people as well. And here is the overall master plan. So again the idea here is that we are trying to create a balance between the development and meanwhile protecting the nature to the extent that we can, or at least to the extent as our ancestors did. And this notion we consider as the topo city versus the flat city, so we are trying to keep the natural characteristics in such a city. The next stage would be the development of architecture. We're thinking of
these high-density low-rise houses. Of course it's derived from the tradition of vernacular houses.

So the second point I'd like to make is entitled "Programming Time." It's also again about something China has been doing for the past almost two decades—and we think it's very problematic and actually very dangerous—is the making of [an] instant city. A city—again, I actually touched upon that before—is perhaps planned, but is only for the very near future, and then it's built in a rush. Once it's built, it starts to have all kinds of problems, not able to accommodate the changes. One of these cities in fact is Shenzhen; it's a large city next to Hong Kong which is about 7 million inhabitants. So that city, if you go there, you wouldn't ever thought it was planned, but it was. But it's planned in a way which did not consider growth or evolution or time. So with this project, again, it's a residential area. In fact, Mr. Steven Holl here was also in the competition. So I'm going to give you some of the basic information about the project and then Steven could tell you his take, different way of taking on the project.

So we're given again about 200 hectares of land to develop as residential in this southern city of Nanning. It's the provincial capital of Guangxi, which is next to Guangdong province, so it's not that far from [the] Pearl River delta. And with the site quite near the city center, [it] is about twenty minutes by car to go from the city center of Nanning to the site. The site also is next to a big scenery area, a park, and to go to the center of that park would take again 25 minutes by car.

So the issue here is that the developer would like to have eventually about 1.2 million square meters of housing built in the time about eighty years. So for us the question of course is, [Is] that possible? And, Would that be the right strategy to go after the project? Let's take a look quickly at the condition of the project. I don't know if the English words there are legible, but anyway, this piece—rather quite beautiful peninsula has been destroyed to the extent that these huge you may say scars [are] left on the site. It's related to what I talked [about] before, because this notion of making tabula rasa is almost like a prerequisite for any development, the previous developer came in, just bulldozed the site to the extent you see here, and left. According to the rumors he was able to make a profit and left. That's such an amazement for me, but I guess it's possible, anything is possible for a moment in China. But everything else is a tremendous challenge.

And then this is [the] remaining topography, these pieces. Here is a little hill, a valley, and there's some water, and some vegetation along this river. And here are the water surfaces on this peninsula. And this is the flood line, so the flood would come up this much. And then we don't think we should build a hard embankment, so would rather let the flood come up to a certain extent, not as extensive as you see. So these are some of the conditions. This one is the distribution of the different cliffs, because of the leveling [that] happened before.

So our idea is that, first of all, we'd like not to say to restore the ecology or even the topography—I think that would be unrealistic—but to take on whatever the existing condition is, but maybe use architecture, use development, as a way, almost like a thread, to sew the damaged land and the remaining parts together. And the second idea has to do with not to see it as a flat instant development; we'd rather like to think there is a possibility to inhabit the land first as a park with a very low number
of people only making a day trip, and then later becomes a resort. People will be there for a weekend or a little longer, and then eventually becomes a place people would take up residence. So these are the two ideas. So the remaining landscape features, we’d like to turn them into three empty cities. So the idea of the city in fact is being turned inside out, so that people would do well outside the city, so in all the three cities they will become parks. It's a park of the castle of the peak because of the water and the castle of the valley.

So here are some of the basic circulation analyses and designs. So this is the main road [that] goes to the city center, and this is the public transportation system within the site. And these are all the roads and so on. And there’s another thing with our design, with all the zigzagging of buildings. One of the goals we're trying to achieve is to have the maximum southern exposure of buildings, because in China there is a tradition, a culture, to really enjoy southern-sun daylight. So when people purchase homes, that's one of the criteria they are quite concerned with. That's a distribution of different functions. So I'm not going to go into it because when I talk about the facing I will touch upon that too. So here are the notions of facing. As I said earlier, from a park to a resort, and then to a residential community.

So the first stage we suggested [was] to build buildings only along the river, and as few points. These buildings are public buildings, and it’s like park facilities with commercial and a little residential, but in forms more like hotels, to bring people up here to visit. So they are placed where the best sceneries are. And then so it's along the embankment, along the river, and at the existing geography and topography. And then you see it slightly better. So buildings are designed into the embankment, and some buildings are serving as almost like vista points, and so on. We will draw inspirations from the tradition of making water-towns also from paintings. We do research as architects; quite often it’s very visual instead of textual, I guess. And then here you see the different sections. It's all about how part of the embankment would become buildings and people can inhabit the embankment.

And so the second stage, the castle town would be completed with apartment buildings so that the population at this point will go up, and makes this peninsula as a resort, people would be here to spend weekends.

And then for the third stage—oh, I’m sorry I forgot to say something important. At the very first stage except [for] the small number of buildings, we planted bamboo to reconstruct the vegetation for the entire site. Bamboo grows very fast in this area. It takes a couple of years for bamboo to grow to full height. It's like 3, 4, even 5 meters high. So the recovering of the landscape feature was very important. So when we got to the third stage, we started to cut the bamboo out, and then plant houses in. It's like making little clearings in the bamboo forests. And then it's making these negative spaces for the houses. So these areas are where the houses are, so in a way they are really like suburbs of these castle towns. There’s something I know Steven will criticize it, because we discussed that before. And it’s kind of a—it’s a problem I’d like to discuss more.

So at this point, what you can see here, How do these people travel or commute? What is really the role of cars in people's life today in China? I think they are also very important questions. We have newly coined middle-class. We have a very recent really phenomenon of property ownership, which was confirmed by the state.
recently, actually only earlier this year. And of course there is a rise of private cars, not in Nanning so rapidly yet, but in Beijing the number is shooting up. And nobody knows, even the planning bureau doesn't really know, how many cars we have. But usually the number they quote is from six months ago, meaning that it's already obsolete. So very roughly for the city of Beijing we have about 2 million private cars already.

So what I'm showing here, as you can see, is not so much about urbanization; it really is about suburbanization. So itself, it is a big, big question. I don't think we have answers, but really it creates a tremendous problem for China: habitat in general. But our point here for the moment is at least we can see a city or a community not as instant as probably what has been done, but rather is a city which would evolve, which would grow. So instead of an instant city, so perhaps we can build an evolving city or a growing city. So there are the different castle towns, and then the edge condition around it has been defined by various architecture and programs, and always drawing inspirations from the past. So the water-town, actually we designed it for more commercial purposes.

This is the last stage which is about making courtyard houses out of the bamboo forest. Bamboo forest now is—I hope it's a vivid image in everyone's mind after Hidden Dragon, Crouching Tiger movie. There are some new ones. It's the House of the Flying Daggers by Yimou Zhang. It's very entertaining.

And then you can see these three areas of houses being carved out from the bamboo: one, two, three. And some of the views of the study model we made, different zones in the valley castle, the peak castle from the north, or the water-town.

So the last one is one we are currently working on. And unlike the other two, it fell through at one point or not, we don't even know. Sometimes in China there's a great uncertainty involved. A project may die anytime, but may bounce back anytime. So resurrection is a word we experience quite often.

The last project, however, is a current one. The construction started about two months ago. But it could stop, but for the moment we are very happy, it's going ahead. As you can see we are dealing with directly this notion of programming-use. Another problem, the third one, is this desire for a city of objects in China. Again, it's very popular to see city as a collection of objects, designed by foreign architects or not. It actually is not so important, but rather in our tradition we have these shelving with little compartments, and then you can display your traveling souvenirs, and antiques, and trinkets, and toys at home. The city in China is very much perceived that way by many, and again technocrats from the planning bureau and the planners, architects, developers, and so on. So there's a whole set of regulations in planning to support that, to make a city with very wide boulevards and further setback, and then very low land coverage. Coverage is only 30 percent, and then each lot has to have 30 percent greenery and so it makes a city with these totally unrelated and detached buildings. And then people can't walk in the city, people can't really enjoy window-shopping and so on. I think that's a city really stripped of the basic urban pleasure, meaning they take away the reason people would like to live in the city.
And then we like to make a city of fabric instead of a city of objects. Now it's in Szechuan where the spicy food is from. It's about 50 kilometers from the provincial capital Guangzhou. R. Klein who's a very typical, very young, but he has a tremendous collection of artifacts and artworks from the Cultural Revolution in the '60s and early '70s, and also a collection of artifacts from World War II. And then through a lot of discussions we had with him, the idea came to build a town for people to live and work, but with a core of museums in the center of the town to accommodate his collection. And this is where we are based, Beijing, and that's the provincial capital Guangzhou, and then the town of Anren, when the freeway is completed later this year would be about half an hour away. This is the old town, and these are some of the big manors, and this is like ranches also, of the local rich in the past. And here is the new site which used to be a fish farm. And then the tradition of fabric are still there to some extent. Actually you do see new buildings built in '80s and '90s in the back. And these are some of the typical images of the town. A lot of construction going on like all the cities in China. And then the historic streets with covered walkways in different ways. Of course the scale is more intimate. And these are the typical vernacular houses we surveyed, more of that. And how people would have commerce. For your information, that's a shop selling mobile phones. Everyone has one now. Young people, they would change probably four phones every year, just to get the latest style. And this is a video-game arcade in the middle, and billiards.

And here are the major circulations from the old city to our new town, which is entitled "Museum Town." And parking facilities. In the study of the urban spaces and the traditional streets and alleyways and manors and mansions and so on. And this is a study of the potential numbers of tourist who will visit this town. There's a lot of interesting things there. There's really the most famous sculptural piece made during the Cultural Revolution, it's called the "Wren Collecting Yard." It's there, it's still there, and intact.

And then the number of square meters needed eventually. I'm going, I guess, slow here. And again some calculations. And here is a more in-depth study of the quality of the traditional streets. And then what we have done, we collaged the traditional streets, or the urban spaces, and houses directly onto the site to give it a definition of spatial quality as well as scale. And then from there on we developed our master plan. So the red line represents the route for all the museums, for the Cultural Revolution. The blue line is for the World War II line.

And here is the master plan. So we saved these clusters of farmers' houses while developing a center, town center with museums, and the residential, and commercials. So there's a very important notion which we also borrowed from the heritage, from the tradition, is mixed use. So the cultural, the residential, and commercial are always together. And then that would actually give a life to the town. And this is all the ways of different streets. Streets are narrow. The local cars can go in. The visitors have to park there and change to a transportation system of bicycles, and tricycles, and bicycle taxis, and so on.

And these are a detail of the street design, and the study model. And these are the design guidelines to hand out to all the architects involved in the projects. Since our client collects everything from the past, one hundred years of Chinese history, we decided to invite four generations of Chinese architects to be involved in the
projects, designing different museums. The oldest one is 88 years old, but he’s not the oldest architect China. The oldest one now is my father who is 92. The youngest one is 33, so we have four generations, each taking on not only a museum but also some fabric of commercial and residential. And the Japanese Pavilion is designed by Arata Isozaki. So the only regret I have, I wasn’t able to recommend a good American architect, the reason being that a Los Angeles architect promised my client a tank from World War II, so my client was bribed to the point that he had to take him.

Proposals by different architects. So there is no object except a bridge crossing the river which is a museum of posters from the Cultural Revolution that is designed by the master planner which is us.

So this is the end of my presentation. I think it is a very open-ended presentation. There are far more challenges and really problems and opportunities in China at this point in terms of urbanism. I understand both my fellow panelists, they’re going to discuss also projects in China, so I’m happy just to open up the discussion.

Thank you very much.