

CORINNE THIBAUT

NATURE AND LANDSCAPE IN CHINA

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND SHARED PRACTICES



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*The gardens... full of latent
mystery of an ancient culture ...*

ENG_ NATURE AND LANDSCAPE IN CHINA

China's continuing emergence as a superpower is characterized by extraordinary urban and economic growth. Inside the country, its rise to the status of competitor with the great powers is expressed in burgeoning, ultra-modern mega-cities – a showcase for the modern Chinese identity. The resulting new urban issues demand expertise appropriate to the scale, constraints and complexities of today's cities, in areas such as urban and landscape design,

resource management, and coordinated urban development – issues common to the world's biggest cities. Western expertise, which has long grappled with such questions, is being sought out in China to help lay the foundations for new urban spaces built for living, interaction and enjoyment. But the homogenization of global urban culture does not imply a clean break from local cultural identities and traditions, which form the foundation for the richness, complexity and ambiguity of today's China.

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1 YU'YUAN EN MAI 2 ON THE BUND
PHOTOS 1 VINCENT ASSELIN 2 JEAN LANDRY
ABOVE THE ZHUANTI CHARACTERS : LANDSCAPE



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CHINA TODAY

With China's emergence as a superpower comes extraordinary urban and economic growth. The country's rise to the status of competitor with the great powers finds expression within the country in the form of burgeoning, ultra-modern mega-cities, which serve as showcases for the modern Chinese identity. The resulting new urban issues demand expertise appropriate to the scale, constraints, and complexities of today's Chinese city, in areas such as urban and landscape design, resource management, and coordinated urban

development – issues common to large cities around the world. Western expertise, which has long grappled with similar questions, is being sought out in China to help lay the foundations for new urban spaces built for living, interaction, and enjoyment. But the trend toward the homogenization of global urban culture does not imply a clean break from local cultural identities and traditions, which form the foundation for the richness, complexity and ambiguity of today's China.

In this environment of rapid change, western landscape architecture professionals have been called upon to envision new landscapes. The challenges are enormous. What forms and uses should they propose for these landscapes? How should nature be handled? The question of landscape and nature, and their adaptation to support urban development, is becoming increasingly urgent in the Chinese urban setting.

THE LANDSCAPE AS PART OF, AND COUNTERPOINT TO, URBANITY

Today, the role of the landscape in the urban, modernist identity of major Chinese cities is more or less an implicit one. Recent thinking about landscape has led to a more holistic reflection on the best way to build viable urban environments incorporating all aspects of development: planning, urbanism, architecture, and ecology. This vision of the landscape as a holistic view of the city, already familiar in the West, is now being applied in China. In downtowns, landscaped spaces counterbalance high urban densities. In newly developing zones, the landscape contributes to new neighbourhoods' image. This evident interest in the landscape is being expressed in China in line with the media-led modernist image of life at the global scale. But it also comes into play in the need to create liveable environments in ever less sustainable cities. The landscape becomes both a participant in the modernist showcase, and a counterpoint in the form of a balancing or compensating element.

Thus in Shanghai and other large cities, there are increasing numbers of living-space developments that are not only constitutive

of urban life, but vehicles for a contemporary vision of the landscape. For example, the Yan'an Interchange Park in Shanghai, surrounding a major freeway interchange in the centre of the city, comprises five themed gardens (WAA-Williams, Asselin, Ackaoui Inc). By using remnants of old neighbourhoods associated with vacated spaces in the shadow of the overpasses, the parks create a large green space in the heart of the city, providing motorists with views of a lush canopy. Likewise, a development such as Century Avenue in Pudong (Agence Arte Charpentier) is a major artery connecting the new business district with the banks of the Huangpu River. Its modern gardens, inspired by Chinese traditions, enhance the pedestrian route along the boulevard's entire length.

AN UPDATED VISION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

Along with China's opening to the world, the 1980s brought a revival of historic and local cultural identities, the lynchpin of a resurgent national identity. Concepts such as heritage and authenticity, once deprecated in China, are part of the new policy that apparently governs the protection of cultural assets. But the reality on the ground is rather disappointing. It underscores the paradoxical relationship between the Chinese and their cultural heritage, more clearly seen in the active transmission of spiritual and moral values than in material culture. This paradox of the protection of urban heritage is reflected on the ground through the promotion of an urban identity that draws upon local history while also fostering tourism development. The result is a whole series of projects whose quality ranges from excellent to deplorable. In tourism-oriented spaces, some sites have been completely rebuilt, such as the new "Old Shanghai" surrounding the famous classical garden of Mandarin Yu, dating from the 16th century. Designed to promote tourism at the expense of residents, who were relocated to the city's outskirts, it employs cleverly decorated new concrete structures to create a pastiche of an ancient district with traditional sloped roofs, carved-wood façades, and colourful



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“...nature, whose intrinsic value has long been neglected, is gradually gaining a real foothold in Chinese cities...”



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storefronts decorated with paper lanterns. This heavily trafficked site is a favourite destination for both Chinese and foreign tourists.

In the centre of Shanghai, in contrast, the Xintiandi historic district represents the successful revitalization of a residential area comprising traditional Ming and Qing-era houses called shikumen, which have been renovated by integrating modern architecture with preserved shikumen. Its pedestrian-only tourist core, enclosed by a brick wall punctuated with gates, is home to restaurants, luxury shops, various stores, art galleries, and museums. It has become one of the city's prime locations.

THE IDEA OF NATURE: BETWEEN SYMBOLISM AND PRACTICE

Historically, the idea of nature found in Western human and urban development (emphasizing conquest of, or protection from, nature), has been absent from Chinese culture. In ancient China, the traditional garden reflected a worldview in which the human actor remained in harmony with the natural laws of the universe. Far from being a simple representation of nature, the garden was a symbolic microcosm of the universe, which by embodying unity and perfection tended toward the preservation of universal harmony. To achieve a fully realized symbolic existence, a garden must be named, hence the inscriptions decorating the stones at the entrance to gardens and certain other landscaped spaces.

Within a growing modern society, it has become essential to consider nature in designing environments that are viable for the long term. In China, concepts such as renaturation, the use of native plants, forest resource management, and water purification using plants have all been introduced as innovative strategies that all carry with them the need for significant new learning. The idea that initiatives should have environmental goals – whether

through their experimental aspects, planned self-sufficiency in resource use, or their expression as “natural spaces” rather than “gardened nature” – has not been fully adopted by the local culture. And yet nature, whose intrinsic value has long been neglected, is gradually gaining a real foothold in Chinese cities, not only as a landscaping tool but also within the wider context of a reflection on urban space and related issues. Shanghai's plan for parks and green spaces, within the 2000-2020 master plan, stands as one notable example.

KALEIDOSCOPE OF LANDSCAPES

These different, but intimately connected – and complementary, interdependent, and cohesive – facets of landscape form the foundation, the richness and complexity of the Chinese people's relationship with their environment. The culture which is at the foundation of the Chinese identity is clearly present, overlaying the objective type of urban nature requested by decision makers and created by professionals. Symbolic connotations continue to inspire the Chinese as they incorporate landscaped spaces into the urban fabric. Invisible traditions amalgamated with new ways of doing underpin the new Chinese relationship to the environment as landscapes are created, sometimes this leads to resistance, incomprehension, or the need to adapt certain elements. This identity comprises the foundation and the meaning of landscape in today's Chinese city. As always, in city centres, gardens are not simple natural spaces. They are suffused with the latent mystery of an ancient culture subtly integrating itself with modern urbanity.



Nature

1 NEAR MANDARIN LU'S GARDEN, THE NEW OLD TOWN OF SHANGHAI 2+3 XINTIANDI, SHANGHAI'S NEW PEDESTRIAN TOURIST AREA
PHOTOS 1-2 CORINNE THIBAUT 3 VINCENT ASSELIN