

Studying cosmopolitan landscapes

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I Introduction

In Beijing, a few months ago, I was intrigued by the meaning of a (by now) banal street scene.

Cycling on the sidewalk close to the 4th Ring Road in the northeastern part of the city, I bumped into a street-sign for a furniture and design shop just nearby: *Cosmopolite, Boutique Living in China* (Figure 1). A few blocks away and a few minutes later I could not miss a huge and comfortable housing complex – *Lido Courts* – presenting itself as ‘the oasis of Cosmopolitan Living’. This complex proposes, I discovered later by visiting its website, 364 fully serviced apartments, a shopping mall, a park with a playground for children and a series of sports facilities. The whole promises:

to make your life in Beijing as comfortable and rewarding as your life back at home. Here you will experience a hassle-free transition into Beijing’s life, a complete cosmopolitan lifestyle and the convenience of ‘Turn-key’ luxury. From the fittings and furnishings of our serviced suites and parkland environment, Lido Courts give you a tranquil, safe, international oasis in Beijing.

Another few minutes later, I passed along another large housing complex under construction: *Phoenix City II*. The palisades were clad by a series of large black-and-white arty photographs. These were the portraits of a series of international architects and designers such as Bernard Tschumi, Marco Ferreri, Michele Saee and Odile Decq (Figure 2).

Later, on the web again, I read that they had been invited to design an apartment for an exhibition entitled *Infinite Interiors* set in the new high-rise tower of the area, which occupies a total of 250,000 square metres. I also found out that this development is promoted around the world: it was presented in London in June 2005 to potential customers and on *expatriates.com*, the online community for expatriates, in November 2005.

What I will try to do in this viewpoint is to unpack the meaning of these urban signs to understand what this short segment of a hectic (but very enjoyable) bicycle ride can tell us about the production of contemporary cities. I will, first, briefly discuss the meaning of the words used to promote these developments (what is the cosmopolitanism that is referred to here?), second, question who the producers of these signs are and, third, discuss how to approach and why it is interesting to analyse cosmopolitan *landscapes*.

II Cosmowhat?

An important amount of literature has been published in recent years in the social sciences and humanities around the concept of cosmopolitanism. This led David Harvey (2000: 529), a few years ago, to warn against a loss of relevance of the term through the accumulation of meanings and nuances. A couple of years later, Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen (2002) proposed a useful orientation in this polysemic maze by distinguishing between six different perspectives: cosmopolitanism as a



Figure 1 Advert for a shop, Beijing, 2005 (photograph: Béatrice Ferrari)¹



Figure 2 Phoenix City II building site, Beijing, 2005 (photograph: Béatrice Ferrari)

sociocultural condition, as a philosophy or world-view, as a political project regarding (first version) the development of transnational institutions, or (second version) the multiple affiliations of citizens, as an attitude or disposition and, finally, as a practice or competence.²

What the developers of these complexes in Beijing refer to corresponds to none of these definitions. It is certainly not a political project and very incidentally a philosophy, for instance. What it comes closest to is a conception of cosmopolitanism in terms of attitudes and tastes, on the one hand, and a competence for travels and navigation in 'foreign waters', on the other. These places are, in their promoters' discourse, 'oases': they propose an 'international' (read 'western with an exotic flavour') milieu to expatriates and are conceived as havens or 'transitional objects' for temporary dwellers in this foreign country. They convey the reassurance of the known in a journey through the Chinese 'desert'. So we are far from an idealized cosmopolitanism where circulating élites have developed a taste for difference and a capacity for switching smoothly from one cultural (or traffic . . .) code to the other: attitudes and competencies to which Ulf Hannerz (1990), for instance, refers when attempting to define the cosmopolitans. *Phoenix City's* and *Lido Courts'* cosmopolitanism is a commodified version of it, where investors and promoters cater for travellers seeking to escape the continuous exposure to a 'culture shock' rather than to engage with ordinary Beijing daily life.

In other words, what the use of the term in this context shows is that 'cosmopolitan' or 'cosmopolitanism' have become suitable buzzwords and categories in the minds and mouths of developers, after having been debated concepts in the social sciences of the past 15 years. For these actors, these discursive categories obviously capture something of the ethos of the contemporary city or, at least, something of the tastes and expectations of their customers. So they mould an urban landscape according to their specific

definition of what a cosmopolitan city should be. These terms have been used outside academic language-games in the past of course, to condemn the influence of communism in the period of fascism or, closer to us, to give its title to a magazine. What is interesting here, however, is that they work as performative categories, participating in the transformation of Beijing's urban space.

In sum, the cosmopolitanism which is at stake here is far from the sophistication of contemporary social theory, but all the more interesting because it is directly related to the shaping of urban *forms*. I will come back to this issue of form later, because these huge portraits, encountered during my bicycle ride, deserve a few comments first.

III The conveyors of cosmopolitan taste

The most famous figure in the gallery of portraits close to the 4th Ring Road in Beijing is Bernard Tschumi, the Swiss-American architect as well as theoretician of the city, known for his 'folies' in the *La Villette* park in Paris.

Tschumi and the other architects and designers, transformed into icons of cosmopolitanism by the promoters of *Phoenix City*, should not be confused with the real conceptors of the development. The key actors of *Phoenix City* are not the larger-than-life figures exposed in the streets but *China Resources Co*, with its headquarters in Hong Kong, and the *Jones Lang LaSalle* company, one of the leading real estate services and investment management firms in the world. Tschumi and Co are, however, crucial in the process as providers of a cultural and artistic surplus value. They assure that there will be a touch of international and 'classy' design in the development and, in so doing, they assume what is a traditional function for some figures in these professions.

Internationally renowned architects and designers have indeed been travelling around for centuries diffusing their aesthetics through the creation of buildings and objects (furniture, watches, kitchen utensils and so on). So, certain forms of taste have been travelling

worldwide through the work of these professionals for quite a long time. More recently, though, we have witnessed the emergence of firms disseminating a quantitatively more significant (but perhaps artistically inferior) 'international' taste in places such as hotel interiors, bars and restaurants and in the design of urban public space. In other words, firms that are more active in the 'prêt-à-porter' than in the 'haute couture', like Conran and partners based in London or Jacques Garcia in Paris.³

These actors play a significant role in the transformation of contemporary urban landscape and, more generally, in the social and cultural dimensions of globalization, in the sense that they create a network of places in which cosmopolitan élites can travel 'safely', finding a (hypermodern, postmodern or whatever) sense of home wherever they land. But their impact on these landscapes, their transnational organization, how they handle multiple frames of reference in their daily practice, how they synthesize diversity into style and form are aspects of urban transformation that have hardly been studied.

Cycling along these portraits I was wondering how we, as geographers, are equipped to study the landscapes they create. Not so badly, I would say, if we manage, as I will suggest hereafter, to jump elegantly over the divides between materiality and immateriality, between mobility and fixity and if we develop a sensitivity to the diversity of these built forms.

IV Analysing cosmopolitan landscapes

1 Materiality/immateriality

Championing the inclusion of objects and technologies as basic elements in the study of the constitution of society, Bruno Latour (1992) was, a few years ago, pointing to them as the 'missing masses' of classical social theory. Geography was, however, a missing mass in Latour's reflections at the time, since our discipline has traditionally been focused on (spatial) forms and objects, from rural settlement patterns to the solid geometries of

spatial analysis. Geography has instead faced the reverse problem: how to conceptualize and come to terms with the immaterial dimensions of human life and social organization. As we know, the 1980s and '90s were characterized by an 'immaterial turn': geographers got alphabetized to issues of identity, values, representation and so on, up to a point when, recently, there was for some geographers a serious need to call for a 'rematerialization' of social and cultural geography (Jackson, 2000). So there we are now: in a return to materiality but trying not to forget to accomplish this loop into the immaterial forces that are constitutive parts of the hard and stubborn artifacts we are traditionally used to analyse (Latham and McCormack, 2004).

If we remember work done by authors like David Ley (1987) on Vancouver, James Duncan (1990) on Kandy, Paul Knox (1991) on Washington and Augustin Berque (1993) on Japanese cities, not ages ago, these calls for a subtle marriage between materiality and immateriality seem rather superfluous, however. The most memorable pieces of work on urban landscape in the past 20 years, in my opinion at least, are indeed grounded on such approaches. These pieces have shown the importance of paying attention to style and form as elements that are eloquent of the processes of urban change and of their ideological underpinnings.

More recently, Anthony King (2004) has pursued this type of inquiry showing the importance of grounding a microscale analysis of cultural globalization in a knowledge of the history of architectural typologies. The meaning of the contemporary version of the villa in China, with its walled garden, is illuminated in his analysis by a genealogical reading of the transformations of the *villa* from early Italian Palladian examples to its contemporary versions.

So the first divide is not so difficult to cross, but the second can be more difficult to overcome since it poses some tricky methodological questions.

2 *Mobility/fixity*

The expression 'cosmopolitan landscapes' is, when we think about it, something of an oxymoron. Cosmopolitanism often relates, as we have seen, to the values and tastes of a cultural and economic élite acquired through an experience of mobility. Landscape refers, at least if we don't take the word too metaphorically, to the framing of a piece of environment by, usually immobile, human subjects. Landscapes, unlike the tastes and values of circulating élites, are not transportable.⁴

So, schematically speaking, if we are interested in understanding cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitans we could be inclined to consider only the routes and discourse of subjects and, if we are interested in landscapes, merely the arrangement and aesthetics of artifacts (in an environment or in its representation). So, each part of the expression tends to lead us on diverging trails. What we would fail to grasp, if we separate things this way, is the dialectic between flows and forms, circulations and landscapes, mobility and fixity. Therefore, the apparent oxymoron 'cosmopolitan landscapes' could be useful, precisely to help us capture such a dialectic.

If we return to materiality, to fixed forms, as some geographers encourage us to do, we should therefore not only remember the impact of immaterial forces but also develop the means to analyse these physical forms as traces of the circulation of persons, capital and aesthetics. In order to do this, fieldwork design is crucial. Multisited fieldwork is one solution to the problem leading us to study different spots along the circulation of persons, goods or information. A more difficult and not always feasible one is a translocal instead of multilocal perspective, which would lead us to follow the designers (the Tschumis, Conrans and others), investors (the China Resources and others) and real estate service firms (the Jones Lang LaSalle and others) around during their world tours. In any case there is, when one considers cosmopolitan landscapes, a need for a circulatory approach to the production of built form, which is still only embryonic in geography.

Finally, geographical perspectives on such phenomena should, I think, help to disclose the variety of cosmopolitanisms in the past and in the present.

3 *The diversity of cosmopolitanisms*

It is now well accepted that cosmopolitanism cannot only be discussed as an abstract idea or moral principle. Recent discussions have insisted on the different historical moments when different forms of cosmopolitanism emerged (Mignolo, 2000) or on the importance to consider its geographic diversity (Harvey, 2000): does it, for instance, make any sense whatsoever for populations in certain deprived regions of the globe to think about global citizenship? Cosmopolitanism is thus geographically diverse in the sense that its overall conceptual and political relevance is place-bound. But also because it takes different forms and meanings in different geographic contexts. Landscape, here again, gives us interesting hints.

If we think about Beijing, the interpretation of its changing landscape gives us a series of indications on the way contemporary China 'creolizes' world culture: how a distinct form of cosmopolitanism is in the making, for instance, in the way the international developments referred to above blend with the nationalistic aesthetics of recent administrative buildings or in the way 'ramblas-like' pedestrian paths blend with traditional landscape codes in the design of central avenues for the 2008 Olympics.

The city of Palermo, in Sicily, on the other hand, provides, probably more than many other places, rich examples of the existence of sedimented *layers* of cosmopolitan urban forms in the same space. Recent 'Conran-like' bars and hotels in the city centre are signs of an internationalization of the city (after decades of postwar 'local' development under the strong influence of organized crime). But this is, in fact, only part of a long series of urban transformations related to transcultural processes, among which we find the famous arabo-normanic monuments of the twelfth

century. The landscape of the same city of Palermo also recalls that cosmopolitanism cannot be restricted to the activities of, and the services provided for, travelling economic and cultural élites.⁵ Immigrant communities in Palermo (but also of course nearly everywhere today) demonstrate impressive skills in understanding and managing cultural difference, as any visit to one of the many recently opened 'ethnic businesses' of the city would show. Urban landscapes thus point not only to the geographic, but also to the social diversity of contemporary cosmopolitanism.

The signs discovered during my bicycle ride in Beijing can therefore be seen as more than just anecdotal winks to recent discussions in social theory. They are indexes of a process of urban transformation which stages discourses and objects, 'nomads' and locals, to create, according to very variable social and geographic situations, grounded forms of world culture. A process on which geographers have, I think, (still) a lot to say.

Notes

1. Many thanks to Béatrice Ferrari, who did the ride again a few weeks later, but with a camera this time.
2. 'Transnationalism', another frequent term in contemporary geography, belongs to the same semantic network and is nearly as polysemic, but does not carry the same historical and philosophical load, which makes it, in comparison, more descriptive. For a discussion of the term, see for instance Crang *et al.* (2003).
3. Conran caters for all aspects of aesthetic identity, from architecture to graphic design and is active in most world-scale cities. Garcia, also active worldwide, has made a specialty of extravagant interior design. More than 25 restaurants, hotels and commercial buildings in Paris have been revamped by this designer,

leading commentators to talk about a 'garcia-ification' of the city.

4. Even though they can 'travel' under the form of representations and inscriptions in our minds, suitcases and computers.
5. Often, but not always (Vertovec, 2000), cosmopolitans are equated with well-off temporary expatriates.

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