



Viewpoint

Critical research on eco-cities? A walk through the Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-City, China

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Abstract

This article uses the narrative tool of a walk through Tianjin Eco-City, China, as an entry point in raising and discussing key questions in contemporary eco-city research. Eco-city projects are becoming increasingly prevalent in policy and political-economic discourses in a variety of locations as new urban spaces where blueprints for low carbon economies can be trialled. In light of this, the article highlights the key necessity of, firstly, considering scale when analyzing eco-city ‘futures’. Secondly, the article argues for the need to interrogate eco-cities’ definitions, as well as evaluation, performance and monitoring frameworks, as this will aid in critical analyses of the marketing, presentation and actually built urban environments in eco-city projects. Thirdly, the question of internal social resilience and the emergence of communities within newly-built eco-cities needs to be assessed: this is of crucial importance in light of the exclusive, gated nature of several flagship eco-city projects under construction at the time of writing. Lastly, the article argues that research on eco-city projects needs to consider not only the high-tech, new urban environments materialized as eco-cities, but also the production and reproduction of large, often transient populations of low-paid workers who build eco-cities and who form what the article calls the ‘new urban poor’, forming ‘workers’ cities’ on the edges of flagship ‘sustainable’ urban projects worldwide.

Section snippets

Introduction: eco-city as entrepreneurial experimental city

My journey into Tianjin Eco-City begins from central Tianjin on a wintry day when temperatures are so low, I do not want to leave the vehicle we’re travelling in. Downtown Tianjin is bustling as ever, but the winter feel is heightened by the white clouds of smog and haze, which reduce visibility to less than a mile this morning. The sun

is a pallid puddle hidden somewhere above, and shimmers in unnatural orange-brown colours on this morning. In this context, I wonder about the construction of a ...

Scale

Coming from the UK, I am as always unprepared for the impact I feel when stepping into a newly-minted eco-city. I'm used to my local 'transition town', Totnes, with its 'alternative' businesses and green focus and, with a population of around 23,000, a distinctly small-town feel. However, when we arrive in Tianjin Eco-City I am taken back to my high school days, when I indulged in large-scale (and mostly ill-fated) terraforming and urban planning projects using the SimCity game platform....

Definition

Walking around the empty eco-city, I am struck first and foremost by how different, indeed how 'normal', the city looks compared to the images I had constructed in my mind about what an eco-city should look like. In my mind's eye, no doubt influenced in part by marketing videos and brochures I had perused, the eco-city was meant to look clean, airy and technologically advanced. I had expected to see serried ranks of wind turbines turning in the onshore breeze, solar panels glinting on the...

Internal social resilience

Above all, after a few hours the feeling that sticks with me is of walking through an eerie post-apocalyptic landscape. I walk block after block of new buildings and construction sites, surprised when I hear the clanging of workers or see a spark from a welder on a high floor in the distance. Seeing, and being seen by people in this vast urban vastness is, unnervingly, a very animal encounter: I spot policemen and construction workers half a mile or more away in the residential areas or...

The urban poor

Having lunch in an empty city is a real challenge. We head to the only place which shows signs of life in this eco-city: the workers' city. Here, blue-roofed pre-fabricated housing units house the mass of migrant workers whose labour is being used to raise this city from the saltmarsh into the sky. The workers' city is well-ordered and set out over a large space, a far cry from the way in which workers' housing often appears. Basketball courts provide some recreation options for the workers,...

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