

THE ART OF KEYS

The key quality of a warehouse, from the architectural point of view, is that it is cheap to build. Form indiscriminately follows function; function rarely demands much; and the resulting warehouse will typically present rock bottom costs per square meter of built floorspace. So from the developer's point of view, if you can throw up a few warehouses, essentially for next to nothing, then move in – instead of warehouse goods – a bunch of artists, and watch to see if land values soar, you have the kind of low-investment/high-return project that is real estate alchemy. China's urban explosion has been fueled in no small way by speculation, and recognizing these parameters, urban development in China has found a new asset class in the idea of a manufactured artist village. Indeed considering the commercial potential of the creative cluster, the fact that for-profit planned creative communities are now being pursued in Beijing is perhaps less surprising than that they were for so long left to the whimsical notion of organic formation.

It is a chance felicity that artists, with mostly low rental incomes, like warehouses, which offer low construction costs. The light and the space to work on large pieces are both practically favorable. In addition, there is a curious ironic urban nostalgia for ex-industrial spaces (epitomized by London's Tate Modern, the world's most visited art gallery, which is housed in a former power station). Happily for the developer, this sentiment seems to carry through into industrial-style spaces, even when built explicitly for conversion into artist's studios. It is almost pedantic to worry about the "inauthenticity" of the "created" creative community when the creatives themselves experience remarkably few problems. However, the elusive part of any creative cluster development project is inevitably attracting the art community, or an art community, to settle there. A notable strategy for dealing with this is to bring the art community into the development process itself. The key becomes the collaboration of the prominent Chinese artist.

Leading figures of the Chinese art world are regularly involved in real estate projects, offering consultancy, partnership, and in some cases even leading new developments. This is a polyvalence which often seems surprising to Westerners, more used to the idea of the creative artist at odds with capitalism and the company. Yet in China the artist-realtor-entrepreneur seems more congruent. Modern, urbane, affluent, internationalized, the successful artist is in fact a surprisingly suitable role model for the new China, even ranking in the top ten preferred professions selected by parents for their children in a recent survey of Chinese middle class families.

Western jitters over the ready engagement of the Chinese artist with the commercial sector no doubt derive from the Western environment, in which art forms are heavily institutionalized, and firmly reliant on state funding. Ironically, this model of the artist as a master of funding application forms, and a government-objective box-ticker, is far further removed from the original concept of the artist than the Chinese one. Historically artists has been almost pure entrepreneurs, trusting their own skill and innovation to sell concept products to fickle and competitive markets. Without subsidy, artists have traditionally incorporated related commercial activity into their operations, with creative production being carried out in tandem with business projects. Notably, one of the most successful real estate investors in commercial property in Renaissance South London, William Shakespeare, was also a playwright.

It would be a mistake to regard the prominence of real estate speculation in the rise of China's creative clusters as anything formally new. Rather, it is an expedient binding together of artists' creative energy and self-reliance, and the financial pressures and opportunities presented by China's booming new urban environments. What is more striking about these clusters however, and ultimately more problematic, is how globalized they are. While the urban planning of physical creative districts or enclaves within the city is charmingly parochial in terms of the living communities they imagine, the trading community is unequivocally international. The last decade of super-heated sales of Chinese art, overwhelmingly to foreign dealers and collectors, has dominated China's internal market. The primary aim to sell to foreign buyers has informed the spatial design of creative communities, which invariably aspire to congeniality to Western visitors, and attractiveness to Western direct investment. In fact if the artist-developer is able to start selling his warehouses or warehouse lots to Italian galleries or shoe stores, the alchemy has manifestly worked. At the same time, Western focus has informed creative production, bending the Chinese artworks themselves toward the tastes of prospective buyers, who in an oddly tail-eating fashion increasingly seek to buy back their own Western fantasies of Chineseness off the tip of a Chinese brush. And as the foreign sales represent the ideal, their aesthetic permeates the ambitious domestic market.

The power the creative communities thus have to refashion China's image both overseas and at home has brought them to the attention of central government, who are starting to talk about harnessing creative output for enhancing national strength. Simultaneously the effect of the creative community on land values draws the eyes of local officials, who have a continuous proprietorial interest in property sales and the factors influencing them, especially where foreign money is involved. The implications of this for the creative community itself – and its developers – is that as soon

as an area becomes hot, it becomes potentially too hot. Political pressures brought on by the government's twin aims to control ideologically and cash in financially threaten to co-opt the space entirely, and in so doing potentially crush the unique entrepreneurial drive to which the art district owes its existence. Beijing's 798 provides an early paradigm: the disused warehouses of the 1990s became the flourishing international art district of the 21st century – only land values brought in chains and hotels, and cultural values brought in scrutiny and guidance. The early figureheads of 798 have left, and the Chaoyang government now oversees site management through its business partner the Seven Stars Group. Subsequent and more explicitly planned art villages are in turn catching official interest. In the new Chinese city, it is the Chinese artist-entrepreneur who is able to unlock the potential for physical instantiations of creative clusters; ultimately though, it is the Party that turns the key.