

Accidental Affinities in the Contact Zone: Envisioning Public Well-being in Michael Sorkin's Urban Imaginaries for China

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This research looks into Michael Sorkin's urban images not only as vehicles of his universal guidelines for urban designs, but more critically as localized and situated instruments for social and environmental justice that manifest a coincidental parallel between China's indigenous cultural psyche and Sorkin's urban ideals. Since 2010, more than half of the Michael Sorkin Studio's projects are based in China, including new city planning, river basin planning, infrastructure management, and massive residential complex designs. Although most of them remain on paper, these urban images function as intermediaries between theory and reality in their capability of visually incorporating unique local conditions with broad social arguments. This research frames foreign urban design projects as a virtual contact zone, where designers/theorists' own background and ideals engage with the local socio-cultural context through hypothetical images that envision ideal conditions, and thus catalyze new urban solutions with both universality and situatedness.

This study sees unbuilt proposal images beyond "failed" projects, and argues for the significance of these images as intermediaries between theory and reality in Sorkin's genre for their capability of visually incorporating site-specific specificities. I first introduce Sorkin's urban theories which claimed "the end(s) of urban design" and critiqued the existing urban spaces dominated by global capital and consumerism. I then discuss the "transitional" Chinese cities as a test field for Sorkin to experiment his urban ideals. Tracing clues of indigenous spatial forms that are adopted, transformed, and re-applied in Sorkin's urban designs for China, I particularly investigate how traditional ways of life and self-emergent urban forms in China coincidentally run parallel to Sorkin's urban ideals. This research thus explicates the potential of coincidental affinities between foreign urban ideals and local cultural conventions, with Sorkin's work in China as an inspirational case that achieves both local and universal applicability in global urban studies.

Despite his New-York-based life and professional experiences, Michael Sorkin (1948-2010) participated in over forty urban designs, building complex, and infrastructure projects in China, which counted for most of his design proposals since around 2010. The swiftly urbanizing Chinese cities provided a fresh test field for Sorkin to experiment with his urban ideals, although few of them were ever realized. The radical urban solutions envisioned by Sorkin include a new capital planning, modeled on Venice in Italy, to revive the local water basin (figure 1), highways and viaducts wrapped in greeneries (figure 2), city parks with farm lands to achieve food autonomy (figure 3), combinations and variations of South Chinese indigenous urban forms to stimulate local community (figure 4). A longtime critic for architectural magazines, a distinguished professor at the City University of New York, and publisher of several books, Sorkin did most of his projects as image-based, public declaration of his radically socialist, left-winged urban theories rather than as practical proposals grounded in feasibility, budget, and functionality. These urban visionaries, consequently, are usually too idealistic to be realized, yet they are unbounded by practical restraints on one hand, and thus embody Sorkin's urban theories with high formal clarity and exaggerated visual effects; on the other hand, they integrate contextual elements and are site-specific compared to the abstract, textual guidelines conveyed through writings. This study sees unbuilt proposal images beyond "failed" projects, and argues for the significance of these images as intermediaries between theory and reality in Sorkin's genre for their capability of visually incorporating site-specific specificities. The images are thus used in this project to trace clues of indigenous spatial forms and cultural psyche that are adopted, transformed, and re-applied in Sorkin's urban designs for China.

Although Sorkin is himself a proliferate critic and publisher, studies specialized in his urban theory and design projects are rather scarce. Existing commentaries on Sorkin's work mostly focus on his contribution to equality and justice advocacies, but seldom discuss his design in specific cultural contexts. This research explores the rich legacy of Sorkin and his studio through the lens of Chinese culture and urban studies in order to evaluate his works not as abstract guidelines, but rather as



Figure 1. Michael Sorkin, The Anxin Archipelago, 2018, Michael Sorkin Studio, <http://www.sorkinstudio.com/the-anxin-archipelago>



Figure 2. Michael Sorkin, Shenzhen Pedestrian Bridges, 2017, Michael Sorkin Studio, <http://www.sorkinstudio.com/shenzhen-pedestrian-bridges>



Figure 3. Michael Sorkin, Sponge Park, 2017, Michael Sorkin Studio, <http://www.sorkinstudio.com/fengincity>



Figure 4. Michael Sorkin, Zhejiang Cultural Center, 2016, Michael Sorkin Studio, <http://www.sorkinstudio.com/zhejiang-cultural-center>



Figure 5. Michael Sorkin, Golden Oyster Food Culture Town, Bao'an District, 2016, Michael Sorkin Studio, <http://www.sorkinstudio.com/golden-oyster-food-culture-town-baoan-district>

site-specific proposals that coins with local cultural psyche in unexpected ways.

MICHAEL SORKIN & “THE END(S) OF URBAN DESIGN”

Michael Sorkin (1948-2020) remained a proliferate public intellectual critiquing the existing urban spaces dominated by global capital and consumerism throughout his life. Most notably, in his edited volume *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space*, Sorkin radically attacked and deconstructed the “theme-park-like city”, modelling on the entertainment-security complex, that spread across the United States in the late 1980s and early ‘90s. Framing theme parks as the archetype of urban design, or more broadly, the archetype of modern lives of leisure and consumption, has been a recurring topic in the 1960s to 1990s amongst myriad architectural and urban theorist. For instance, Reyner Banham addresses how television and Disneyland distribute popular entertainment primarily through the aesthetic of the vulgar, Charles Moore is convinced that life is more real in Disneyland than any leaking commercial strip or sterile civic center because everything in Disneyland is designed to move people, both physically and emotionally, Louis Marin uses the concept “utopiques” to frame Disneyland as a utopian space of consumer experience, and Kevin Lynch criticizes the artificial miniaturizations such as the three-quarter scale settings of Disneyland as simulacra against real city lives.¹ As Sorkin sees it, cities with “a new world order bent on a single citizenship of consumption” that “threatens an unimagined sameness” suffer from the “de-particularized” place with loosened ties to community, the obsession with security with enforced distinction among people, as well as the ever-proliferating simulacra-scapes preoccupied with urbane disguises.² Throughout his life as an urbanist, Sorkin dismisses the increasing tendency to build cities into “Fantasyland, Frontierland, Tomorrowland”³ that relies heavily on the play of signification and semiotic, manipulates human behaviors through pre-determined lifestyles, follows the logic of consumerism and neglects fundamental desires for collectivity and physical proximity in urban spaces.

Arguing against the theme-park city, as well as the associated neo-urbanist planning approaches, Sorkin in 2006 declared “the end(s) of urban design” which “(e)stranged both from substantial theoretical debate and from the living reality of the exponential and transformative growth of the world’s cities”.⁴ His solutions for spatial justice in the urban environment are grounded in a genuine attitude towards the potential of informalities,⁵ a pursuit for “scintillating dialectic of equality and difference”,⁶ an ideal for self-sustained and autonomous urban system⁷, as well as a construct of real communities to evoke human connection and diversity. Although similar claims of intricate social cities against the tyranny of large-scale, market-driven solutions were already raised by non-designer theorists including Charles Abrams, Jane Jacobs, Lewis Mumford, and Lloyd Rodwin as early as in the 1950s,⁸ Sorkin, with his own design studio, was able to implement these ideas into design

proposals. This study thus focuses on Sorkin’s projects in China to see how the theoretical guidelines are fulfilled in specific cultural contexts, and how contextual elements in turn inspire Sorkin’s urban solutions for locality, diversity, sustainability, and spatial justice.

DESIGNING PUBLIC LIFE: THE “TRANSITIONAL” CHINESE CITIES AS TEST FIELD

After the re-opening policy enacted under Deng Xiaoping’s regime in 1992, China has undergone extremely speedy urbanization under an unchanged political system and a switch to market economy. As early as in 1996, Rem Koolhaas exemplified the first Western attempt to describe China’s urban phenomena as the materialized spatial and economic outcome of a highly uniform and compelling ideology, which cannot be adequately framed under existing Western urban theories.⁹ Sorkin himself, having visited China in the 1990s, also noticed the outburst consumerism and its necessary “freedoms” within a context of political repression,¹⁰ which seemed to repeat the pre-determined path of intensified environmental issues, social segregation, and the demise of traditional urban fabric due to neoliberalism and consumerism as in the Western world. However, Chinese urbanism differs fundamentally from existing models for several reasons. On one hand, the Party-state’s strong persistence at the central and local levels, as well as its penetration into the market, has purported an overwhelmingly accelerating urbanization process that is monitored by “the visible hand”. On the other hand, the performance of cities is widely acknowledged as a major criterion for city leaders’ career advancement, since urban scale has been foregrounded as a state strategy to promote modernization in post-reform China. Therefore, countless projects on new city planning, city center renewal, infrastructure construction, iconic building design, etc. come out each year, which is unseen in other regions of the world. Additionally, massive flows of rural population to the cities have raised increasing problems of accommodating diverse social groups in limited urban space, which has not yet been well explored in existing Chinese cities. Some scholars have thus warned against the over-reliance on Western theories, as well as labels such as “socialist” or “post-socialist”,¹¹ due to the irregular trajectories and urban informalities that cannot be simply framed by existing frameworks. Some seek to distinguish Chinese urbanism by proposing the notion “organized capitalism”,¹² highlighting the all-encompassing control by the party-state as opposed to the neoliberal market economy in the West.

As contemporary urban phenomena in China can only be understood through critical examination, as well as rich and multifaceted descriptions, I adopt the notion “transitional city”, as developed by Laurence J. C. Ma and Fulong Wu, to describe the dynamic urban conditions in China that Sorkin was faced with as an urbanist. As Ma and Wu claims, the “transition” is defined as the process of change from one condition or a set of circumstances to another without implying any “convergence”

or “switching” towards a preconceived and well-defined model.¹³ This theoretical framework embraces the uncertain, the fortuitous, and the autonomous over preordained trajectories exemplified in other models. Based on this notion, I hold that Chinese urbanism is both driven by global capital and indigenous socio-cultural forces, and the experimental and uncertain nature of which is where Sorkin’s urban theories could come into play.

On one hand, Sorkin was deeply impressed by the collectiveness of socialist urban forms. The “massive scale of the construction of clean and spacious apartments” that Sorkin appreciated in his writing,¹⁴ for instance, derived from the *danwei* (work-unit) system originated in the 1950s socialist reforms. As the basic structural cell of urban space at the time, *danwei* with its walled and gated enclosure, well-integrated internal circulation system, close association of work and residence, high level of social facilities, etc.,¹⁵ constructed a spatial order of living proximity, low social stratification, senses of community, as well as security and collectiveness. The large-scale apartment complexes developed from the *danwei* model thus coin with Sorkin’s urban ideals in various ways. Additionally, the “tentacles of glistening infrastructure that spread in all directions”¹⁶ that Sorkin gladly observed during his trip to China was also an impressive achievement towards urbanization, enacted by the centralized government. Securing fundamental needs of city life for billions in China, the state-regulated infrastructure project promotes social justice and equality by distributing resources that favors the interest of the majority.

On the other hand, China’s over-speedy urbanism also hits on many problematic issues attacked by Sorkin. For instance, the monstrous homogeneity that tramples on cultural traditions ails most newly planned cities in China. The urban spaces designed as “towers in the park,”¹⁷ as well as the ever-growing highway and the automobile suburbs, decorate and valorize increasingly unequal and antisocial cities. New urban spaces that derived from consumer culture, such as the “One City, Nine Towns” project around Shanghai that features ersatz Thames town, Versailles Palace, and Eiffel Towers, etc., also suffers endless simulacra, knockoffs, and mimicries that run parallel to the “theme-park-like” city that Sorkin despises. Addressing Chinese urbanism as “another Cultural Revolution, with impacts at least as broad and distorting as the first, if less savagely lethal,”¹⁸ Sorkin bluntly voiced his discontent with the status quo in China. Characterized by the authoritarian administration, the wildly growing market economy, the large flow of population, and the longtime cultural conventions, China with its “transitional” cities features a sophisticated yet tempting site of urban experiment for Sorkin. His urban solutions for China, therefore, are both grounded in his ideal for humanized urban space, as well as the cultural specificities of the local.

ACCIDENTAL AFFINITIES WITHIN DOOMED DISCONTENT

It is worth noting that the urban solutions proposed by Sorkin are inspired by China’s local forms of urban spatial structure, indicating the potential of coincidental affinities between foreign urban theories and local ways of life. For instance, Sorkin in various articles articulated his great interest in the *lilong* (alley) and *hutong* (courtyard houses) model from Shanghai and Beijing. Both indigenous urban forms that developed through a long history, *lilong* and *hutong* are composed of juxtaposed small-scale residential buildings laced with small lanes and commerce. Sorkin celebrates these “small-scale urban sanctuaries of both intimacy and variety” for they house the necessities of daily life while stimulate the autonomous construct of community via inevitably encounters and interactions with neighbors.¹⁹ This “concise, efficient, and diverse” model of neighborhood coincidentally matches with Sorkin’s urban ideal in a number of ways: the proximity of living within walking distance, the imagined community as constructed and conceived, the small-scale public space that stimulates social encounters and human interactions, diversity of residents in place of social segregation, the accommodation of abundant urban functions within small space, as well as the dual comfort of secured privacy and convenient social contact. Additionally, both *lilong* and *hutong* models did not derive from the top-down planning of “good life”, but rather grew autonomously from the daily life and practices of urban dwellers. Beyond mere preservation, Sorkin saw the value of *lilong* and *hutong* in reproducing healthy, equitable, and just urban spaces for public well-being in the contemporary time.²⁰

If we look further into the *lilong* and *hutong* model, the cultural psyche behind these urban forms indicates a deeper yet unexpected connection to Sorkin’s urban theories. On one hand, the self-sustained unit of independent household is considered a fundamental source of prosperity, stability, and happiness in China since the ancient time. As Shiqiao Li observes in *Understanding the Chinese City*, traditional urban forms in China derived from the desire of “demarcating boundaries around the conserved body” in urban space.²¹ Coincidentally, the cultural psyche of fulfilling one’s life necessities and sustaining one’s private and social life in a small-scale space against the outside world runs parallel with Sorkin’s urban ideal for proximity and autonomy. On the other hand, Chinese has a moral and aesthetic demand for abundance and for it to be appropriately displayed. Shiqiao Li addresses “Chinese cities as amalgamations of quantities that acquire their significance in their own rights.”²² The co-habiting of diverse things of large quantity in a space, not necessarily being orderly, is in China a preferable state of assembly. The consequent display of diversity and flexibility in urban spaces like *lilong* and *hutong* unintentionally caters to Sorkin’s desire for mixed functions and social groups for the sake of equality and community construct. Additionally, the folk tradition of informality also manifests in this neighborhood model. *Lilong* and *hutong* accommodates the emergence of what Duanfang Lu calls the “liquid urban space”,²³ usually due to the everyday life needs of residents and

the loopholes in the urban management system. The potential for informality that occurs within an inherited space, as well as the possibility of changing the urban realities through everyday practices, also provide a lively case for Sorkin's advocacies for informality and its "perpetual state of negotiation and push-back with the law".²⁴

The above analysis addresses the coincidental parallel between China's inherited cultural psyches, as manifested in local urban forms, and Sorkin's universal guidelines for designing world cities. China thus not only provides fresh test fields for Sorkin's large-scale urban experiments, but also inspire culturally-situated urban solutions that are firmly rooted in the local context.

Looking into the urban images created by Sorkin, we may get a vague idea of how the critical urbanist innovatively appropriate his favored urban forms into design. In this 2016 proposal for the Zhejiang Cultural Center (figure 4), for instance, Sorkin planned a communal public space modeled on the tulou ("earthen building") model from Fujian, a vernacular form of collective residence with circular configuration surrounding a central shrine. The public space in the center was divide by Sorkin into small-scale streets with commerce and entertainment, referencing the form of lilong. This proposal exemplifies a building complex designed as a city, with a strong tendency to stimulate walking experience, diversity and human interaction. In his 2015 proposal Golden Oyster Food Culture Tow in Shenzhen (figure 5), Sorkin integrated his ideal for self-sustained city with China's "fabulous and abiding relationship with food" to design a gastronomic loop for the district. As reflected in the renderings, the variegated, rich, and human-scaled public spaces are populated by diverse social groups, accommodating abundant and varied urban activities. The convergence and clash of large quantities of things, people, and activities within tight, non-automobile public space designed by Sorkin is clearly inspired by the local urban forms in China. Sorkin's 2017 project Sponge Park (figure 3) also introduced farm land into public park to mix different people and to achieve self-sufficiency in food. Again, this urban imaginary not only coins with his own ideal for a self-sustained urban system that integrates multiple functions, but is also inspired by a conventional Chinese preference for the cultivation of land as a source of security, derived from the traditions of a culture primarily based on agriculture.

These urban imaginaries, as developed by Sorkin, demonstrate how the indigenous spatial forms and cultural psyche in China contingently coincide with the New-York-based urbanist's ideals for spatial justice in contemporary cities, despite the ongoing speedy urbanization process and rising consumer culture in China that he fought against. By tapping into the local culture, the foreign urbanist was not only able to anchor his relatively abstract and theoretical design principles down to specific social realities, but also brought into play the folk wisdom in a situated context, allowing the design solutions to truly achieve the purpose of improving the social lives of the local.

CONCLUSION

This research looks into Sorkin's urban images not only as vehicles of his universal guidelines for urban designs, but more critically as localized and situated instruments for social and environmental justice that manifests Sorkin's personalized and selective appropriation of China's indigenous spatial forms and cultural psyche. I particularly investigate how traditional ways of life and self-emergent urban forms in China coincidentally run parallel to Sorkin's urban ideals for community-building, human connections, diversity, informality, and autonomy, and were consequently adopted and transformed into localized urban solutions amongst the ruthless, speedy urbanization process valorized by the party-state. This research frames foreign urban design projects as a virtual "contact zone", where designers/theorists' own background and ideals encounter, interact, and negotiate with the local socio-cultural context, and ultimately catalyze new urban solutions with both generality and situatedness. Through the above analysis, I argue that, although Chinese urbanism is seemingly tending towards the neoliberalism and consumerism as in the Western urban history, both the authoritarian administrative system and the longtime cultural perception of space, body, material, social lives, etc. pose unprecedented and site-specific challenge and potential for Sorkin's practice. And it is Sorkin's personalized understanding and selective appropriation of certain local urban forms and cultural elements that facilitated his deeply-grounded design works as instruments for social and environmental justice in the Chinese context. By analyzing Sorkin's urban visionaries, this research discusses a unique case of cross-cultural intervention, in which the foreign ideas are not directly implanted onto the local site, but rather engages with the local through imaginary, hypothetical images that envision the ideal conditions. This research especially contributes to the existing scholarship by highlighting the potential of coincidental affinities between foreign urban ideals and local cultural psyche, which serve as an inspirational case that achieve both local and universal applicability in global urban studies.

ENDNOTES

1. See: Nigel Whiteley, *Reyner Banham: Historian of the Immediate Future*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 96; Charles Moore, "Plug It in Ramses, And See If It Lights Up, Because We Aren't Going to Keep It Unless It Works," *Perspecta* 11 (1967), 43; Louis Marin, "Utopic Degeneration: Disneyland," In: *Utopics: Spatial Play*, (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1984), 239-257; John M Findlay, *Magic Lands: Western Cityscapes and American Culture After 1940* (Univ of California Press, 1992); Kevin Lynch, "A Tribute to Donald Appleyard," *Places* 1 (1983), 3-15.
2. Michael Sorkin, "Introduction: Variations on a Theme Park", in: *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (Macmillan, 1992), xi-xiv.
3. Michael Sorkin, "See you in Disneyland", in: *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (Macmillan, 1992), 217.
4. Ibid.
5. Michael Sorkin, "Architecture Without Capitalism", in *What Goes Up: The Right and Wrongs to the City*, (Verso Books, 2018), 183.
6. Michael Sorkin, "Alternative Routes", in *Twenty Minutes in Manhattan*, (Macmillan, 2013), 208.
7. Michael Sorkin, "Canal Street", in *Twenty minutes in Manhattan*, (Macmillan, 2013), 165.
8. Michael Sorkin, "The End(s) of Urban Design", in *Urban Design*, ed. Alex Krieger and William S. Saunders, (U of Minnesota Press, 2009), 157.
9. Chuihua Judy Chu, Bernard Chang, Mihai Craciun, Jeffrey Inaba, and Rem Koolhaas, *Great leap forward*, (Taschen, 2001).
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12. Ma and Wu, "Urban Transformation in China", 247.
13. Ibid, 234.
14. Michael Sorkin, "Parametrics and Power", *Architectural Record*, September 1th, 2016, accessed April 17th 2022 at: <https://www.architecturalrecord.com/articles/11850-parametrics-and-power>
15. Duanfang Lu, "Work Unit as Urban Form", in *Remaking Chinese Urban Form: Modernity, Scarcity and Space, 1949-2005* (Routledge, 2006), 52.
16. Michael Sorkin, "Parametrics and Power", *Architectural Record*, September 1th, 2016, accessed April 17th 2022 at: <https://www.architecturalrecord.com/articles/11850-parametrics-and-power>
17. Michael Sorkin, "Bull in China's Shop", in *What Goes Up: The Right and Wrongs to the City* (2014), 263; Michael Sorkin, "Hyper Growth in South China", *Architectural Record* (July 1997), accessed April 17th 2022 at: <https://advance.lexis-com.proxy01.its.virginia.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentitem:3SP2-BWB0-0091-N179-00000-00&context=1516831>
18. Michael Sorkin, "Bull in China's Shop", 2014, 263.
19. Michael Sorkin, "Learning from the hutong of Beijing and the lilong of Shanghai", in *All Over the Map: Writing on Buildings and Cities* (2008), 418-421.
20. Ibid.
21. Shiqiao Li, "The Body in Safety and Danger", in *Understanding the Chinese City* (Sage, 2014), 79-97.
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24. Michael Sorkin, "Architecture without Capitalism", 183.