

Rachel Keeton (2011),

Rising in the East: Contemporary New Towns in Asia

Amsterdam, NL: SUN Architecture

ISBN-13: 978-9461056832

Reviewed by:

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Pages: 230-231

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The Journal of Space Syntax

ISSN: 2044-7507 | Year: 2012 | volume: 3 | issue: 2 | Online Publication Date: 28 December 2012

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Rising in the East: Contemporary New Towns in Asia by Rachel Keeton, published by SUN in 2011, is a book whose publication is partially supported by the International New Town Institute (INTI). As indicated by the title, the book is a result of an investigation into the new town developments in Asia, which are highly intense and occur at a speed that the world may not have seen before.

According to INTI,

'New Towns differ from gradually developed towns in the political moment of the decision-making, and the subsequent design of a master plan by professions, to create an urban community on a site where there was no town before' (<http://www.newtowninstitute.org/spip.php?rubrique1>).

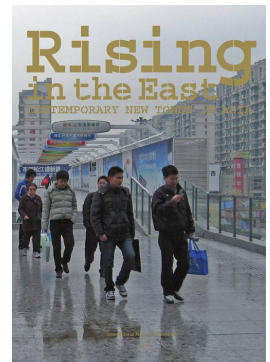
Asia is a huge continent, diverse in cultures, economies and politics, and housing more than half of the world's population. Over the past 15 years it has witnessed the establishment of the independent sovereign states; for example, those from the Former Soviet Republics, the political stability and rapid economic developments of China and South Korea, and the emergence of the influential geopolitics and economics of the Gulf States. The continent is therefore rendered fertile ground for the development of new towns, demonstrating the political will of the states and their financial strength.

The focus of Keeton's book is how the new towns in Asia have been developed. The framework that Keeton uses for this investigation is based on the 'urban design' point of view. According to Keeton, there are six distinguishable urban design approaches that can be applied to Asia's new

towns: eco-cities, political cities, enclave cities, economic cities, hi-tech cities, and shelter cities. The book therefore consists of six chapters. Each is presented with an introduction to its particular design approach and gives three example cities, which can be far apart in distance; for example, Masdar eco-city in United Arab Emirates, Tianjin eco-city in China and Zira eco-island in Azerbaijan. It also includes a useful and clear introduction by Michelle Provoost, the Director of INTI since 2008, and Wouter Vanstiphout, an architectural historian.

The strength of this book lies in two areas. The first is the way in which Keeton questions the role of professionals, i.e. the architects and urban designers involved in the process of new town development. She seems to conclude that the professionals' role now is more limited to the realm of design rather than that of the decision-making. This is a far cry from the role of the modernist architects in the development of the new towns in the 1940s -1950s. During this period, design professionals were involved in every step of the process, from site selection to the detailed design. For Asia nowadays, the design professions are invited to provide design ideas that can be applied, disregarded, aggregated with other ideas, or magnified by the development committee.

The book's second area of strength is in undertaking an investigation that covers the social, historical, political, economic and design aspects of new towns. In particular Keeton focuses on the following: some basic facts (including expected population, development period, development cost and designers), the design concept, representa-



***Rising in the East:
 Contemporary
 New Towns in Asia, 2011***

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tions (location map, land use plan, principal building drawings, basic neighbourhood units, important technology, and so forth.), promotions (adverts and official webpages), and the everyday life displays (perspectives of living within the city or photographs of the existing situation). The investigation leads to a more critical self-inquiry for professionals regarding the design strategy they offer and its outcomes. A number of questions are raised: to what extent will the design be true to the approach? For example, will the eco-city be green to the world as well as to the residents in terms of selection of materials, construction process, energy consumption, living, and so forth, or will it be about 'green wash'? To what extent will the new towns cater for the population mix in relation to socio-economic factors, and age and ability of residents, rather than addressing a preferred socio-economic group, i.e. international white collar workforces or the upper middle class? Most importantly, to what extent will the design create or support the socio-cultural sustainability of the new towns?

This critical inquiry into urban design will be of interest to the space syntax community, as well as a challenge. Without living precedents in the new towns, i.e. local heritage being often eliminated in favour of international acceptance of contemporary lifestyle, to what extent can space syntax knowledge

be applied to design in order to maintain some of the living traditions within the completely new physical environment, or to enable the generation of a new living culture out of them? The application of space syntax research methodology to a post occupancy evaluation of new towns would also be attractive, enabling further development of space syntax theory and tools through the assessment of the design outcomes.

Overall, this book raises some alarming concerns for the contemporary urban design situation in Asia. New towns are built intensively and speedily. Their designed environment seems to be less related to the existing local culture than catering for one or two preferred resident groups - as previously mentioned, the expat and the upper middle class. This often occurs at the expense of lower socio-economic groups such as farmers, who might be displaced from their lands in order for the new towns to be built. Their development and design defy most of the conventional norms, and sometimes contradict their own design approach. These observations pose two huge social questions: how will Asian populations live in the 21st century new towns, provided that most of these are designed by European or American firms rather than Asian designers? And, how will Asian urban space change as a result of the new town developments?