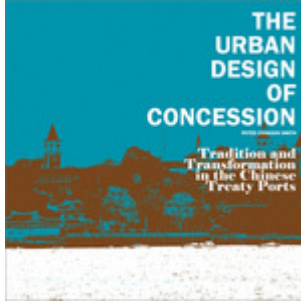


## The Urban Design of Concession: Tradition and Transformation in the Chinese Treaty Ports

by Peter Cookson Smith



(2011-05-18) -- A picture really is worth a thousand words.

Whatever other abilities and accomplishments Peter Cookson Smith may have, his sketches of buildings and modern street scenes are marvelous and quite extraordinary, far more illustrative and expressive than photographs of the same scenes are likely to have been -- and *The Urban Design of Concession: Tradition and Transformation in the Chinese Treaty Ports* is full of them. The amount of work this must have entailed is mind-boggling.

This volume is worth acquiring for this reason alone, especially since the text is something of a specialist read: it is what the title says -- a discussion, largely academic in tone (lots of *op. cit.*'s), of the integration of western-style buildings into Chinese cities. Smith writes from authority and experience, being an architect and planner himself.

The book is divided roughly into two halves: the first being a selective history of China, selective in the sense that it focuses on development Smith considers relevant to the development of the foreign concessions, and the second consisting of accessible city-by-city urban histories. These are filled with fascinating tidbits of information: an Italian concession (in Tianjin of all places) with a Winged Victory atop a column in a Pza. Regina Elena is really no more fundamentally incongruous than a Victoria Park, but it isn't something I would have expected.

*The Urban Design of Concession* is largely descriptive: Smith does not seem to be making a point or expounding an overarching thesis -- at least not directly: it is difficult to read the book, and look at the illustrations, without concluding that China has on the whole done, and is doing, a better and more enlightened job at conserving and redeploying its architectural heritage than Smith's own Hong Kong has.

This otherwise admirable volume has a couple of drawbacks. The textually-dense first half of the book suffers from being visually dense as well: relatively small sans-serif fonts, no matter how stylish, do not make for easy reading of lengthy footnoted paragraphs. And there are a small number of "ahem" moments, e.g. "The prominent building ... built under Soviet occupation in 1900..." and "the Mongol invasion ... extended the influence of China to other cities under Mongol control, as far as Constantinople, Moscow and Cairo." A certain number of inconsequential lapses are perhaps inevitable -- and these do not affect any of the points being made -- but they are distracting.

Smith's publisher, MCCM Creations, is known for its stylish publications; *The Urban Design of Concession: Tradition and Transformation in the Chinese Treaty Ports* is a worthy addition to their list.

—reviewed by Peter Gordon

© 2011 Asian Review of Books, all rights reserved.