A Tale of Two Spaces: A Defining Moment for China’s Urban Regions

Peter G. Rowe

Regardless of the geography or era of their creation, cities almost always emerge as the products of defining moments in history when their urban terrain became spatially well established. With our modern perspective, it is commonplace to speak of the “European city” in contrast to the “American city.” The former is usually construed to be dense, compact, older, and less differentiated in its overall form, while the latter is typically seen as younger and more dispersed, consisting of many individual buildings in an open landscape. While there is still a considerable amount of truth to these distinctions, nowadays the differentiation is less obvious than it might have been around the middle of this century, before suburban sprawl became attached to the historic cores of many European cities and before higher-density developments began to occur at widely accessible locations in many American cities. Underlying these defining moments are usually influential relationships among property developments, transportation, and other forms of urban improvements. Again, it has become commonplace to speak of the “American automobile city,” implying a predominance of well-functioning roadways, high levels of horizontal mobility, and an accordingly outward extension of the urban terrain. By contrast, during one of its defining moments in the late nineteenth century, the European city was characterized by relatively dense urban development on either side of streetcar lines emanating from the city center. In short, “what time is this place?” is often just as useful a distinction to make as, “where in the world is this place located?”

At present, many cities and urban regions in China are undergoing similar defining moments in their histories. Economic reform and expansion have been accompanied by mounting pressures for industrialization and urbanization. After ebbing during the Cultural Revolution, the tide of urbanization has changed and China’s overall proportion of ur-
Urbanized land has increased significantly from 15.3% in 1970 to around 30% today. Nevertheless, this level of urbanization is considered very low in comparison to more economically developed nations. In South Korea, for instance, the proportion is 84%; in Japan, 70%; and in the United States—along with much of Europe—70 to 75%. If China hopes to continue modernizing at anything near the pace of recent years, its cities must clarify their vision because China has reached, or is about to reach, a defining moment in city development. With government policies encouraging modernization and industrialization in the countryside as well as in the city, the overall level of urbanization in China is likely to reach over 50% around the year 2015, and will be well on its way to a steady state of around 60 to 65% in the not-too-distant future.

Urban Landscapes: the Changjiang Delta

Two kinds of urban landscapes seem to be emerging from the rapidly modernizing and urbanizing areas of China. One is predominantly compact and horizontal in its physical layout, corresponding to areas like the fast-growing urban region of the Changjiang Delta in the vicinity of Shanghai. The second is distinctly vertical, corresponding to the abundance of high-rise buildings and high-density urban conditions in places such as Hong Kong and Shenzhen. Both types are without precedent in their sheer scale and density of human settlement, certainly in comparison to urban areas in both North America and Europe. Moreover, the two types already co-exist, at least at a regional level, and they might well become more intertwined as the need for urban density becomes even more imperative in the face of a declining availability of agricultural land. In most cities throughout China, the need for relief from severely overcrowded living circumstances, the aforementioned sheer increase in population rate, and burgeoning urbanization drives a pressing demand for more urban space. During the past decade or so, the average area devoted to dwellings has risen from an appallingly low four square meters per person to around eight square meters per person. This figure is likely to continue rising in the near future to around fifteen square meters per person, as more old tenements are torn down and replaced by new, more spacious housing, located either directly in the central city, or, more likely, on the urban periphery.

Unlike in the West, developments in the Changjiang Delta Region exhibit a spatially distinct continuum between intense urban and rural activities. Recently, township enterprises have flourished by employing surplus labor and bringing an added industrial component to an already productive countryside; and significant urban settlements continue to emerge where there were once only hamlets. Shanghai, at the head of this urbanizing hinterland to the east, is already a very large city with a population on the order of 13 to 14 million people and with plans for continuing growth, particularly across the Huangpu River in the vicinity of Pudong. In effect, the distribution of urban settlements is beginning to change; whereas settlements never surpassed about 100,000 to 300,000 people in the past, and medium- and large-sized cities used to be relatively scarce, now both the scope and frequency of these settlements are growing. At present, perhaps the most important problem in urban management is avoiding a debilitating proliferation of small-sized cities and towns, while controlling the growth of very large cities like Shanghai before they become unmanageable. Also at stake are grave matters of environmental and agricultural sustainability since the Changjiang Delta continues to be one of the most productive and naturally well-endowed areas of China. Recent estimates show that, in the short term, the environment of this
Vertical Agriculture

The Hong Kong Model

At an opposing spatial extreme from this kind of fluctuating urban-rural continuum stands Hong Kong—whose tall and very dense collection of urban settlements houses a total of six million inhabitants, linked across a rugged, mountainous topography by the most frequently-used mass-transit system in the world. Paradigms for the term “hyperdensity,” Hong Kong proper, and satellite towns such as Shatin and Tuen Mun, represent an intense spatial experience of urban living. Here, spot densities of 2,500 people per hectare are not uncommon, high-rise living is the rule rather than the exception, and an emphasis on vertical movement invades even the most routine trips from one place to another. This is not unlike the situation in Tokyo—an even larger, denser modern metropolis—where space as resource among urban inhabitants appears to have been exhausted in favor of time. In general, people in Hong Kong do not live very far from where they work or recreate, thereby avoiding the brutal and lengthy commute known to most Tokyo dwellers. Consequently, many living quarters in Hong Kong continue to be small, cramped, and lacking in private amenities. Furthermore, Hong Kong’s dense, high-rise living circumstances typically provide inhabitants with either a panoramic view or a close-up view of the surrounding environment. This, along with the occlusion of the more standard, predominantly middle-ground perspective, affords a new or at least different kind of urban spatial experience.

In recent years, Hong Kong has also been held up by some as an urban model worthy of emulation in other parts of China. Shenzhen, a city immediately north of Hong Kong, is a case in point: in 1978 it was a relatively small town and agricultural community of 70,000 people, today, it is a bustling city of over 2 million inhabitants. A second example, Guangzhou—the sometime partner of Hong Kong in matters of trade, commerce, and industry—already has a skyline punctuated by many tall buildings. By now, the reasons for copying many aspects of Hong Kong are clear. Dense urban development means less land consumption and more efficient service by public transportation and other utility systems, particularly in regions with productive agriculture or significant environmental preserves. Problematically, however, the costs of living in a place like Hong Kong are very high and the disparities between the rich and the poor are wide. It is also a technologically sophisticated form of urbanization, as amply displayed by the recent completion of Hong Kong’s Airport Core Project, involving some 34 kilometers of high-speed road and railway, several world-class bridges, the largest airport facility in the world, and several cross-harbor tunnels. Indeed, Hong Kong is currently the testing ground for new vertical transportation systems such as elevators and outdoor escalators, particularly with regards to the all-important realm of protective and ongoing maintenance. Unfortunately, these levels of technical sophistication are
presently difficult, if not impossible, to replicate satisfactorily in many other parts of China.

Nevertheless, from the broad perspectives of both economic and environmental sustainability, sufficient urban density must be achieved without simultaneously compromising productive agricultural land or natural resource conservation. In a place like the Changjiang Delta Region, this probably means encouraging urbanization towards mid-sized, relatively dense cities like Suzhou, with populations between one and two million. At the same time, the outward expansion of major urban centers like Shanghai must be controlled and we must discourage the formation of redundant townships too small in scale to be economically viable or effective. Under the rubric of "One Body and Two Wings"—referring to the traditional city center and two new satellite settlements on either side, respectively—the present master-plan for Suzhou aims to provide the basis for orderly redevelopment and densification of the historical core, while simultaneously providing needed opportunities for economic growth and more precisely defining zones for agriculture and environmental conservation on the city’s periphery. Furthermore, the plan appears to be feasible, and the size of the city seems manageable for such concerted urban development. Over time, however, the need for even higher-density redevelopment seems inevitable if the coherence and balance of the present plan’s major land-use components and its agenda for historical conservation are to be preserved.

Another race with time in urbanizing China concerns the sufficiency of high-quality mass transit, both in the form of intra- and inter-urban networks. An over-dependence on the private automobile seems likely to be catastrophic, but it can yet be avoided by drawing from the Hong Kong experience. A careful deployment of a well-defined, lattice-like arrangement of dense urban areas across a field of highly productive agricultural and environmental conservation areas, or across a well-organized and less indiscriminate version of the rural-urban continuum, will allow China to skirt the perils of automobile dependency. The spatial structure of the lattice, in turn, could be made up of dense nodes of urban development with urbanized links between these nodes corresponding to major infrastructure improvements, developments already occurring in the Changjiang Delta Region in and between places such as Wuxi, Suzhou, Zhangjiagang, and Jiading. In short, advantage can be taken of many of the urban dynamics and technological agents of urban change that are either already in place, or about to be put in place. During other periods of high rates of urban change, however, it is imperative to maintain the cultural conviction to move forward while guarding against rote modernization for its own sake. In this last regard, future Chinese urban developments, if well handled on a regional scale, could well be instructive to the West, where problems of significant urban sprawl and resource misuse have already occurred. Clearly, how China builds its cities and urban regions now and in the near future will determine their adequacy as human settlements for many years to come.