

mEgACuN

“Building the new socialist countryside’s...Megablock“

Walled urban bliss

China’s hyperactive urban growth has generated a city which in most cases looks more like a **polymorphic patchwork** than a systematic planned homogenous environment. The Open Door Policy launched in the late 70’s has proven to be incredibly efficient in shaping the country’s athletic shape and competitiveness as demonstrated in the 2008 Olympics both inside and outside the stadiums. Chinese capital cities firmly positioned themselves in the starting blocks of the global metropolises race tracks. From an outside point of view, one can only be impressed by the mushrooming agglomerations modernizing at relentless speed. Meeting all possible challenges that either the ideological superstructure or the so-called socialist market economy sets for them, Chinese cities are on the long run.

The separation between political leadership and market led realms has been the driving force shaping China’s recent past, present and future. The communist superstructure led by the central government formulates the main guidelines for the country’s intended development while an ecstatic hyperactive market is achieving its objectives and reality. The new role the market is taking in the urban renewal mechanisms is a huge leap forward from not only the second half of 20th century post revolution China but also from the past 5000 years of mainland urban history. Under imperial rules, the city was based on feudal society’s systems and was watchfully planned by the omnipotent state. Later on, communist China’s urban planning complied with scientifically designed schemes constantly nourished by the Red ideologies and socialist utopias. In these two predominant periods, state played an essential role in city planning. The governance was fully responsible and in control of urban space and its fabrication.

In recent booming economy, under huge economical and demographic pressure, it seems that the **state slowly disengaged from the actual production of urban spaces**. Political power still points out and guides the direction

city should take by either top down policies or active involvement in semi-private developments, but tends to avoid what would be seen as political interventionism in real estate market. City planners are relegated to draw transportation and infrastructure lines between which **market driven forces will be “invited” to fill the blanks**.

The city fabric has been forsaken to the fierce competition of real estate developers. Those developers comprehensively follow market speculations while, paradoxically, create the needs of the market and the so-called “city consumers”. Developers are shaping the city of today and tomorrow in their own terms. The properties fight is harsh; the city has become one of private interests where incongruous juxtapositions of concealed blocks avoid by any means to interact with each other. Under various blustering slogans, developers are selling **fortresses-like island of well-being** and happiness against the city of “others” filled with congestion, unwanted social melting pot, polluted concrete environment, etc... The very names of these “cities within the city” are highly representative of their phantasmagorical natures and their exclusiveness: Star city, Château Regency, Free town, The Glory Land, Top Aristocratic, Merlin Champagne Town, Upper East Side, Fortune Plaza, Sunshine 100, St Regis Residence, World City, Top of the World, Rich garden, City Castle Blood and Royalty Apartments, Versailles de Shanghai, Parkview Hyper Castle, etc... The Chinese versions of urban blocks is a weird combination of both gated communities and zoning urbanisms. One of the main difference of the Chinese situation compared to other countries is that the **gated zones** are not only placed in the very heart of the city (instead of at its periphery) but are slowly taking in hostage the whole urban fabric. High value lands, high profitability for the market-led city makers, urban competitive setting and the pressing need for densification impelled the zone to morph into a much more compact and massive entity: the megablock.

Toward a (megablock) architecture

The pace and the ambitions of Chinese modernisation are constantly putting the city under pressure. It has become more and more difficult to seek wholesome approaches on the crucial issues at stake or to even have the luxury to question the course of events. Any attempt to go against or to change the city fabrication processes will be taken as either counterproductive or an opposition to Chinese progress. Big time developers are making big time projects and hastily shaping China's big time future and dreams.

This **"big time" situation** and the disengagement of the state has instigated real estate Laoban (boss) and their army of architects and urban planners as the masterminds in charge of creating future Chinese society. Considering that these laoban are sacredly devoted to economical standpoints instead of visionary attitudes, the city became to some extent a hazardous race for benefits. Each developer is frenetically building his own vision of what should be the cities of tomorrow. These proposed "visions" are regrettably in most cases based on city of images, filled with happy people, visual effects and salesman renderings that are supposed to blow future inhabitants' minds and expectations. Deep reflections on current and future society are automatically washed away if they fail to find the marketable arguments that could interest the real estate barons.

The situation calls for **bigness** at every level. "Bigness" results directly from the harsh urban land fight in which competing investors are pushed to "get as big as possible for as cheap as possible". Once a piece of land has been unravelled from the property market chess board, developers will seek to make most out of less. The bigger the block, the higher and denser you can build, the cheaper the overall operation will get. The overwhelming demand of Chinese demographics coupled with swindling property market prices will unmistakably assure the high profitability of the development process.

Bigness relates to a complete different set of

motives: "one should see the big picture". Projects have to be ambitious, grandiose and symbolize as much as possible the revolutionary transformation of Chinese cities and of the progressive society on which it is grounded.

Monumentality has been exploited from the beginning of the country's modernisation as a way to express both the scale and the ambitions of the nation. Almost every of the mega development projects being built in China perpetually insist on their "monumental" features. The project has to be impressive and spectacular enough to be able to have a minimum of impact and prevail in one of the biggest and wildest real estate market in the world. Market dominated developments led to the production of an **architecture of images**. The architectural object that is supposed to be sold became its own advertisement. Architecture has been striped off its essence and its structural semantics. What is sold is not architecture but the image of architecture, what is built is not architecture but the image of architecture.

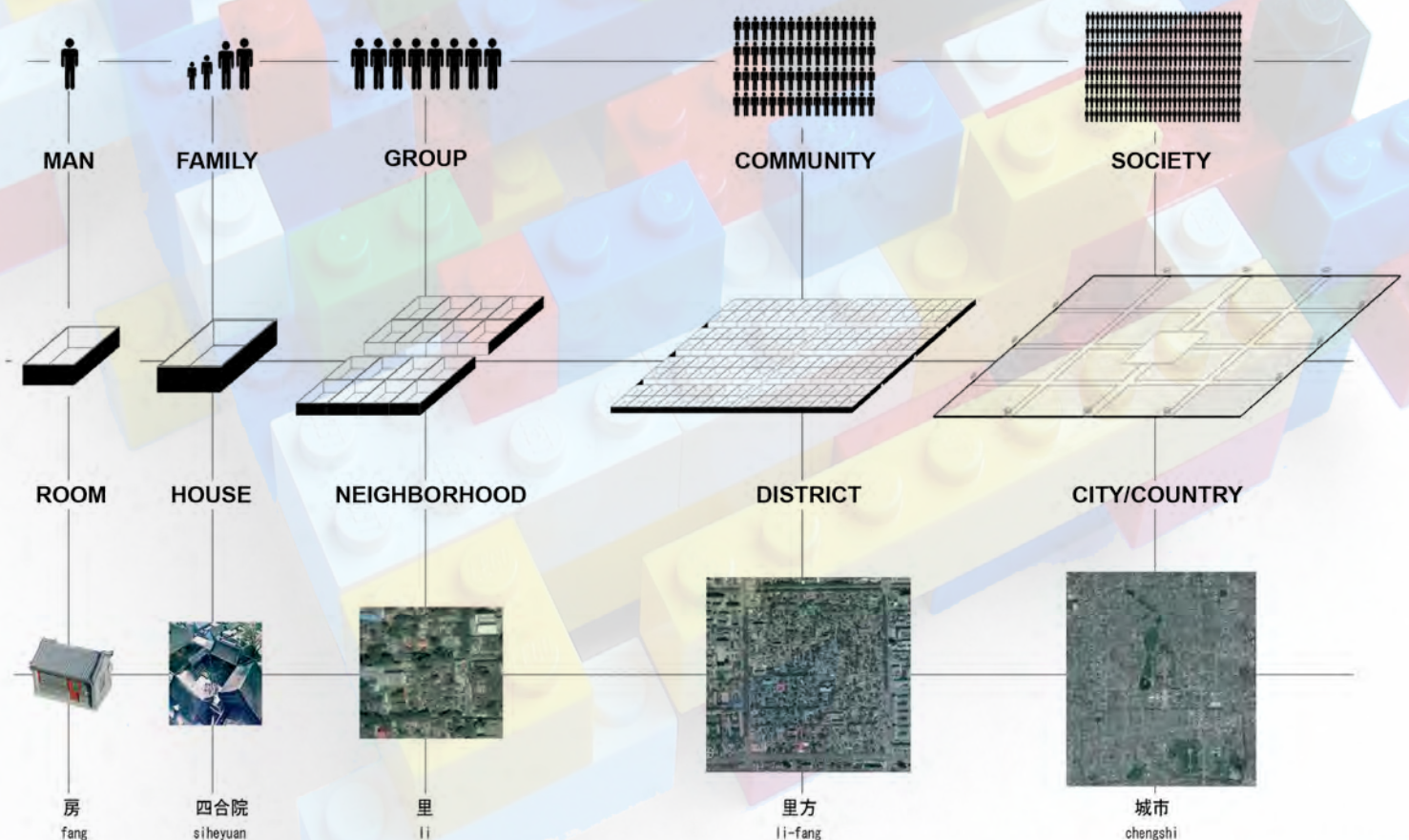
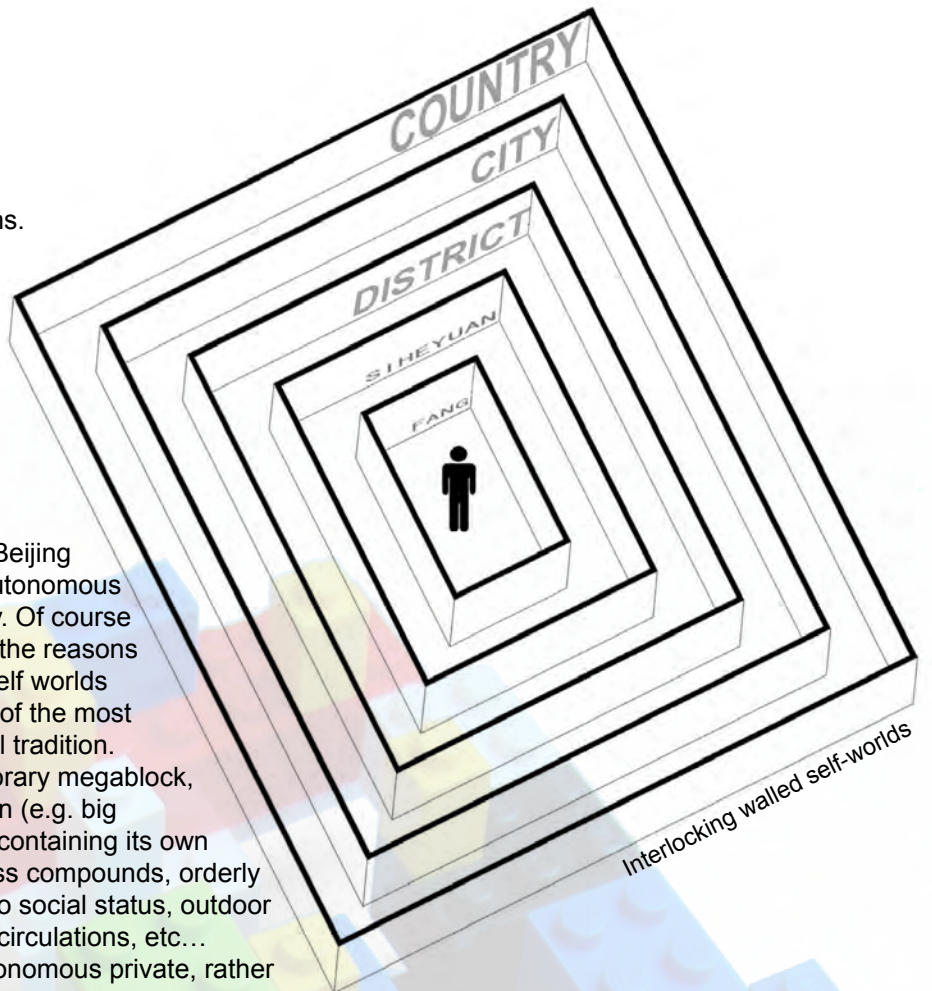
Market dominated urbanism thus resulted in huge scale developments that tend to keep away from each others spatially and programmatically. The compact, highly dense, semi-autonomous urban entities are isolated to ensure distinctiveness and to guaranty exclusiveness to their inhabitants. The **megablocks** have emerged as the almighty tool of contemporary China's urban renaissance because they fit the given timescale and pace of urban growth, because their economical efficiency and profitability is matchless, and because they adapt perfectly to a growing individualistic society demanding clear separations between social groups.

The roots of megablock urbanism are peculiarly not only relying, as often commented, on foreign model importations. Although some western thinking influences such as visionary projects of the late modernists or foreign paradigms (city goes big, city goes up, city goes gated and most recently city goes green) reached China, the contemporary megablock movement and its



popularity has deep indigenous foundations. Ancient city planning used to consider the city as a walled agglomeration within which sixteen blocks were separated by three north-south and three east-west axis. They were clearly defined by limits which formed walled compound firmly separated from each other.

The **city within the city** has been recurrent in imperial Chinese architecture throughout history. The Forbidden City in Beijing is in itself a perfect demonstration of an autonomous isolated mega entity in the heart of the city. Of course in this case, being the emperor's fortress, the reasons for such exclusiveness are obvious. Still self worlds contained in a walled space might be one of the most important features of Chinese architectural tradition. Drawing some parallels with the contemporary megablock, apart from the question of scale, a Da yuan (e.g. big merchant house) is a block within the city containing its own "public spaces", leisure, study and business compounds, orderly organized accommodations with regards to social status, outdoor areas with multiple functions, hierarchical circulations, etc... Altogether, one could see it as a semi-autonomous private, rather dense, block sealed from its outside.



Much later on, again, in Chinese post-revolution socialist cities, the principle of dividing the urban fabric into

multiple **macro units** was taken a step further as the whole society was reorganized through the scope of egalitarian paradigms. The Danwei (work unit) was then forming urban modules in which most of the city usages were contracted. Accommodation, offices, services, political and cultural representations, schools, clinics, public squares, gardens, industrial production, workplaces, micro economies, etc... were all condensed within a walled complex next to which another Danwei with the same characteristics was build and another, and another, and so on. Even though the mechanisms generating the Danwei and the ones founding nowadays megablocks are totally different, their similarity (concealed autonomous compounds) and the fact of juxtaposing them one next to the other to build up the main structure of the city fabric is somehow evocative.

Another much more recent phenomenon that is very interesting is what has been called the **villages in the city**.

Nearby villages around urban agglomerations have been literally swallowed by the city in its last 30 years of booming growth. Sprawling urban areas have completely surrounded what used to be villages in the countryside. Under the city's pressure peasants sold their land to real estate investors and the villages became pockets in the heart of the city. Administratively speaking, they are still under the same set of rules than other villages, meaning that for example they own collectively the land on which the village sits. What happened for those villages after having been plunged in the urban realm is what could be called the emergence of self generated or

community generated megablocks. The whole village was literally vertically extruded and filled at its maximum. The hectic aggregation of miniblocks slowly mutated into a block-like maze of incredible density. These urban fortresses, greatly contrasting with their planned urban backgrounds, offer informal/formal commercial and service activities alongside with long and short term dwellings accommodating the flows of migrant workers coming from the countryside.



/// Danwei // Socialist urban macro unit



Village in the city // self-generated Megablock

MEGABLOCK HOTPOT

URBAN PLANNER

DEVELOPER

ARCHITECT

GOVERNMENT



Menu

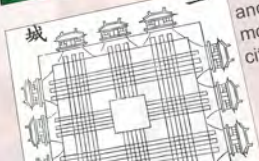
菜单



TULOU
rural traditional
megablocks



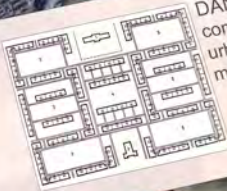
NEW
SOCIALIST
VILLAGE
Huaxicun



王城
WANGCHENG
ancient
model
city



VILLAGE IN
THE CITY
community
generated
megablock



DANWEI
communist
urban
macro unit



BABEL
TOWER
Babylon



PLAN VOISIN
Le Corbusier



DAZHAI
socialist
model
village
urban utopia



NEW YORK
SUPERBLOCK
the raise
of metropolis



OLD VILLAGE
compact
rural entity



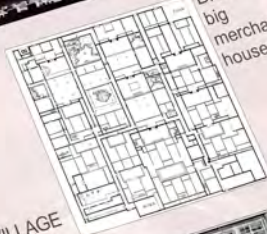
BAS(ic)E
BLOCK
commercial
based residential
block



WALKING
CITY
Archigram
1964



CITY IN THE
AIR
Arata Isozaki
metabolism



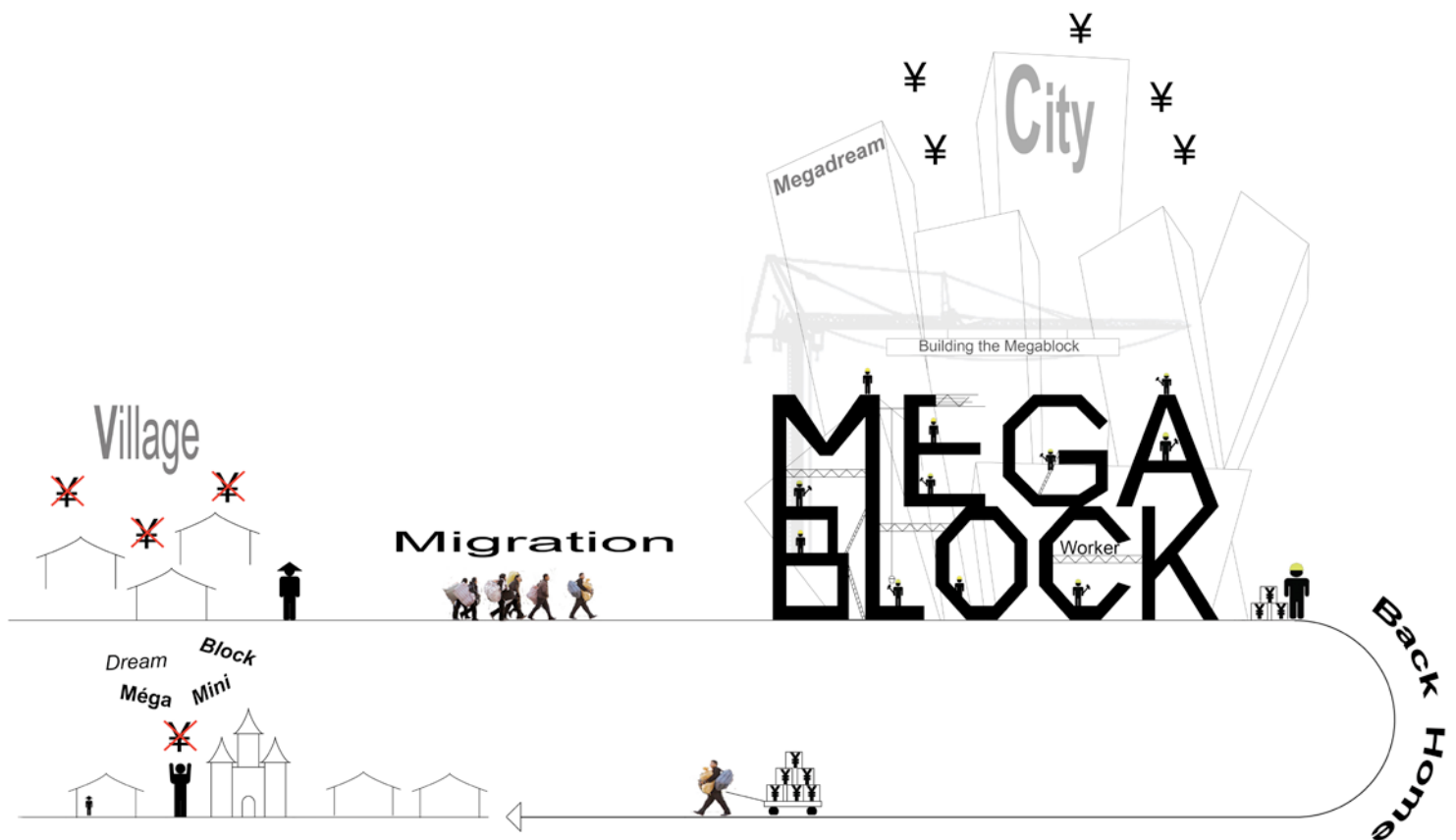
DA YUAN
big
merchant
house

Behind the megablock

Chinese impressive fast forward city development has been drastically widening the gap between rural and urban populations. Behind the stage, the **countryside is still struggling in backwardness** and harsh living conditions. For the last 30 years, everything has been about the city; wealth, services, new spaces, new infrastructures, new equipments, etc...have been realized at a speed and a scale never seen before. Because very few investments ever reached rural areas and that only top down policies try to implement solutions, 2/3rd of the largest population in the world is still living on agriculture-based revenues with low prospect of improvement or transformation.

The situation has pushed millions of the so-called floaters to migrate to the cities to seek better

incomes and permit them to support the ones staying in the villages. What used to be farmers now **“float” from one megablock’s construction site to another**. The peasants represent the low paid workforce without whom none of the Chinese glimmering metropolis could ever have been built. After few years of rather hard labour in the cities and enough savings accumulated, the migrant workers are likely to go back to their respective hometowns where they will mostly be reinvesting their money in the construction of their own **“mini mega dream block”**. Because no proper improvements have been made to the local built environment or public facilities and economical prospect is low, the coming back is even a more discouraging than before. It seems that until now the countryside only received the **side effects** of the national development and progress.

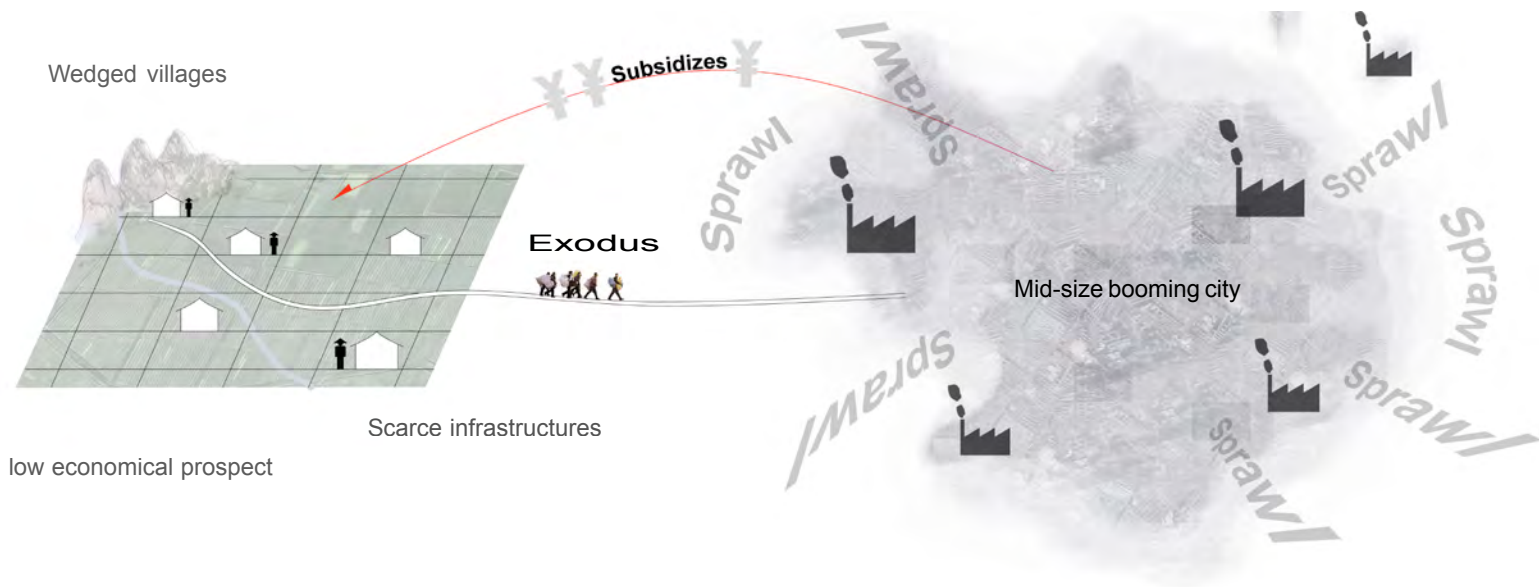


Chinese leadership is well-aware of the growing problem of rural and urban realities gap and has been formulating different policies to counteract it. China has the ambition to move 400 million people from villages to the cities within 20 years. Considering the volume of Chinese population, the former ration 1/3rd urban for 2/3rd peasants can no longer stand in a developed economy and that modernizing agriculture will mean that the 800 million farming workforce won't be necessary anymore. A

massive **rural exodus** is under process. Day after day, cities are growing and villages are emptying. The migration is mainly occurring in mid-size cities (1 million inhabitants) which are perpetually growing and sprawling, filling everyday with more newcomers, industries, work labour and congestion. The mid-size city is the genuine boom place of Chinese development. It is most of the times awkwardly planned and highly inefficient in most of its aspects.



/// Mid-size sprawling city



/// Rural Exodus

The alternative to rural exodus that is being tested and implemented is what has been called the “New Village Strategy” or in other terms the “**Construction of a New Socialist Countryside**”. This government's plan launched in 2005 is an attempt to redefine countryside's 21st century. It consists of basically regrouping and transforming villages in small urban agglomerations. One of the first and foremost examples of these new villages is Huaxicun in Jiangsu province where thousands of villas were constructed in rows alongside industries, landmark buildings and tourist attractions. Pretty much based on the suburban model, Huaxicun is an interesting hybrid of romanticized foreign villas, local post-ruralism and “new ancient” Chinese cultural background. Although it is called the “number one village under the sky”, one has to wonder if this type of new villages will really be able to propose the prosperous future they try to advocate.



/// New socialist village // Huaxicun

Huaxicun started last year the construction of the *Nong Min Gong Yu* tower (peasants apartments) which is going to rise 328m high with 72 levels of dwellings. The 200 000m² of floor area will be able to accommodate 770 families with facilities such as a 1500 people dining room. This huge countryside megablock project initiated by the government enlightens perfectly the need for densification in rural areas. The rural megablock will permit to save a lot of precious land for field cultivation and reforestation. It also importantly suggests a radical shift for future countryside development. If urbanisation became the almighty tool for progress, the rural megablock or megavillage, although being questionable when done like in Huaxicun, could actually become a potential alternative to sprawling mid-size cities or new suburban style of developments.



天下第一村 // Number one village under the sky /// Huaxicun



农民公寓 /// Peasants apartments // Huaxicun

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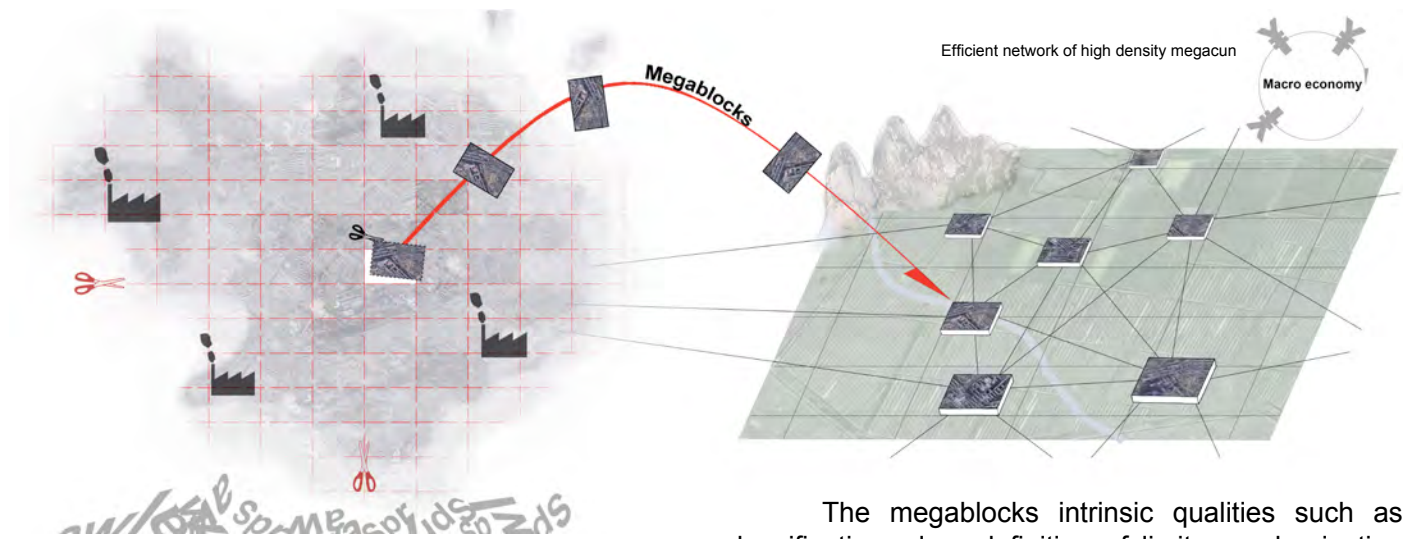
If Megablocks have emerged as the ultimate Chinese urban evolutionary tool, they might as well propose interesting solutions for countryside’s development. Today’s situation have created an even greater opposition between city and rural spaces. The countryside has been pushed evermore on the sides of the country. Rural spaces were once the primary locus of the nation’s modernisation and reinvention. In the 1960’s, the communist leadership formulated very radical utopian visions to **break the city / village dichotomy**. Visions of a continuous landscape in which concentrated human settlements were wedged, were promulgated to respond to the ‘bourgeois’ suffocating cities. Dazhai, located in Shanxi province was a daring experimentation of a supposedly hyper productive agricultural commune on which every rural township should model itself: “*In agriculture, learn from Dazhai*”. Apart from its constant use in propaganda iconographies and the weird hybridization between industrial and rural built forms, what Dazhai was proposing is a dense urban entity that could rejuvenate the whole country’s landscape, economy and modes of life of its inhabitants.



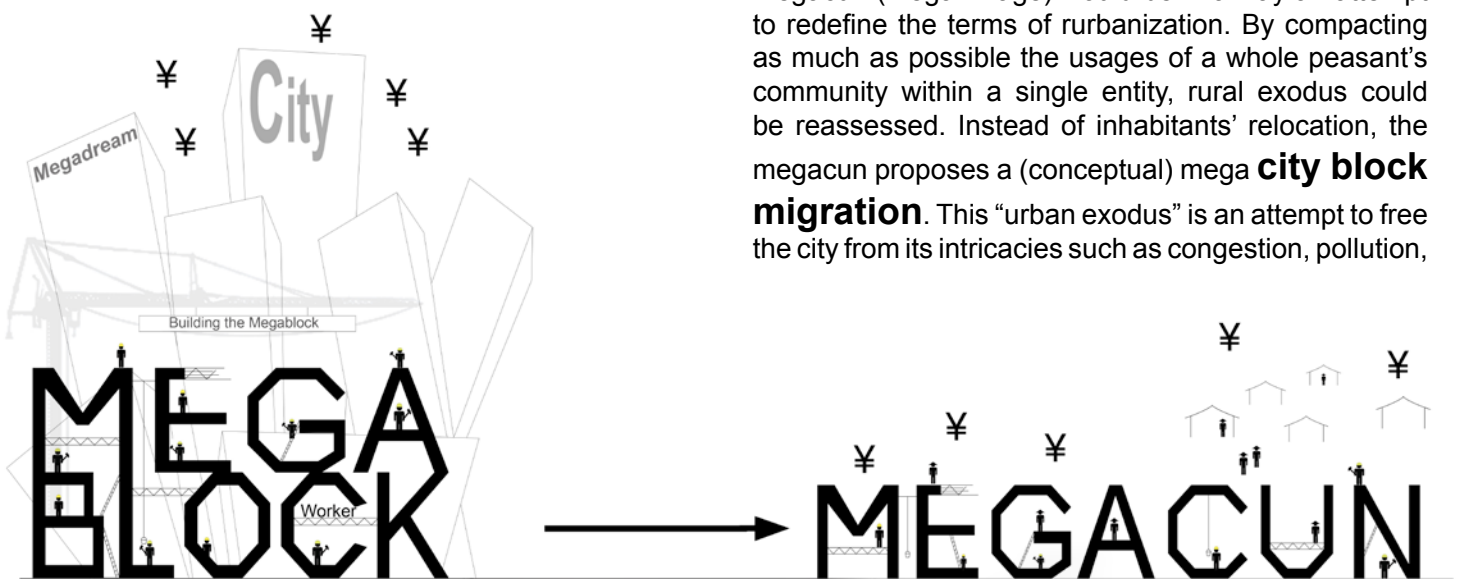
/// A view of Dazhai, the socialist model village



«In agriculture, learn from Dazhai»



The megablocks intrinsic qualities such as densification, clear definition of limits, modernisation and comfort, autonomy, creation of micro economies, cost-effectiveness of big scale development, etc... are all interesting foundations for rural redevelopment. The Megacun (mega village) would be in a way an attempt to redefine the terms of rururbanization. By compacting as much as possible the usages of a whole peasant's community within a single entity, rural exodus could be reassessed. Instead of inhabitants' relocation, the megacun proposes a (conceptual) mega **city block migration**. This "urban exodus" is an attempt to free the city from its intricacies such as congestion, pollution,

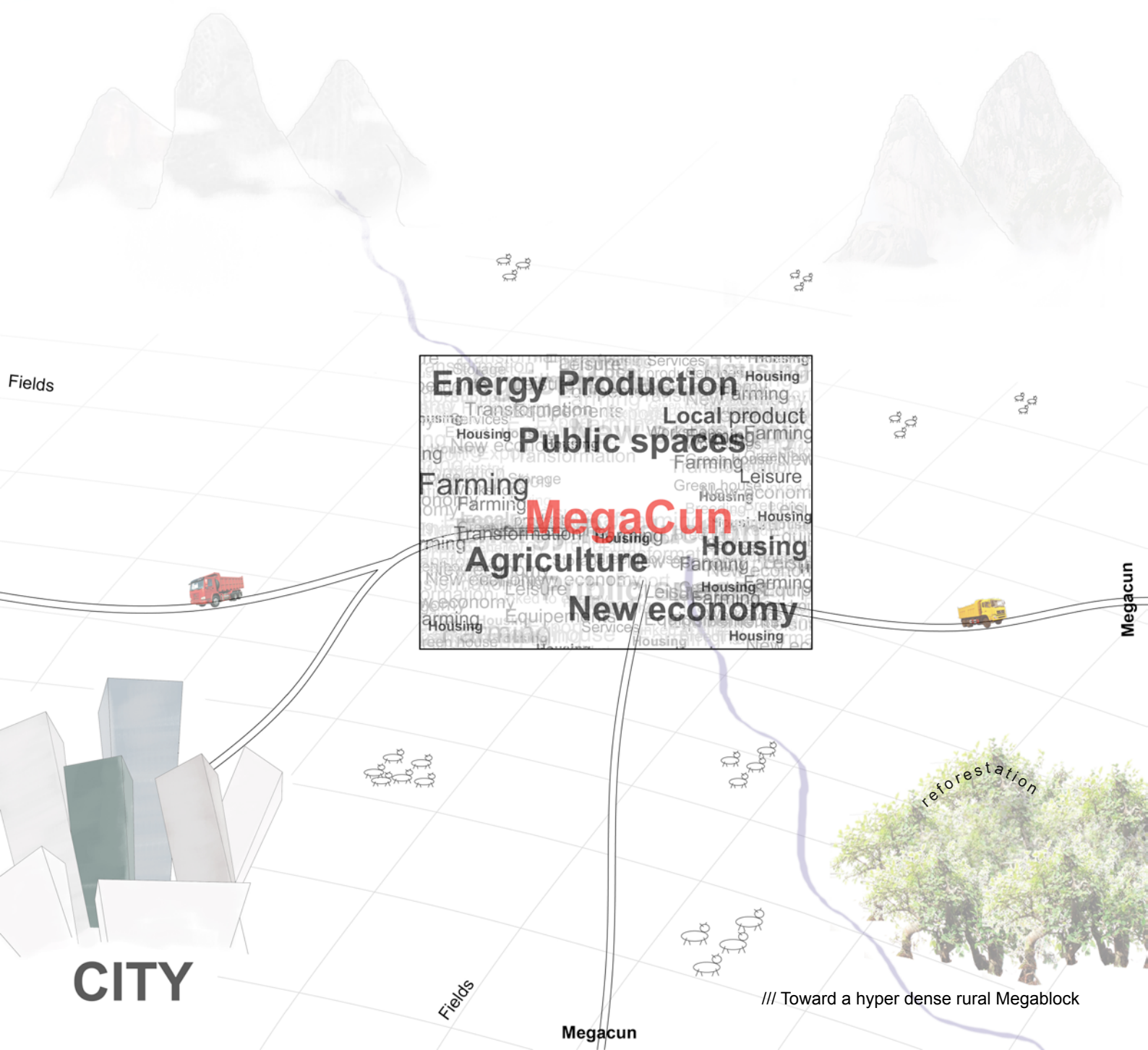


/// Building the Megacun



The Megacun combining sustainable assets such as waste treatment and green energy production would go beyond the urban megablock autonomy aspirations by proposing energetic independence. The environmental approach would in addition greatly differ from its urban counterpart because the very conception of nature and environment in the

The Megacun could become an **operative base** for outside fields production and a transformation unit for its outcomes by drying, storing, converting, packaging and exporting the goods produced locally. Megacun is a small scale modernized farming station permitting either to gain efficiency or to produce a local offer boosting micro economical operability. The densification and containment of the block permit on the other hand to liberate maximized outside field areas



and free land for reforestation and natural resurgence.

Within the Megacun, the **intensification** strategy would facilitate the imperative shift to service and commercial based local economies. Workshops, small manufacturing, shopping, tourism, businesses, could be combined with cultural and public equipments to assure the conversion the agricultural workforce.

The Megacun tries to reuse the megablock mechanisms and its essential qualities to increase community bounds, protect natural , agricultural and built environment from uncontrolled urbanisation, and propose real improvements in rural population prospects.

“In agri-tecture, learn from the megablock!”



