

China's chichi suburbs American-style sprawl all the rage in Beijing

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Drive 20 miles out of the center of town and there is a series of cookie-cutter tract homes. Some are painted in pastels and are Italianate or Spanish in design, while others are more Georgian Revival. Manicured lawns and clubhouses dot the landscape. There is the occasional golf course. Neighborhoods are gated and carry names like Le Leman Lake, Capital Paradise, Yosemite and River Garden. Sound familiar?

This is Beijing, the ancient capital of China where "the center of town" is the storied Forbidden City, the walled complex that was the seat of China's emperors for centuries.

During the past several years, numerous gated subdivisions have sprung up outside mainland China's two largest cities, Beijing and Shanghai; and the trend is spreading to other cities, such as Tianjin and Shenzhen.

What is most remarkable is that most of them, visually and architecturally, look as if they belong in San Jose or Orange County. They are directly modeled on the tract homes that have defined American suburban growth in the past 30 years.

Most of them carry few, if any, Asian influences in their design, layout and ornamentation. The first ones were built to house mostly expatriates, such as diplomats or those heading the local offices of multinational companies.

"In order to provide living facilities for foreigners (that match) the foreign standard, they copycat the Western style and Western standard," says Billie Chau, head of the Beijing office of FPD Savills, a British company that manages some of these compounds. "That's why they look and feel so Western."

Now, though, many more have just been built and more are in store, as an increasing number of local Chinese with money try to get out of the crowded and dirty milieu of the contemporary Chinese city. Many are also buying them for investment purposes.

"As China's economy continues its breakneck upward trajectory, with high economic growth and suburbanization occurring in major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, the wealthy inhabitants and white-collar workers of such cities are showing a preference for the purchase of villas or houses located on

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the suburban fringes of these cities," says Andrew Ness, Asia executive director for research for CB Richard Ellis. The global real estate company is now doing a lot of business in the selling and renting of these properties.

"Additionally, since the level of car ownership in major cities is increasing, these new suburbanites are showing a preference to commute in their own vehicles," Ness says.

China seems to have caught onto sprawl, and with it are the foreseeable problems we in the United States experience: more traffic, more pollution, environmental threats to rural areas, and social exclusion, alienation and division.

Yet, what is perhaps most distinctive about these developments is not the sprawl itself, but the way it looks.

Vancouver Forest, for example, is a new subdivision of homes that mimics a typical neighborhood in British Columbia. It was built by Canadian architects, using Canadian materials to create a mini Canada.

"Vancouver Forest a Showcase of Canadian Expertise in China," a banner headline from a recent Canadian Embassy newsletter proudly boasts.

Wish to live in Australia? Beijing residents can buy a home at Sydney Coast, a subdivision that offers its residents a "seven-day Australian-style villa life."

"Designed by Australian experts, the project presents a kind of simple and fresh lifestyle," says a brochure for the new development. "Taking a walk along the streets in Sydney Coast, you will get a true sense of Australia."

Sydney Coast is being developed by Beijing Capital Land, a venture partly owned by the municipality of Beijing. The company is also developing Upper East Side, a large series of apartment buildings in northeastern Beijing.

For those who would prefer to live in California, Beijingers have been able to set up shop in the Yosemite subdivision.

Now there is the additional option of moving to Napa Valley, a new development under construction about 30 miles outside Beijing. Napa Valley attempts to capture a Californian Mediterranean lifestyle of laid-back, al fresco leisure.

"Rustic stone is widely used, with rich stucco colors, along with wood shutters and wrought-iron accents, to create an intimate scale and village-like feel," according to Napa Valley's architects and planners, who are based in Palm Springs and Newport Beach (Orange County).

For those craving to recreate life in 17th century France, there is Chateau Regalia, located on Beijing's northern outskirts. Here, potential buyers can choose from several different models of homes: the Duke I, the Duke II, the Marquis, the Earl and the Viscount. In both form and decoration, Chateau Regalia's homes are an eccentric amalgam of French Baroque and neoclassical architecture.

The craze has also caught on in Shanghai, where there are many more tract homes built in foreign styles. Local officials recently announced plans to build a cluster of satellite towns built in different national styles outside Shanghai.

There will be a French town, an Italian town, an English town and so on. Each will have its own commercial center.

These places are the direct result of China's relentless economic development and its newfound discovery of the temptations of the free market.

After decades of insularity -- a period whose residential architecture consisted mostly of drab, Stalinist apartment blocks -- China's nouveaux riches are giddy with excitement and eager to recreate the lifestyles of developed countries they have long gazed at from a distance.

Among the wealthiest subset of China's new professional classes, owning a detached home has become an important issue of class and status. Because most Chinese cities are condensed and full of apartments or courtyard buildings, the only option for them is to build new homes on the city's suburban edges.

"While in China's ever more capitalistic society, social norms are evolving at different tangents and in various fashions," Ness says, "an expensive residence is considered as a major symbol of status across the board."

That desire for status often goes hand in hand with a deep lack of confidence among the country's new wealthy in Chinese culture and tradition.

Now that they have the means, Chinese elites are eschewing the long tradition of Chinese elegance and craftsmanship, opting instead for a pared-down version of a Western dream world.

These developments are an uncanny representation of China's current psychosis -- focused on catching up on materialist fantasies after decades of lost time.

The first time I stepped into Chinese suburbia, I felt I had landed in another world, a place more Floridian than Chinese.

As more scholarship and research has revealed the side effects of the tract-home lifestyle, many Americans have begun to question the wisdom of suburban sprawl.

Despite these discoveries, American mistakes are being repeated in China. These neighborhoods lack a connection to place. They look off and awkward as they rise from the Chinese landscape.

Many argue that sprawl in China is unavoidable; that it is the obvious by-product of economic success. Why the need for these spread-out communities is so inevitable remains unclear, but if we accept it is, why does the new Chinese suburbia have to be a foreign fantasyland? Why must it lack Chinese characteristics?

It might be quaint to ask, but what is wrong with just a simple Chinese street?

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