



Contemporary urbanisation

The interesting case of China's 'replica' towns and cities

More people live in towns and cities now than at any point in human history – in both relative (percentage) and absolute (numerical) terms. The quality of life in these settlements depends greatly on the decisions of architects, designers and the government agencies that oversee development in both older and new towns and cities. China has urbanised at an astonishing rate since 1990. Around 35% of China's citizens lived in towns and cities 25 years ago; today it is estimated to be 67% of a far larger population.

Replica settlements

As part of the rapid urbanisation process, China has created a set of 'replica settlements'. They deliberately copy settlements in Western countries, including iconic places such as central Paris. The question arises: is this mimicry appealing to

Chinese people or not? More broadly, is it a useful model for other countries to follow?

With the support of national and provincial-level governments, several 'replica settlements' have been constructed in rural and suburban areas of China since around 2005. Together they have cost hundreds of billions of pounds to construct (in Chinese Remimbi). They include the following:

- **Tianducheng**, which mimics parts of central Paris, including the Eiffel Tower.
- **Overseas Chinese Town East** is modelled on Interlaken in Switzerland.
- **Suzhou** mixes different influences, with replicas of parts of London, Sydney (Australia) and other Western places.
- **Guandong** replicates the heart of historic Austrian town Hallstatt, a UNESCO World Heritage site.
- **Tianjin** recreates parts of Manhattan, New York, including its iconic skyscrapers.

- The town of **Songjiang** replicates small settlements along the River Thames, England, in their Tudor and Georgian forms ('Olde England').
- **'Hometown'**, in a rural part of Hebei Province, is a recreation of the small Wyoming town of Jackson's Hole in the USA.
- Parts of **Dalian** reproduce the canals and buildings of Venice, Italy.

Why build replicas?

Why have replica towns been built in China? The answer is twofold.

First, from the early 1950s until the mid-1980s, much Chinese architecture in towns and cities was very monolithic and rather drab. This sparked a search, from the early 1990s onwards, for alternative aesthetics.

Second, China's rise to economic prominence over the last 40 years has coincided with the emergence of well over 150 million middle-class citizens. Often well-travelled, they have the money to buy homes and have been on the look-out for attractive and distinctive places to live. Land and property developers in China, with government approval, believe that Western settlements appeal to many aspirational middle-class Chinese people. Their difference from traditional Chinese building styles, and the iconic status of cities such as London and Paris, arguably make it appealing to 'transport' them to China. Developers speculated that many



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middle-class Chinese people would want to live in such places.

Has it paid off?

What are we to make of so-called 'duplicature architecture' and design? Critics say you should never try to copy 'the real thing', especially when it's as unique as Manhattan or Hallstatt. Seen

in this light, 'replicature' is derivative and unoriginal. However, some see replica towns and cities as fun and interesting precisely because it's so unusual to find, say, a part of central Paris in China. In China, some see it as a virtue to be able – accurately – to copy other places (imitation, the saying goes, is the highest form of flattery).

The middle-class residents targeted by the developers seem to have embraced some replica settlements. Hometown, for instance, has proven popular for second-home buyers. Meanwhile, Thames Town is now popular with tourists and with those celebrating special occasions, such as weddings and anniversaries. Yet other settlements have proven unappealing, such as 'Little Manhattan' (Tianjin) where properties lie vacant and streets are largely empty. Developers in these cases have gambled and lost.

China has created more new towns and cities than any other place on Earth in a very short span of time. Normally, towns and cities grow organically. It has been rare in history to design and build numerous new settlements according to a plan in just a few years. Given the breakneck speed of Chinese urbanisation, it was perhaps inevitable that different things would be tried to ensure places looked distinctive and different from each other – even if, in the cases considered here, they are replicas of distant, though well known, towns and cities. The question of urban aesthetics matters to us all: we want to live in places that look and feel good.

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Parts of Dalian reproduce the canals and buildings of Venice, Italy

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Tianducheng mimics parts of central Paris, including the Eiffel Tower

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