A DECADE SHAPED FOR THE ‘NEW’ LIVEABLE CHINESE CITY

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Three years after President Xi took power in China and following Justin Bergman’s insightful essay, ‘The Chinese City in the Asian Century’ for MULTITUDES, we dive deeper into “the Chinese city” to address changing political and design priorities.

An important shift in the future of urban China is occurring and some recent HASSELL projects are helping design the emerging ‘new’ liveable Chinese city.
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“China on Sunday unveiled an urbanisation plan for the 2014-2020 period in an effort to steer the country’s urbanisation onto a human-centred and environmentally friendly path.”

Xinhua, China 16 March 2014

In March 2013, with economic growth in China just shy of eight percent, Xi Jinping stepped into the highest political office in the country for a 10-year term.

Xi came into power after a decade of phenomenal economic growth and increasing global chatter that this success was propped up by the construction of vacant ‘ghost cities’, speculative and soulless commercial developments and urban growth at the expense of the natural environment.

The ‘new normal’ of slower growth helps foster higher quality urban places

Within a year of his election, President Xi had declared a ‘new normal’ of slower, service-sector economic growth. At the same time he promoted a ‘new-type of urbanisation’ that would be more human-centred and would return nature to the cities.

While his government enacted policies to slow the economy and move people from factories to offices, Xi’s policies have been not coincidentally aimed at creating more liveable cities with the potential to retain talent to drive China’s future service economy.

‘Jiu ling hou’ drive better policy and design for Chinese cities

In 2015, 7.5 million graduates left 2,325 universities across China. Almost 60 percent of them chose to move to a new city in search of employment. Half of them chose the major cities of Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, or their surrounding and connected second tier cities.

The post-1990s generation or ‘Jiu ling hou’ is sometimes seen as ‘spoilt’ and ‘demanding’ in a similar way to their counterparts in the west – Gen-Y or the Millennials. However, it’s their demands that appear to be driving better policy and the design of better urban places across Chinese cities.

With a generation that is seeking more authentic experiences in retail and public spaces, more flexibility in their workplaces, and more convenient and liveable urban lifestyles, it’s apparent that cities and those who govern them are competing for their attention.
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A desire for authentic experiences is placing people and connection at the heart of commercial developments

With this ‘Jiu ling hou’ generation now driving the growth of the world’s largest e-commerce market (20 percent of China’s retail sales are now online), the standard big-box mall is fast becoming an outdated model in China.

As many retail operators struggle to come to terms with this, HASSELL has been working with a number of innovative clients to define the retail destinations of the future; places that can integrate online sales with an experience that goes beyond simply shopping.

Shanghai’s K11, developed by Hong Kong developer New World, is known as China’s first ‘Art Mall’. Our landscape architecture team worked on delivering their vision of ‘Art, People, Nature’ in inner Shanghai. The green-walled, art gallery-anchored shopping centre has been a great success and a new cultural and retail landmark of the city.

Similarly, our competition-winning scheme for Keppel Land’s Park Avenue Central (PAC) project was driven by a response to the same phenomenon in nearby Jing’An.

Only blocks from the large luxury-brand touting malls of Nanjing Road, our winning master plan for a 200-metre tower is integrated into its context by a smaller and more diverse retail village setting. An extension of the fine-grained surrounds that have begun to bubble with the activity of small bars and restaurants, the laneways of PAC build upon a quintessentially Shanghai experience of narrow pedestrian thresholds connecting from street through to lush, active community courtyards within the block. This network for pedestrian discovery has been adapted to create open-air shopping corridors leading to a new community space – an address for cafes and restaurants as well as shared amenity to overlook during lunchtimes and evening peaks of activity.

The success of the HASSELL scheme illustrates a yearning within the city for developments that can, in parallel, bring new commercial models while paying homage to Shanghai’s unique and historic urban patterns. It signals a market where consumers are turning away from the past obsessions with the status of luxury brands towards products (and places) that have more depth in their narrative and a greater connection to their place.

PAC’s public realm will offer shoppers diverse urban spaces, public art and lush green walls. Contemporary uses of local Shanghai brickwork will punctuate the shopping experience and replace the brand name banners that defined the last generation of retail destinations.

This shift in Chinese urbanism towards a more context-responsive model is long awaited and will lead to better precinct integration and collaborative models of delivery.
A more integrated approach taking shape for development around the world’s longest subway

One hundred metres from the PAC site, one of Shanghai’s 364 subway stations lies on one of 14 lines connected by 588 kilometres of track. This is the longest city subway network in the world. More than two thirds of it was built in the last decade, so it’s no surprise that lessons have been learnt since its construction. The Central Government, as well as most major municipalities, has recently issued directives for better integration between metro stations and their surrounds.

Over the last 18 months HASSELL has added significant new master planning scope to many of our projects. District and city-level governments are increasingly inviting our clients to contribute visions for integrating development, transport infrastructure and the public realm across the precincts surrounding their sites.

HASSELL has been at the forefront of this process, working with Hines on its landmark office tower development, One Museum Place. The tower is located directly above the new metro station serving the adjacent Jing’An Sculpture Park and newly completed Shanghai Natural History Museum. HASSELL was engaged to optimise the public realm connecting the site to the subway station entries, as well as these adjacent public destinations.

Perhaps one of the most innovative projects of this type is being undertaken by the Qianhai Authority, responsible for a special district on the western coast of Shenzhen.

The Authority has ambitions for a higher level of integration between metro and development sites. A HASSELL + PB/WSP team has come together with local station design institutes, planning authorities and prospective developers to deliver a higher quality metro station for seven stations along the first two lines. The project will deliver a new kind of station experience for the 10 million-plus residents of rapidly growing Shenzhen. It will also mean a seamless connection from each station through co-ordinated underground retail and cultural uses to the surrounding high density office and living zones.

Within an area known as ‘the Manhattan of China’, the stations of Qianhai will offer more than simple street-side entries. Each station will extend its reach outwards under the surrounding blocks, providing more integrated entry points and extending the catchment for a better passenger experience in this experimental sub-tropical city.
China’s largest cities turn from grey to green as they compete in the liveability stakes

More integrated and informed planning and design of cities aims for the ultimate goal of ‘sustainability’. Historically some Chinese cities have struggled to separate sustainability from the social benefits brought to the working class by rapid economic development. Since taking power, President Xi’s government has directly connected with the greater sustainability concerns of a population that as recently as 1980 was overwhelmingly rural based.

The return of nature to the city is being touted as one of the key components of sustainable Chinese city design, an objective which balances both Xi’s perceived nostalgia for urbanites’ hometowns as well as contemporary city theory on the value of green space in improving urban liveability.

The first major generation to migrate to cities was on the move for economic opportunity, but this has now changed. The post-90s kids are spoilt for choice – and with more than one hundred cities boasting populations larger than one million, liveability is becoming an increasingly important factor in their choices. In response, major municipalities are punctuating former sprawl areas with new parks and green recreational destinations. Most notably, the major cities of the east coast are creating large green assets as weekend destinations for the growing middle class.

In Nanjing two recently opened public parks designed by HASSELL (Nanjing Niushoushan Cultural Park and Nanjing Tangshan Geopark Museum) have become hives of activity on most weekends, evidence of the success of recent policies aimed at increasing urban places for recreation and public amenity.

Niushou Mountain is a centuries-old spiritual site containing Ming Dynasty temples, tombs and palaces amid local villages and city reservoirs. Over the last 30 years the site has changed from being on the periphery of the city to one engulfed by urban development.

The HASSELL competition-winning proposal aimed to connect the site for access by tourists and city residents and provide the modern service facilities and supporting recreation program needed across the mountain. A delicate balance of embedding ancient Buddhist tradition within the experience offered to modern visitors, the park provides people with an escape from the city and their modern lifestyles.

It’s this opportunity to see and smell the seasons, to engage with the tranquil water of the mountain setting, and to walk through the small patches of farmland that have begun to offer a necessary balance to urban life in the Chinese city.

This nostalgia for the countryside is proving a powerful draw. Many major cities are enacting policy to deliver these sorts of places to their residents. In Shanghai, the city government conceived a series of five country parks on the periphery of the city. HASSELL was involved in conceptual proposals for the first in 2014, Qingpu Qingxi Country Park, and is now one of a limited number of practices invited to submit proposals for Heqin Country Park on the eastern fringe of the city.

The appetite for repairing forests, farmland and wetlands gives some indication of the future weekend recreation and tourism destinations that will be on offer to residents of Shanghai – places that are already being embraced and sought by a more mobile and adventurous generation of urban residents.

Huangpu East Bank Urban Forest
A concept developed by HASSELL teams in Sydney and Shanghai was recently shortlisted in a major international design competition to transform a 21-kilometre stretch of waterfront on Shanghai’s Huangpu River. Our master plan would create the world’s largest urban forest, with two million trees planted along the river’s east bank. The proposal also included seasonal event spaces for local communities and a plan to teach students about the natural world by involving them in the forest’s creation and management.

Our team’s concept – a response to the government’s aim to ‘green’ cities for the benefit of urban residents – has been embraced by the community. In online forums, our short video had more than 25,000 views in just three days.

Huangpu East Bank Urban Forest Imagery by HASSELL

A decade shaped for the ‘new’ liveable Chinese city
The future points to more engaging, experiential, connected and sustainable places

It’s evident that a change is occurring in both the pace and quality of urban development in China. Within the ‘new normal’ of slower economic growth, and after decades of fast-paced and often destructive urban development, urban design is becoming a valuable commodity in delivering more place-responsive, better integrated and more liveable urban development.

We are moving into a decade that will be defined by liveability as cities compete for an educated and talented post-90s generation to drive the growth of their emerging service sectors.

For this better-educated and better-travelled generation, places that are more engaging and experience-focused, more connected and accessible, greener and more natural, offer a more exciting and rewarding urban life within the Chinese city. We foresee that this trend will continue, and will place design at the centre of this global urban phenomena for the decade to come.