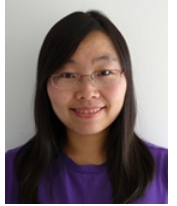


# Book Review: Chinese Urban Design: The Typomorphological Approach by Fei Chen and Kevin Thwaites

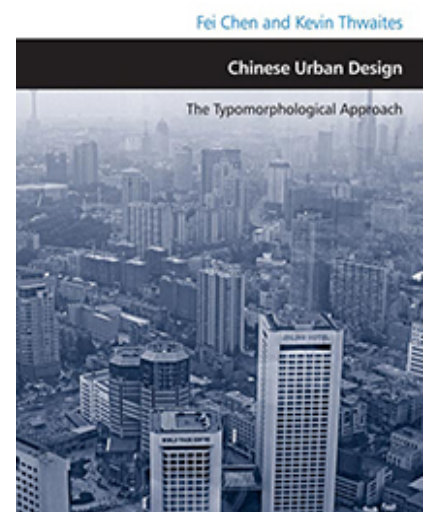
[blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2014/02/10/book-review-chinese-urban-design-the-typomorphological-approach/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2014/02/10/book-review-chinese-urban-design-the-typomorphological-approach/)

*The traditional Chinese city is undergoing an identity crisis. With rapid developments taking place, there is growing conflict between this new building and the existing urban heritage. In **Chinese Urban Design** Fei Chen and Kevin Thwaites argue that urban design needs to play a far more important role in China's urban development if cities are to become places that are relevant to the lives of local residents, be sustainable and adaptable to meet future needs. This book should prove to be essential reading for urban design scholars and city policy-makers, writes **Amy Tang**.*



**Chinese Urban Design: The Typomorphological Approach. Fei Chen and Kevin Thwaites. Ashgate. August 2013.**

Find this book:



Fei Chen and Kevin Thwaites have taken a fascinating angle on urban investigation and city design in China with this recent book. Examining Chinese urban design at a time of conflict between traditional culture and traditions on the one hand, and new developments on the other, the authors consider real examples from the city of Nanjing to show readers how Chinese cities have transformed over time, and use a typomorphological approach to suggest best future practice for urban design in China.

For unfamiliar readers, typomorphology as a theory refers to the built landscape in relation to location, time, and scale, in order to understand the production and transformation process of urban form, and to guide quality design practice. The authors posit that 'only certain cultural symbols or physical elements that have gone through a typological process are given fundamental attention and determine the features of the local built environment because they have adapted to new demand by local residents in a continuous manner' (p.59).

The intention here is not simply to preserve the visual continuity of forms, but to follow cultural changes, and as such the typomorphological approach represents a dynamic and evolutionary concept. The book aims at improving the urban environment through a new approach that ensures a culturally and socially sustainable urban design in China. It focuses on the issues of continuity and cultural identity, which the authors argue are currently disrupted by rapidly planned, designed, and delivered developments. Their key question is: 'are there spatial and form related dimensions to the optimisation of social benefit that we can identify, describe, and ultimately apply, that will give the greatest social experiment of humanity a better chance to deliver socially sustainable outcomes?' (p.1).

The authors have structured the book into three parts in order to address this question. The first part of the book briefly introduces the history and theory of traditional Chinese urban form, the relationship between continuity and urban identity, and also gives a comprehensive theoretical overview of typology and morphology. It explains how this work draws from the European literature for its intellectual foundations in order to provide the framework for typomorphology, and also how the

research methodology has been developed and applied to analyse Chinese urban design. The authors assert that 'urban form is an extremely complex synthesis' (p.65) that can be comprehensively understood in space, time, and at appropriate scales by typomorphology, achieved by breaking down this complex entity into smaller components and placing them in a logical order to create an analytical framework.

The second part analyses in-depth the Chinese design context at different levels of scale and resolutions of study, with the introduction of seven elements: general plan, silhouettes, street network, urban blocks (plots), public space, public buildings and houses. It declares that a



Shanghai. Credit: [Hugolim](#) CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

typomorphological approach would help us to 'understand the persistent features of spaces which are important for the emotional and psychological tie between local resident and the space, and then can be reapplied to new forms to sustain such a connection' (p.65). The case study of Nanjing leads to a typomorphological reading of the city through three morphological periods, resulting in a series of design guidelines that are discussed fully in the third and final part of the book and form its most intriguing chapters.

The authors believe that a typomorphological approach would be able to help Chinese cities and towns continue to expand and review in order to accommodate growing populations and their changing needs and lifestyles, whilst retaining a sense of their distinctiveness as expressions of cultural identity. There are twenty-eight design guidelines on the seven elements for Nanjing proposed in the book, and these certainly enrich the existing urban policies and serve current development control. However, some of the details seem too ideological, such as the possibility of widening roads or streets in historic areas; the authors give no examples to explain whether demolishing buildings or other physical elements would be involved in this process. Discussion of such issues would be most welcome from the authors in the future in order to demonstrate how practical the book's guidelines are. In its conclusion, the authors write that urban design needs to play a far more important role in China's urban development 'if cities are to become places that are relevant to the lives of local residents, be sustainable and adaptable to meet future needs' (p.197).

Undoubtedly, the authors have done an excellent job of introducing Chinese urban design theory and practice to urban theorists and researchers, designers, practitioners, and – perhaps most importantly – policy-makers. The book provides a new approach for achieving socially sustainable urban design in contemporary Chinese cities and towns. However, the book could have been improved if the authors had included clear definitions of the traditional urban identity of Chinese cities, and shown more precisely what they are and how they should be identified. Clearly, the design guidelines would help to regulate and ensure certain qualities of place-making, but there is a danger they could also limit the creativity of urban design. A discussion about achieving this balance and controlling innovation with respect to tradition was wanting. Furthermore, in relation to audience, those who are not already familiar with the Chinese built environment may encounter difficulty in imagining the authors' discussion of spatial arrangements. If a second edition is printed, more diagrams, images and maps to support the authors' descriptions and discussions in the book would be very much appreciated.

This book's ultimate aim is to introduce a humanistic approach that 'acknowledges the close link between human functioning and the form and locations where it takes place' (p.199). This approach is a powerful tool for facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the local design context and for enabling urban policymakers and designers to generate new forms that are

relevant to this context. The authors have certainly achieved their aim, and the book should prove to be essential reading for Chinese urban design scholars.

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