

# How China Plans To Inhabit Its Future

**REM KOOLHAAS** spoke with NPQ editor Nathan Gardels in 2017 about China's urban future.

**NPQ** | To keep its high rate of growth going, the Chinese government is planning to move or incorporate 200 million people into “mega-urban” clusters of 20 million or more over the next decade—this on top of the most rapid urbanization in human history over the past few decades.

Clearly, for the Chinese, the past is too small to inhabit. They aspire to build out a grid of what you have called “generic cities” defined more as a new space of flows—migrants, trade, capital, technology—than a space of places rooted in an historical identity.

You once said Singapore, a glittering, completely new city-state built over 40 years, had synthesized a new norm of urbanization through “a hard core Confucian shamelessness, a kind of ultimate power of efficiency that will fuel Asian modernization.”

**Is that what we are seeing in China today?**

**REM KOOLHAAS** | Yes and no. In long-range planning and orderly method, China is seeking to do what Singapore has done. But Singapore cannot be a prototype for China's mega-urbanization because it is a small island while China is a country with a massive land area that houses 1 in 8 of the planet's population.

I see what China is embarking upon as a quite new idea in history. They are building metropolitan “clusters” throughout the nation so there is less incentive for people to leave as migrants to already overwhelmed cities. It is really an effort to anchor populations in the countryside. In an historical twist, they are taking the city to the country.

*China is doing something new in history: they are trying to anchor the population in the countryside. Instead of migration to the cities, they plan to bring the city to the country.*

Within the boundaries of these clusters, there will be rural conditions, but in close proximity to metropolitan entities that have concentrated population and a wide range of cultural and economic activities—with everything integrated by telecom and transportation infrastructure to everything else.

This is similar to a project my architectural firm, OMA, once proposed for Dubai called “the waterfront city.” We envisioned an area one kilometer by one kilometer that encompassed all the activities of a metropolis embedded in a village-like environment.

Our aim was to combine and link a range of conditions in a given zone without transforming everything into a dense and vertical megacity.

So, what we see in China’s plan is a series of “starter-kit” metropoli, or the first phase of a series of emergent metropoli that can stabilize population movement for entire regions of the country. As they grow over time, they will more evenly spread the population across the entirety of China.

One could see this pattern already developing in the Pearl River Delta, with its 25 million people, over a decade ago. You would see rice fields surrounding an incredibly dense cluster of high rises with factories, housing and services.

In a way, this new approach reminds me of the Mao era where gigantic industrial complexes right out of the Fritz Lang’s movie “Metropolis” arose in the middle of the countryside.

It is therefore likely that the Chinese mega-urban clusters of the future will have all conditions within its space—light and heavy, intense and sparse, lively and sedate—rather than one overriding characteristic like “delirious” New York.

If there is an advantage to being a megacity with the impossible demographics of 20 to 30 million inhabitants, then that multiplicity has to be one of them.

Another way to conceptualize these super-cities is to define them as “Scape.” Scape is neither city nor rural landscape, but a post-urban condition. The world of 2050, certainly in China, will be covered by a lot of Scape—pervasive, generic conditions punctuated by an event here or there, possibly architecture.

**NPQ | So far, despite its immense population and dense megacities, one does not see the slums in Chinese cities so prevalent in other rapidly developing places from Lagos to Mumbai to Mexico City. As it accelerates**

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**urbanization in the years ahead, will China remain able to avoid such concentrations of dire poverty?**

**KOOLHAAS** | I would hate to sound like someone who embraces authoritarianism as the only way to avoid slums. Of course, there are and have been authoritarian countries with plenty of slums.

What allows China to escape this scourge is not so much authoritarianism as such, but its ability to plan long-term and mobilize the political and economic resources to realize those plans. China's capacity is not related to ideology, but to an efficient apparatus so many other states have been unable to develop in the context of liberalization, de-regulation and a small state where initiative is mostly in the private sector.

China has an intelligent form of maintaining a bureaucracy that can shape things.

**NPQ** | **President Xi Jinping has announced he will reform the “hukou” system of urban registration, erasing over time the discrimination against rural migrants and city dwellers in terms of available services, such as education and health care.**

**Won't this equalization create a new kind of citizen in the generic spaces of China's new mega-urban clusters that undermines the agriculture-based hierarchical ethos of Confucianism which undergirds its governing system? In short, the mega-urbanization of China would be a true cultural revolution.**

**KOOLHAAS** | Again, yes and no. Yes, there will be the new multiplicity of experiences within the new post-urban zones that I described. That will be neither rural nor urban.

At the same time, let's not lose sight of the countryside by focusing too much on the city. We've been hypnotized by the statistic that more than 60 percent of humankind that now lives in the cities. Yet, in many ways, the countryside—where the other 50 percent live—has been transforming more intensely than the cities.

The countryside has not been abandoned. Far from it. If you just look at the absolute numbers, more people live in rural areas today than ever before—even if it is a smaller percentage—by the simple fact that the world's population is

larger. If 40 percent of 10 billion people live in the countryside that is more than 60 percent of 5 billion.

What we see happening in the countryside today is that forms of organization and social life that were once only possible at the scale of the city are now possible in rural areas. Agricultural mechanization, commodity markets that link small farmers to global trade, cell phone networks that leapfrog the absence of landline infrastructure, Internet connections, clean water and sewage technology are all taking place.

The countryside is becoming less and less the counterpart and more and more and more the complement of the city.

China's planning is also smart for this reason: it understands that the countryside is undergoing transformation as well. What their mega-urban clusters will allow is much more fluid movement between city and country, density and low density, north and south, east and west. Greater opportunity as a result of this fluidity will in turn lead to greater stability and ease the famous contradiction, as Mao put it, between rural and urban that has for so long been China's challenge.



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