

PROF. Oakes  
COURSE & # (e.g. Hist. 1243) Geog 3822  
SEMESTER Fall 2004  
AUTHOR Watts, Jonathan  
TITLE Shanghai surprise... a new town in ye olde English style

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## Shanghai surprise ... a new town in ye olde English style

The Guardian

2004-06-02

Jonathan Watts

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/china/story/0,7369,1229455,00.html>

In a small corner of the giant construction site that is China, something rather quaint is happening: modern skyscrapers are giving way to Georgian terraces, concrete squares are being discarded in favour of English village greens, and instead of the usual eight-lane superhighways there are winding cobbled lanes.

That, at least, is the ambitiously low-rise plan for a giant new satellite-city near Shanghai that aims to recreate the most picturesque elements of a British town to lure homebuyers from China's newly affluent middle class.

Squeezing 500 years of British architectural development into a five-year construction project, Thames Town will have half-timbered Tudor-style buildings at its centre, a waterfront of Victorian red-brick warehouses, and an outlying area of gabled 20th century buildings bordered by hedges, verdant lawns and leafy roads.

With a fake turreted castle and at least one windmill, there is a danger that the site in Songjiang could turn into a British Disneyland that might serve as a monument to the excesses of Shanghai's overheated property market. But the architects say they are designing a working community.

When it is completed next year, residents will be able to have a fashionable white wedding under the spire of a new Catholic church modelled on one in Clifton, Bristol.

Drinkers will be able to drop into pubs inspired by Birmingham, and shoppers will be able to browse in a covered market with distinct echoes of Covent Garden. As well as football pitches and at least one garden maze, the project aims to create one of the greenest residential areas in the country, with streets lined by London plane trees and yew and hawthorn hedges.

It is part of a scheme by the Shanghai municipal government to rehouse 500,000 people in nine new satellite towns, each with a separate theme.

At Anting, for instance, seven German architectural firms are creating an "auto-town" complete with an Formula 1 track and a BMW plant. Pujiang will have an Italian flavour; Fencheng will duplicate the Ramblas shopping arcade in Barcelona.

None, however, is on as grand a scale as Songjiang. In the coming two years, nine universities, encompassing 100,000 students and staff, are to be relocated to this site, about 20 miles outside China's commercial capital. Construction has begun on a train link that will cut the journey into town to 15 minutes. Work is also under way on a giant terminal building that will house what is claimed to be the biggest shopping mall in China, with a floor space of 280,000 square metres.

Hi-tech firms, including Hitachi and the Taiwanese computer-chip maker Taijidian, are investing in new factories. Most will be in the modern Chinese style.

But Thames Town will offer a different home to its 8,000 residents, most of whom are expected to be university professors and factory managers.

The 3bn yuan (£200m) project centres on a medieval town square and radiates out through Tudor, Victorian and Georgian styles of architecture. Bringing it up to date is a multi-storey car park.

Paul Rice, principal architect of the Atkins consultancy, said: "We are aware of the Disneyland implications. This could become a joke if built in the wrong way. But this is a working community. Compared with other Chinese towns, it will be a pleasant place to live."

The need to compromise between British designs and Chinese living styles is already apparent at the site, which is laid out in a grid pattern. The few completed villas feature large windows on a decidedly Chinese scale.

"People in Shanghai are looking for something different," said Liu Wei, of the municipal management company. "Our target is young, wealthy consumers who can adapt easily to a new lifestyle."

Whether they can adapt to the 6m yuan (£400,000) price tag for a large three-bedroom villa is another question. With property prices in Shanghai having doubled in the past two years, the market is widely seen as a bubble set to burst.