Building sustainable, liveable and characterful towns has been a major topic in China in its new era of urbanisation. From the government to private developers and professionals, the development of medium- and small-sized towns has been seen as the key to creating new healthy lifestyles in response to big-city problems such as pollution, housing shortages, transportation issues and social segregation. Medium- and small-sized towns are also seen as a remedy to the urban-rural divide, and as a catalyst for the renaissance of China’s countryside.

In July 2016, China’s Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, National Development and Reform Commission, and Ministry of Finance jointly issued a circular which announced that by 2020 China would build around 1,000 towns with distinctive features in tourism, trade and logistics, modern manufacturing, education and technology, traditional culture, and liveability. According to the circular, the construction of distinctive towns should follow local conditions, based on resource strength and development potential. The government should serve as a platform and service provider while allowing the market to play a leading role.

This represents a comprehensive policy to boost innovation in China, which should help to both reinforce the upgrading of traditional industry and reverse the decline of the countryside through a
new balance in the urban-rural relationship. At the beginning of 2017, the Chinese government also announced preferential financial policies to boost the regeneration of China's suburbs and countryside.

The current situation in China has similarities to that in UK more than 100 years ago, when problems in the big cities led to a new focus on the kinds of places that can improve people's quality of life. Much as the Garden City pioneers pushed forward theory and practice in the UK, Chinese urbanists are today passionately seeking solutions to questions of urban-rural balance and are actively seeking to learn from the experiences and lessons from UK towns, including traditional towns, the early Garden Cities, the post-war New Towns, and recent efforts to develop 'garden villages and garden towns'.

Knowledge exchange

In April 2016, the China Design Centre based in London organised a UK-China Ideal Town and Garden City Summit in London, which attracted interest from Greentown China and China Vanke – two prestigious developers that are committed to building high-quality towns in China. The event was followed by a ten-day study trip across the UK, supported by Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation (LGCHF) and the Academy of Urbanism. Greentown China, established in 1995 and based in Hangzhou, a prosperous and scenic city south of Shanghai, together with its sister company Bluetown Group, are enthusiastic about developing pioneering ideal towns, and are interested in how to nurture the right system for the towns' growth. They are currently building more than 30 towns in China and are providing project management services to over 140 towns across the country. The towns they are developing often incorporate natural environment assets, agriculture, culture and creative industries, community facilities and services, and tourism.

To support Greentown/Bluetown’s knowledge development, the China Design Centre, the LGCHF and the TCPA were invited to speak at the China-UK Ideal Town Conference in Hangzhou, which focused on understanding the ingredients for a high-quality, liveable town and on how to establish, in a Chinese context, a system in which long-term stewardship is embedded in new development right from the start. The conference inspired further, more in-depth interest in the UK’s Garden Cities, New Towns and traditional towns. In May and July 2017, Greentown/Bluetown sent two sets of senior managers, 48 in total, to the UK. Along with the LGCHF, the TCPA and Dr Nicholas Falk from URBED Trust (on behalf of the Academy of Urbanism), the China Design Centre facilitated learning trips to Letchworth Garden City, Bournville, Milton Keynes, Cambridge, Hatfield, Shrewsbury, Telford, Stratford-upon-Avon, Cirencester, Stroud and Oxford.

Letchworth Garden City

As the first pioneering town inspired by the ideas of Ebenezer Howard, Letchworth is regarded as a prime example of how to turn ideology to reality. With the support from the management team of the LGCHF and the International Garden Cities Institute at Letchworth, the Greentown/Bluetown managers spent two days learning about the town’s history, evolution, property portfolio, charitable activities, governance, and community participation. One delegate commented: ‘With over 100 years’ history, … the model laid out by Howard at the beginning and the current governance system are effective, which gives the town the capacity to reinvent and adjust itself over the course of time.’

One of the key learning points from Letchworth Garden City is the fact that the land value captured over the years has been invested back into the town and used to support its long-term stewardship. This model was well received by the Greentown/Bluetown delegates, and they have set up a kind of community trust and allocated a certain percentage of property sales income to give it a start. However, it is still challenging for them to decide on the split of monetary assets and commercial or residential property assets that should be transferred to the community trust to meet future needs, a factor that will also affect decisions on the mix of uses and property types from the outset. Furthermore, China’s current land lease policy only allows 70 years for residential and 50 years for commercial uses, and there are uncertainties over who will benefit from land value increases in the future.

Letchworth today seems largely in keeping with the original layout planned by the masterplanners and architects Parker and Unwin. Its railway link, agricultural belt, industrial land, green routes and open spaces and town centre facilities all suggested to the Chinese delegates that good masterplanning, layout and architectural character from the outset can produce a sustainable and durable development structure, in which the contents of the town – shops, businesses, and leisure, social and cultural facilities – can evolve over time. The LGCHF as custodian of the remaining land and property assets of the development company, takes responsibility for improving the public realm and trying to maintain and increase the vitality of the town. The Bluetown/Greentown managers recognised the importance of the LGCHF’s long-term stewardship role – and they also appreciated the Foundation’s Garden City Collection, which helps to ensure that a record of the town's development history is kept; and they would like to make sure that a town archive centre is established in their towns.

A big difference between the first Garden City and town development in China today is that while
the Letchworth model focused on both residential and employment development from the outset and allowed a social mix to grow. China’s current commercial town development model aims to attract affluent middle classes to move to the town – and the countryside in second homes. The study tour delegates recognised that in China the farmers and villagers that make up the original inhabitants of a new development area, who are largely ignored or relocated in the development process, cannot afford property prices of the new town but nevertheless provide key services. Mr Yao from Bluetown commented:

‘Perhaps we should build affordable housing at the start of the development. That will allow construction workers and service providers to become the first group of residents in the town. They are important seeds of growing the town … Howard [wanted] to bridge the gap between rich and poor, and he was a real social reformer. This is what China is striving to do at this moment.’

Milton Keynes

As one of the ‘third wave’ of UK New Towns, Milton Keynes has a short history, but has successfully grown into a city of over 200,000 in just 50 years, and is still growing towards its original 250,000 target. The Chinese delegates found that, although its grid layout and car-dominated road system very much reflected planning concepts of the 1960s and 1970s, its overall success relies on its strategic location, the careful design of neighbourhoods, and the management of the city’s parks and open space through the Parks Trust.

Located at the intersection of the Oxford-Cambridge corridor and London-Birmingham connections, Milton Keynes has a ‘winning formula’ in the ‘business location index’. This has helped the city’s economic growth in logistics, manufacturing, information technology and financial services, which stimulated discussion among the delegates about what a town needs to do to attract a variety of businesses.

Another of the city’s highlights is its system of parks and open spaces. The large-scale parks, green corridors and lakes bring the nature to the city, but landscape management and maintenance are huge tasks. The city’s Parks Trust has been endowed with assets that generate regular income to cover management and maintenance costs, supplemented by income from farming, forestry and leisure activities, and, benefiting from presentations by the Parks Trust, the Bluetown and Greentown delegates recognised the advantages of an independent trust or other body that has the ability to look after the
landscape without competing with other demands on local council funds.

Led by Katy Lock from the TCPA and Will Cousins, a Director at David Lock Associates, the delegates visited some of the neighbourhoods hidden from the arterial grid system by landscaping and green corridors, and found that, in contrast to the grid system itself, the neighbourhoods are walkable and organically designed, with local centres, shared by two or three neighbourhoods, providing shops, services, community centres, schools and children’s playgrounds. The visit inspired discussion about the kinds of facilities that a new town needs to have from the start to help it grow over time.

Finally, the smart city strategy presented by Milton Keynes Council attracted lots of attention – particularly the data hub set up by the council by bringing together data from various sensors in the city, which has provided an innovative system upon which smart infrastructure for transport, water management and energy efficiency systems can be built.

**Bournville**

Bournville, envisaged and built by the Cadburys from the late 19th century onwards, has evolved into a strong and well established community with 8,000 homes. Bournville Village Trust (BVT) was established in 1900 to oversee the community’s long-term management.

Today, 3,500 housing units are owned by BVT, providing regular income to cover management costs. The BVT management system has been adapted by the Trust in building contemporary new communities at Lightmoor and Lawley, where households pay an annual maintenance charge of £250 to cover long-term stewardship. This has similarities to the current property management system found in China, but the difference is that the annual charges in Lightmoor and Lawley contribute not only to estate maintenance but also to work to preserve the developments’ character, as well as social activities organised or funded by BVT.

The delegates also found inspiration in BVT’s retirement village, Bournville Gardens, run in partnership with the Extra Care Trust and Birmingham City Council which includes homes and a range of facilities – restaurants, a gym, a library, a nurse station, a play room, a hairdresser, and other function rooms. Additional flats and houses, a local NHS health centre and a day-care service are under development, which together make Bournville Garden a great place for senior citizens to live.

The delegates took two key points from the visit to Bournville Gardens. First, the modern design and
bright colours used stand in contrast to the more traditional design in China’s retirement villages. Elderly people are no different from anyone else in pursuing new and beautiful things and quality in their lives, and Bournville Gardens provides a great atmosphere for happiness and vitality. The other point is that the older people are encouraged to get involved in voluntary work within Bournville Gardens, whereas is the main approach in retirement villages in China is that senior people are ‘to be well looked after’ or ‘to be served’. The staff working in the retirement village are not much younger than the residents, and the small age gaps help to increase mutual understanding and respect between the staff and the residents.

Mr Zhu from Bluetown summed up the delegates’ learning experience from Bournville: ‘The strength of BVT can be recognised from the passion of the staff. They are the most professional, enthusiastic and honourable team. Their services and management of the town bring the happiness and maturity of the town.’

**Cambridge**

Cambridge was a ‘must-see’ destination for the Chinese delegates, and the visit to the city was guided by Robin Nicholson, a Partner of Cullinan Studio, and Dr Nicholas Falk. In response to great pressure for housing growth, the Cambridgeshire Quality Charter for Growth sets out four principles for new development: community, connectivity, climate change, and character. Hosted by developers Grosvenor, the delegates visited the housing development at Trumpington Meadow, in the South Cambridgeshire District Council area, and noted three key pointers in new town development.

First, it is essential to consider connections with other towns in the wider region, especially in terms of the economy, transport links and people's skills – the network of towns around Cambridge, including towns on the Oxford-Cambridge corridor, form an important growth area that can compete with mega-cities such as London. The university and its spin-off companies form a huge attractor for the knowledge-based economy. The bio-campus in South Cambridgeshire, for example, has become a generator for the aggregation of highly-skilled people and a driver for demand for good-quality living environments.

Second, the delegates also noticed that Grosvenor reduced risks by adopting a long-term approach, to increase vitality and resilience to economic change, and to increase sustainability and adaptability to climate change. Third, Grosvenor is working closely with the local authority and housing developer Barratt Homes to provide 40% affordable homes and to control design and development.
quality. The Trumpington Meadow visit gave the delegates an insight into the UK developer’s role, and how a balanced and collaborative approach offers great potential to build a community.

In contrast to most development projects, North West Cambridge is being led by the city’s university, with the aim of accommodating the growth of Cambridge University by providing more affordable accommodation for staff and students, as well as research and development space. The project provided an excellent example of how to plan a town against current context, bringing together the elements that a town would need, including employment space, community facilities, schools, hotels, care homes, sustainable transport, sports and playing fields, and public open spaces. The following points are particularly reflected in the delegates’ learning notes:

● There are always two dimensions to the growth of a town: its actual development and its long-term management. Both dimensions must be considered from the beginning, especially a mechanism to nurture the community and encourage residents to involve themselves in the management of their neighbourhood.

● It is important to build a community centre, schools and open space and green infrastructure before people move in.

● The development period is much longer than that typical in China. A single phase can last ten years, which has allowed adjustments to be made in response to changes in context. The decision-making process also reflected the shared efforts between government, residents, stakeholders, and other organisations.

● The North West Cambridge project uses more than ten architects to increase the variety of design, but they all operate under the principles of an overall masterplan. There is also flexibility in architectural design to allow adaptation to future environmental demands.

● Development in China can take inspiration from sustainability considerations in the North West Cambridge scheme, such as the district heating system, the underground waste storage system, the sustainable drainage system, the high eco-standard for homes, and the cycle path linking the neighbourhoods and the city of Cambridge.

Stroud

Stroud, with its Saturday market, busy town centre, artist spaces and Ruskin Mill College, set against a backdrop of its beautiful Cotswolds location, was deemed ‘the most charming town of the trip’ by the Bluetown and Greentown managers. And, most importantly, a key feature is its spirit of community and the ‘bottom-up’ approaches in evidence. The Chinese delegation thought that Stroud has most of the qualities that an ideal town should have – beautiful, scenic, mixed, diverse and lively.

Through the interactive sessions with three local urbanists, Dr Nicholas Falk, local architect Max Comfort and Dr Richard Baines from the Royal Agricultural University, the delegates developed a good understanding of how Stroud has evolved through the shared efforts of the community – such as the development of the Exchange community facility in the town centre, which was refurbished by the community and offers affordable rented space to artists or start-up businesses; and the Spring Hill...
co-housing project, where 34 families built their own houses and communities and formed their own governance rules. Even though co-housing is difficult to achieve in China owing to different land policies, these examples stimulated thinking about how far the community can influence a town's development and management. In most places, community involvement means simply public consultation, but in Stroud there are examples of self-build and self-governance models.

Tourism is one of the key strategies that is used for building or generating China's characteristic towns, and delegates were interested in how Stroud has attracted creative people from the surrounding big cities and London, including more than 100 artists, bringing vitality to the town, new uses for old mills, and increases in distinctiveness.

Conclusion

China is undergoing transformation at an incredible pace. Stages of urbanisation, suburbanisation and re-urbanisation have been compressed into a mere 40 years, in the face of rapid change in industrialisation, post-industrialisation and the knowledge economy. China and UK are facing the same challenges of identifying the right places in which to build and establishing an urban/rural balance, nurturing socio-economic growth, and ensuring environmental sustainability for a better quality of life. While the UK currently is still exploring the right development model after the experience and lessons garnered from more than a century, a series of learning points to inspire the Chinese delegates could be drawn.

The time dimension

Although development is usually planned and built within a short period of time, the UK experience demonstrates the need to try to foresee what will happen several decades or a hundred years later. The time dimension is an important factor in planning project development and management, and there is a need for resilient models to deal with post-development issues, such as future economic fluctuations, technological improvements, and demographic and climate change. Aging, social segregation and changes in economic activity will be the biggest challenges for the future in most of China's new settlements. Plans, designs and management methods will need to consider these challenges from the outset if flexible spaces capable of being adapted so as to mitigate the effects of such changes are to be delivered.

Long-term stewardship and benefits for people

The long-term stewardship models used in Letchworth and Bourneville provided a source of inspiration for the Bluetown/Greentown delegates. Although Letchworth and Bourneville have different combinations of assets, the overall principle is the same: community ownership of assets allows the generation of regular income to support long-term management. This approach has also enabled the development of new neighbourhoods – and a retirement village – to adapt to socio-economic changes. However, many of the details need further exploration if this model is to be adapted to a Chinese context – for example the form and formation of the community organisation, the support to be provided by the developer or government, and how to build up the community's stewardship skills.

Systematic thinking on the relationship between town and country

The UK's early Garden Cities and traditional towns presented vivid illustrations of relationships between town and country, in terms of issues such as transport and land policy, as well as urban-rural economic linkages. Both the UK and China are constrained by land availability, such as through Green Belt restrictions in the UK or rigid agriculture usage which cannot be redesignated as developable land in China. There is a need for further thinking on what constitutes the healthiest growth area, in which people can enjoy the benefits of both town and country, and on how land policies and infrastructure can be better tailored to this end.

Exploring the right management model

While Bluetown/Greentown developers would like to adopt a long-term vision and management model, it is important for them to learn how to establish a suitable organisational model for looking after the community, how to nurture communities, how to work with local partners, and how to divide up the various roles with local government. The UK's various civic models stimulated the delegates to think about a 'third way' of maintaining good places beyond commercial operation and government intervention.

What the delegates took away from the trip was not so much a replicable model from one English town, but a range of ideas and methods to explore in growing their towns on Chinese soil. Dr Jiang Li, Director of Research with Greentown Town Development Group, commented:

'It was an extraordinary experience for us to learn from UK towns that have a repository of ideas and knowledge on experimenting to produce better towns. Even though UK and China have different planning systems and land policies, I believe there is lots for us to learn, and I hope Greentown and Bluetown can closely engage with the UK to build exemplary towns in China.'

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