

High-rise urban density in Macau

Dennis Zuev

China is the epicentre of tall-building construction globally. Its ambition in creating vertical urban iconography is spreading from the rich first-tier cities, such as Shanghai and Beijing to the interior, though this is not a new process. The skyscraper has been present in the Shanghai skyline since the end of the 1920s, representing the cosmopolitan spirit of the city, and later its financial power.

More recently, verticality has become the staple feature of Chinese urban modernity and a symbol of the nation's rapid growth and future aspirations. *If there are no high-rise buildings for me it is a backward country*, as one of the Chinese engineers mentioned in a casual train conversation back in 2008. The 'economy of appearances' (Tsing, 2000) is not limited to trade and commerce, but also reflects a shift in living arrangements and urban architecture. Buildings become the part of the urban performance and articulate the local habitat. Along with an increase in gleaming iconic megastructures, Chinese cities are packed full of ultra-high condominiums – reflecting the ongoing urban sprawl and another signifier of China's modernity and prosperity.

In some cities in China, space is scarce and exorbitant prices for real estate dictate that life is lived increasingly higher and higher off the ground. Macau is the city with the highest population density on the planet, where two-thirds of the actual territory have been reclaimed from the sea. The cluster of high-rise residential buildings depicted on the photograph is representative of the high-rise urban density in Macau and the nearby Hong Kong, the city with the world's most expensive **property** market in the world in 2020.

As one of the residents in Macau said, *we could literally shake hands with our neighbours in a building next to ours*. Concrete voids in between the buildings create wells where sun rarely enters. At the same time, subtropical climate is conducive to sporadic growth of trees and bushes on the buildings. Rooftop terraces are often accessible and are used by residents penned in small apartments high above the ground and with the view of other high-rises.

Looking at the cover image, we are presented with the reality of extreme urban density and vertical living. To the left of the frame, in the middle ground we can see a singular human figure. On the rooftop of a grey residential block, the individual represents the discrepancy of scale and is evidence to the value of rooftops as access points to the sky and the air, space potentially liberating from otherwise oppressive spectacle of urban gloom.

Rooftops are a leisure space; where one can sip their coffee or smoke their cigarette. For some urban residents in Macau, they can look across the border to the green hills of the city of Zhuhai, a city with much more space increasingly used to accommodate the residents of Macau unwilling to cope with the lack of living space. The hills of Zhuhai can also be seen through the narrow crack in-between the buildings.

While the high-rises may look monstrous to the outsiders, often the higher the flat the more expensive and more palatial it is with apartments spanning two or three floors in as in a

premium development on Coloane, southern part of Macau overlooking the Pearl River Delta. A small balcony is a luxury for most of the residents that has to be paid for extra. The scarcity of living space means that the residents add metal cage extensions to their windows where they can hang their clothes or flower pots, some of these extensions look alienating to an outsider but are nothing more than an extra claim for space in the air.

Photo – Dennis Zuev –Macau residential blocks 2020 ©