

## **The Chinese urban development dilemma**

### **A short story with some thoughts for the New Year**

**31. December 2010**

China is in the process of rapid urbanization. The government aims at regulating this process and limits each year the number of peasants who can become full right urban residents (Hukou system). However, there are many times more people who move from the underdeveloped rural to the urban areas, where the jobs are. Those, who do not get the urban permit, are called “migrants”, and have no or only very restricted rights to access urban public services.

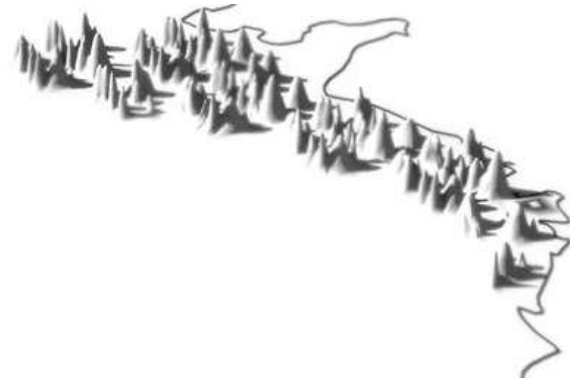
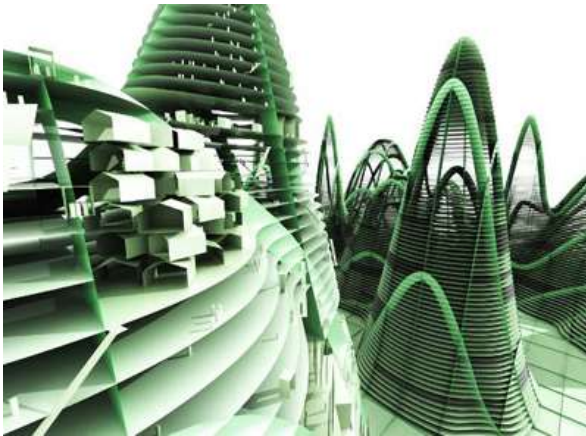
The main form of accommodation for these migrants is private renting in the rural areas close to the cities. This leads to unplanned, spontaneous urbanisation of these rural areas: farmers are extending their houses to establish industries and to be able to accommodate migrant workers. As a result the population density in the rural areas surrounding larger Chinese cities became very high for European standards. Pictures 1-2 illustrate this strange way of peri-urban development (on the first picture some rural houses can be seen which are still in their original shape, before densification).



According to moderate forecasts China has to count with 350 million new urban residents in the next two decades. Many of them prefer modernity and accept high-rise dwellings. This path of development would mean to demolish most of the traditional Chinese urban structures (picture 3) and replace them with residential skyscrapers (picture 4). According to the present practices the only alternative would be to allow the even faster densification of peri-urban areas, which, however, would lead to the loss of most agricultural land.



There are many new ideas emerging to handle this controversial situation. Cautious planners would suggest to develop plenty of smaller cities with not so high houses, instead of further increase of the largest cities. Architects, on the contrary, suggest various unusual solutions. The last two pictures show the futuristic visions of the Dutch MVRDV architectural firm, aiming at the creation of new housing on artificial terraced hills which could reach the density of Hong Kong with 100.000 persons per sq km.



The dynamic urbanisation in China creates special challenges. From the perspective of the ageing (and in the future shrinking) population of Europe these challenges may sound a bit strange. For a more sustainable future, however, all over the world solutions have to be found how to preserve the architectural heritage and the green areas in and around growing cities.

Allow me to wish you with these thoughts a very Happy New Year in 2011!

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