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ÍNDICE

CIDADE CONTEMPORÂNEA

CONFERÊNCIAS

pág. 7

The Post-Industrial City: Main Trends in European Urban Growth 1970-2015

Lars Nilsson

pág. 27

A cidade do Presente

Magda Pinheiro

pág. 35

Portugal sem chão: a importância das políticas públicas e da relação urbano-rural

Renato Miguel do Carmo

COMUNICAÇÕES

pág. 45

Un musée vivant au coeur de Transylvanie: le musée ethnographique de Cluj-Napoca depuis sa fondation jusqu'à nos jours (1922-2017)

Dana-Maria Rus

pág. 61

Entre Skopje e Guimarães. História e Utopia nas visões urbanas de Kenzo Tange e Fernando Távora

Eduardo Fernandes, Ana Pinho Ferreira

pág. 83

A cidade e os sonhos em Auto de Ilhéus

Elizângela Gonçalves Pinheiro

pág. 109

Brasília: A Cidade Moderna na Cidade das Palavras

Eloísa Pereira Barroso

pág. 137

La ciudad ideal vs. La crónica urbana

Jordi Sardà Ferran, Josep Maria Solé Gras, Anna Royo Bareng, Jaume Fabregat González

pág. 175

Guimarães e a procura constante da modernidade

Filipe Fontes

pág. 195

Leituras do passado na cidade do presente: um estudo de educação patrimonial em Guimarães

Helena Pinto

pág. 223

El Friso del comercio local

Pau de Solà-Morales, Jordi Sardà

pág. 257

Perigosidade radiológica na cidade do presente: a contribuição dos materiais de construção para a dose externa resultante da radiação gama

P. Pereira, J. Sanjurjo-Sánchez, C. Alves

pág. 279

Perspetivas Complementares de Valorização do Património em Pedra em Almeida (Distrito da Guarda)

P. Pereira, L.F. Ramos, A. Freitas, A. Cunha, C. Alves

pág. 309

Foz do Iguaçu, Brasil: a cidade das migrações

Pedro M. Staevie

pág. 329

The Evolution of the “Barcelona Model”: Identity and Urban Regeneration

Pietro Viscomi

pág. 347

Brasília Além da Cidade Moderna

Sérgio Ulisses Jatobá

pág. 373

A Construção de Cidades de Eventos: O Caso de Gramado (Brasil)

Yoná da Silva Dalonso, Júlia Maria Lourenço, Paula Cristina Almeida Cadima Remoaldo

pág. 397

In situ urbanization in China: Processes, contributing factors, and policy implications

Yu Zhu

pág. 403

Luanda cidade colonial: A construção de bairros indígenas, 1922 – 1962. “Fomento ou Controlo”?

Yuri Manuel Francisco Agostinho

In situ urbanization in China: Processes, contributing factors, and policy implications

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Resumo

A major characteristic of China's urbanization process since the late 1970s has been the emergence and development of in situ urbanization, a phenomenon where rural settlements transform themselves into urban or quasi-urban settlements without much geographical relocation of the residents. Based on the review of existing literature and government documents, the analysis of official statistics, and cases studies in several provinces (especially Fujian Province) in both the coastal and inland regions, this paper provides a systematic examination of in situ urbanization in China.

The paper first reviews the two interrelated dimensions of the process of in situ urbanization, namely the creation of new urban centers, especially designated towns in rural areas, and the functional and physical changes of rural settlements through the development of township and village enterprises, and demonstrates that it was widespread in China, especially its south-eastern coastal region before the 2000s, occupying an indispensable position in China's overall urbanization process.

The paper then examines various factors contributing to the emergence and development of in situ urbanization, and the results suggest that high population densities and improved transport and communication conditions in the context of blurring rural-urban distinction created the basic conditions for in situ urbanization; local initiatives and investment from rural communities served as the main driving force for their in situ rural-urban transformation, especially at the first stage, which was facilitated and further promoted by remittances and investment from overseas Chinese and Chinese in Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan; and relevant government policies and China's unique institutional contexts further enhanced this development.

The paper further looks at the changing trends of in situ urbanization in both the coastal and inland regions in China, and demonstrates that although the position of in situ urbanization in China's overall urbanization process has significantly weakened since the 2000s, the relatively dispersed, regionally-based spatial pattern of development, which took shape in the period dominated by in situ urbanization, remains an important spatial framework affecting China's overall future urbanization pattern; and in situ urbanization may offer new development opportunities for migrant-sending areas, their residents and migrants themselves in China, especially those in the inland region, in addition or as an alternative to their current mode of development dominated by massive outmigration to the coastal region, in the context of the emerging trend of return migration.

The paper concludes with a discussion on planning and policy implications of in situ urbanization for China in the context of its National New Type Urbanization Plan, and for other developing