

# CEBRI

BRAZILIAN CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

## ASIA PROGRAM

XXV CHINA ANALYSIS GROUP MEETING

REPORT XXV, YEAR IV

JULY 15, 2021

Online discussion panel via Zoom

# THE POST-COVID CITY: THE ONGOING SPATIAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL RECONFIGURATION IN CHINA AND THE WORLD



BRAZILIAN CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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The Brazilian Center for International Relations (CEBRI) is an independent think tank that contributes to establishing an international agenda for Brazil. For the last twenty three years, the institution has engaged in promoting pluralistic and proposal-oriented debates on the international landscape and Brazilian foreign policy.

CEBRI prioritizes themes with the greatest potential to leverage the international insertion of Brazil into the global economy, proposing pragmatic solutions for the formulation of public policies. CEBRI's work was recognized by the University of Pennsylvania's top global think tank ranking, which considered the institution the 2<sup>nd</sup> best think tank in South and Central America in 2020.

The Asia Program is one of the twelve regional and thematic programs currently operating at CEBRI. The Program is coordinated by CEBRI's Trustee Anna Jaguaribe, CEBRI's International Advisory Board member Ambassador Marcos Caramuru, and by the Senior Fellow Phillip Yang. External experts can be invited to participate in ad hoc activities, projects, and seminars, according to the Program's agenda.

# ASIA PROGRAM

The Program promotes a systematic monitoring of matters relevant to international relations and Brazilian development, particularly those related to China. Special attention has been given to monitoring the ongoing economic reforms and political transformations in China, considering their global effects and impacts in Latin America and Brazil. This continuous examination allows CEBRI to provide information and analysis to its members, partners and to the Brazilian government, contributing to the construction of Brazil's strategic position towards China, as well as helping increase knowledge about China within Brazilian society.

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**Anna Jaguaribe**

Trustee at the Brazilian Center for International Relations (CEBRI), Director of the Institute for Brazil-China Studies (IBRACH), Sociologist with a PhD from the New York University and post-graduated at the École Pratique des Hautes Études. She lived and researched in China from 1998 to 2003. She worked at the United Nations in New York, was a consultant at UNCTAD in Geneva, and a Professor at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ).



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## SENIOR FELLOW

**Philip Yang**

Philip Yang is the founder of Urbem, an institution dedicated to the structuring of urban projects. He holds a Master's degree in Public Administration from Harvard Kennedy School. He was a diplomat in Brazil's foreign service between 1992 and 2002, having served in Geneva, Beijing, and Washington. He is/was a board member in the following institutions: MIT Corporation Visiting Committee of the Department of Urban Planning (2012-2016); Arq.Futuro, one of the main spaces for debate on architecture and urbanism in Brazil; the Symphonic Orchestra of the State of São Paulo (OSESP); the City Council of São Paulo Municipality (2013-2016); the Rio de Janeiro City Council (2013-2016); and the Harvard University Brazil Office Advisory Group.



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# THE POST-COVID CITY: THE ONGOING SPATIAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL RECONFIGURATION IN CHINA AND THE WORLD

**Report by:** Kamila Aben Athar

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# Introduction

Philip Yang, Senior Fellow at CEBRI

Epidemics and cities are consequences of the same phenomena: human agglomerations. Modern urbanism not only defines cities as a human agglomeration but also argues that the ideal city is the so-called “compact city” - the one in which the territory includes spaces for housing, work, leisure, retail and services, all next to each other, easily accessible on foot, by bicycle or public transportation.

In the context of the pandemic, there is a lingering question yet to be solved: does the ideal of a “compact city” remain valid? To what extent is an agglomeration - constructive and populational - considered to be desirable and acceptable after the trauma of a world-scale contagious disease?

For decades, environmentalists, sociologists, economists, and urbanists have been trying their best to convince everyone that, for cities, the denser the better. Today, as an effect of the pandemic, new habits and technologies seem to be contributing to give momentum to urban sprawl.

How are the biggest cities in China and around the world going through this new scenario? Will the rise of the home office alter the relation between home and workplace? Will the new technologies that make autonomous vehicles, shared automobiles, and remote work a reality irremediably contribute to urban sprawl?

We know that the high-capacity transportation networks around the world are heavily dependent on government subsidies and tariffs that are paid by their users. With the decreasing demand over the last few years, how will these networks be able to survive?

Even before the pandemic, many cities around the world were going through a free fall in street retail activities. The Covid-19 outbreak increased e-commerce flows, further deepening the neighborhood, local stores crisis.

If demand for offices and stores continues to decrease, will this new trend determine a new urban form? Will the decreasing pressure on commercial properties finally improve the price accessibility of residential properties? In Brazil, the incidence of COVID19 is strongly correlated with poverty. How does the pandemic impact the informal city and

labor, which dominate the urban landscape of the Global South? Will we be able to reduce the informal (and precarious) city that dominates the urban landscape of the Global South?

In the end, will this new urban form be more friendly and safe, or will it be more hostile? Will it be more efficient environmentally? Or more carbon intensive? Combining new technologies, habits, and ideas, do we have a chance of contributing to the construction of an urban space that is safer, fairer, and less segregated from a socio-spatial perspective?

During the XXV China Analysis Group Meeting, these and other topics were addressed.

# Guiding Questions

To help us analyze these complex and dynamic issues, at its 25<sup>th</sup> Meeting, the China Analysis Group proposes three themes and questions to our speakers and audience:

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**1.** To what extent is an agglomeration considered desirable and acceptable after a world-scale contagious disease as Covid-19? Does the idea of a “compact city” remain valid in the Chinese biggest cities? Is the trend towards urban sprawling strong in China?

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**2.** How do the new technologies impact the way cities are organized? How technology such as artificial intelligence and sensible devices are now shaping our urban spaces? Will the rise of the modality of home office work alter the relation between home and workplace, as well as between social networks?

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**3.** Will the new urban form be more efficient environmentally or more carbon-intensive? Will the new technologies that make autonomous vehicles, shared automobiles, and remote work a reality irremediably contribute to urban sprawl? Combining new technologies, habits, and ideas, do we have a chance of contributing to the construction of an urban space that is safer, fairer, and less segregated from a socio-spatial perspective, including in the Global South?

# XXV Meeting Report

1. To what extent is an agglomeration considered desirable and acceptable after a world-scale contagious disease as Covid-19? Does the idea of a “compact city” remain valid in the Chinese biggest cities? Is the trend towards urban sprawling strong in China?

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**F**or the past 40 years, China has had a considerable urban sprawl. Although its urban development was originally based on isolated gated communities, the country recently completed the construction of a new industrial park, a project conceived before the Covid-19 pandemic to make Shanghai a more livable place. According to the participants of the event, the goal of creating buildings planned in small blocks, with 40x40m, surrounded by covered walkways and pedestrian streets was to allow people to enjoy life while working. These social, cultural, and commercial amenities are important for the urban dwellers and their lifestyle. Thus, participants argued that there are two possibilities for the future of Chinese cities. One is to continue to embrace dense urbanity; the other is to reconsider urban sprawl.

In the face of the pandemics, countries witnessed the challenges of locking down big cities. To some degree, urban sprawl has consequences on public health since people are less likely to engage in physical activities, such as walking and cycling, and more prone to obesity and health issues. Sprawl also means destroying the fertile landscape and earth's surface that could have been used productively for agriculture. For instance, participants mentioned that these new urban projects could result in more self-sufficiency, mixed-used amenities, facilitating access to commerce, and some other social facilities. With the complementarity of the internet and the physical city, building a more residential and mixed-used block could bring some advantage as a way to fight against pandemics, secluding small instead of bigger areas for sanitary prospers.

Participants highlighted that the decentralization of cities and the international cooperation among them would be an important solution. The national state is a relatively recent construct, and although it fulfills an important function in the world, society is more often going back to its primary unit of human organization, which is

cities. However, several global topics need to be dealt with by national governments. Thus, authorities must find the equilibrium for the tensions between globalization and the so-called localization. This need for having both higher governance at the global level and lower governance at the local level results in a more devolution at the city level. For that matter, participants stressed that to consider only former best practices, countries are locking the future into the past. What governments need is to find a new way to think about innovation in the cities.

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*Participants stressed that to consider only former best practices, countries are locking the future into the past. What governments need is to find a new way to think about innovation in the cities. ”*

## 2. How do the new technologies impact the way cities are organized? How technology such as artificial intelligence and sensible devices are now shaping our urban spaces? Will the rise of the modality of home office work alter the relation between home and workplace, as well as between social networks?

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Participants stressed the importance of developing a good match between the natural and the artificial worlds. Initially, the principles of urban planning suggested the subdivision of cities in a rigid way, such as the case of Brasilia. However, having a city where every district has a single function and is very well separated from the others creates multiple neighborhoods that are used only for part of the day. Therefore, since the 1960s, the theory of mixed-use developments, combining different functions has become stronger. Today, thanks to digital, countries can use spaces differently, with multiple functions. Participants highlighted that digital allows society to bring artificial intelligence and big data into buildings and the built environment in a way that architecture can behave like a living organism. Through Wi-Fi data, architects are finally able to measure occupancy and better understand the ongoing changes.

According to participants, the Covid-19 lockdown turned out to be the most ambitious experiment to predict and measure the positive impact of physical space on human activity. For example, by monitoring and analyzing email exchanges across campus before and after the pandemics, MIT came to the conclusion that the networks of communicating people from different groups – the so-called “weak ties” – are disappearing. Before the current health crisis, the MIT campus had around 250 weak ties on the network being generated every day. After lockdown, that number went down 80% percent, summing around 50 new ties per day. These weak ties are important because they represent people who are part of a different cluster and potentially bring creativity and productivity to the network, becoming bridges to other communities.

Therefore, even with work becoming more digital over the years, participants affirmed that there are three pertinent reasons to go to offices. First, to put the team’s creativity together. There is a clear need to go back to offices because that is where the richness of social interaction and weak ties are generated. Second, its localization can help define workers’ lifestyles. The way people work together still can change, but face-to-face meetings and brainstorming together are also part of the work experience. Third, not going back to offices could cause deep economic and social impacts on the city. Entire

neighborhoods that were very active before the pandemic might end up in trouble, with the closure of several businesses. Participants argued that rethinking the office could represent transforming it into a place for more interaction, creating weak ties that are not possible by just working remotely. Office life can become a different type of arrangement, based on team building and socializing in communal interaction. For this purpose, architecture and design must find ways to use less space and rethink the interaction so that with just a few days in the office, workers can generate the same number of work and weak ties to sustain their functions and social networks.

Lastly, participants pinpointed three relevant issues about data privacy. First, there is no artificial intelligence without data, and this is vital to move to more intelligent systems. Second, the ownership of data is a crucial dimension of democracy and how it is managed and controlled is crucial. Third, facial recognition and the use of visual information in cities stresses the need for more transparency and more citizen engagement. Thus, participants argued that there is a need for more forums where people can better understand what is happening, as well as make technology more transparent.

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*Participants argued that there is a need for more forums where people can better understand what is happening, as well as make technology more transparent. ”*

### 3. Will the new urban form be more efficient environmentally or more carbon-intensive? Will the new technologies that make autonomous vehicles, shared automobiles, and remote work a reality irremediably contribute to urban sprawl? Combining new technologies, habits, and ideas, do we have a chance of contributing to the construction of an urban space that is safer, fairer, and less segregated from a socio-spatial perspective, including in the Global South?

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**A**ccording to participants, carbon neutrality is a challenge that must be taken seriously. Most large cities across the planet, including all countries in the C-40 league – the group of the biggest cities on the planet – want to reach net-zero emissions by 2050. For that purpose, participants stressed that there is not just a single formula; rather, multiple possibilities must be pulled together. The answer that might work in one city is certainly not the answer to another cities' problems. Also, participants affirmed that there is no technological silver bullet. Instead, from an implementation point of view, policy could be considered as an important solution because official incentives demonstrate that the government has a vision to implement strategic policies to change the lifestyle, encouraging people to live with a smaller carbon footprint. An example would be carbon pricing. Governments all over the world are thriving economically by having taxation on gas, cars, combustion, engine, and others. To avoid the loss of revenues, implementing taxation on different areas, such as in miles traveled, could counter some of the sprawl.

The roads in Beijing and other major Chinese cities are wide and do not ease transportation, often having too many cars parked. Participants mentioned that these valuable urban spaces should be liberated from cars, narrowed down their width, and then use the new available spots for more commerce, housing, sports facilities, and grounds. As far as autonomous cars, participants argued that they will generate more traffic and a solution would be to develop them as a form of public transportation, connecting them with bicycles and other forms of individual transportation devices. Furthermore, participants pinpointed two competing forces about autonomous cars. One force is towards sprawl, where people can tolerate a longer commute in a self-driving car. The other is the possibility of better sharing. Currently, a car is used 5% of the time on average and 95% is parked somewhere. Thus, having a self-driving car would result in a higher shareability that could be proportional to density.

New technologies can be used not only for efficiency but also to help the quality of urban life, re-imagining how it can be reorganized. Participants highlighted that inequality is present in China; however, in its major cities, the gap between the poor and the rich is not as visible. Chinese cities are still relatively dense, and most people can have access to public transportation, shops, and hospitals. Because of the spatial structure of the city, inequality does not play a big part in this crisis. However, home office and delivery can augment urban segregation. Integration in the city starts in places where people from different socio-economic backgrounds can come together, such as parks and schools. Thus, this new concept of a city based on the idea of staying in the neighborhood and at home generates concerns and is a challenge for planners and policymakers.

Participants evaluated that China's experience is paradoxical. On one hand, the country has a huge poverty alleviation program, which is the most successful ever seen in history. On the other hand, China faces a deepening inequality. Participants affirmed that a solution would be opening up gated communities to promote greater social equality and share all the resources. A challenge for that would be people's resistance in opening these communities, with market forces willing to answer to their imaginary needs. Hence, participants stressed that the Chinese Communist Party must take action to overcome this crisis, helping shape cities in a way that people are more integrated and not segregated.



*From an implementation point of view, policy could be considered as an important solution because official incentives demonstrate that the government has a vision to implement strategic policies to change the lifestyle, encouraging people to live with a smaller carbon footprint. ”*

# Participants



## Carlo Ratti

An architect and engineer by training, Professor Carlo Ratti teaches at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where he directs the Senseable City Lab, and is a founding partner of the international design and innovation office Carlo Ratti Associati. He graduated from the Politecnico di Torino and the École Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées in Paris, and later earned his MPhil and PhD at the University of Cambridge, UK.

A leading voice in the debate on new technologies' impact on urban life and design, Carlo has co-authored over 500 publications, including "*The City of Tomorrow*" (Yale University Press, with Matthew Claudel), and holds several technical patents. His work has been exhibited worldwide at venues such as the Venice Biennale, the Design Museum Barcelona, the Science Museum in London, MAXXI in Rome, and MoMA in New York City. Carlo has been featured in Esquire Magazine's 'Best & Brightest' list and in Thames & Hudson's selection of '60 innovators' shaping our creative future. Blueprint Magazine included him as one of the '25 People Who Will Change the World of Design', Forbes listed him as one of the 'Names You Need To Know' and Fast Company named him as one of the '50 Most Influential Designers in America'. He was also featured in Wired Magazine's 'Smart List: 50 people who will change the world'. Three of his projects - the Digital Water Pavilion, the Copenhagen Wheel and Scribit - have been included by TIME Magazine in the list of the 'Best Inventions of the Year'. Carlo has been a presenter at TED (in 2011 and 2015), program director at the Strelka Institute for Media, Architecture and Design in Moscow, curator of the BMW Guggenheim Pavilion in Berlin, and was named Inaugural Innovator in Residence by the Queensland Government.



## Yung Ho Chang

FAIA Founding Partner, Principal Architect of Atelier Feichang Jianzhu (FCJZ) and Professor of the Practice, MIT. Chang was educated both in China and in the US. Since 1992, he has been practicing in China and established Atelier Feichang Jianzhu (FCJZ) with Lijia Lu in 1993. He has won a number of prizes, such as the 2000 UNESCO Prize for the Promotion of the Arts, and the Academy Award in Architecture from American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2006. Between 2005 and 2010, he headed the Architecture Department at MIT. He was also a Pritzker Prize Jury member from 2012 to 2017.



## Philip Yang

Philip Yang is the founder of Urbem, an institution dedicated to the structuring of urban projects. He holds a Master's degree in Public Administration from Harvard Kennedy School. He was a diplomat in Brazil's foreign service between 1992 and 2002, having served in Geneva, Beijing, and Washington. He is/was a board member in the following institutions: MIT Corporation Visiting Committee of the Department of Urban Planning (2012-2016); Arq.Futuro, one of the main spaces for debate on architecture and urbanism in Brazil; the Symphonic Orchestra of the State of São Paulo (OSESP); the City Council of São Paulo Municipality (2013-2016); the Rio de Janeiro City Council (2013-2016); and the Harvard University Brazil Office Advisory Group.



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