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# DECODING KASHGAR

*China's Westernmost City on the Historical Silk Road*

SERDAR AYDIN  
MARC AUREL SCHNABEL

# DECODING KASHGAR

*China's Westernmost City on the Historical Silk Road*

SERDAR AYDIN  
MARC AUREL SCHNABEL

DO  
RA<sup>®</sup>



To Florentina and Alexander  
To Elanur and İlker

Decoding Kashgar: China's Westernmost City on the Historical Silk Road  
Serdar Aydın and Marc Aurel Schnabel

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*Kashgar's approximate location shown on the Dymaxion Map of R. Buckminster Fuller.*



## PREFACE - DECODING

In semiotics, 'decoding' involves more than basic recognition and comprehension of what a text 'says'; it includes the interpretation and evaluation of its meaning with reference to relevant codes.

The British sociologist Stuart Hall defines the moment of decoding as "the moment of reception [or] consumption... by... the reader/hearer/viewer" which is regarded by most theorists as "closer to a form of 'construction'" than to "the passivity... suggested by the term 'reception'" [1].

Mapping is a way of decoding the attributes of the earth. And it is not free

of subjective interpretation. The map in the previous pages is a modified version of the infamous Dymaxion Map, realised by R. Buckminster Fuller in 1954 in search of a dynamic, cosmic and comprehensive illustration that would not be distorted or pre-occupied with political ideologies.

However virtuous Fuller's intent, the Dymaxion Map remains the product of a specific, subjective view on how best to represent a sphere on the 2D medium of paper. We use it here to begin our book with a demonstration of the geographical significance of the city of Kashgar, taking

advantage of the fame of Fuller's map for a distinctive perspective.

Regardless of the map on which Kashgar is depicted, this ancient city appears very central, locked onto the edge of the Central Asian hinterland - China's western gate towards Europe and Africa.

Our juxtaposition of triangles symbolises the historical Silk Road, spanning from the resource-rich ancient towns of East Asia to Mediterranean harbours. On this map, Kashgar sits between Xi'an and Samarkand. The former is widely accepted as the start point of the Silk Road,

and the oldest of the Four Great Ancient Capitals of Chinese civilisation. One of the oldest inhabited cities in Central Asia, the latter was once the capital of the Timurid Empire. Sitting on the western edge of the Fergana Valley, Samarkand was a trade centre for goods coming from Kashgar's neighbours to the east and the goods of Turpan, situated in the Grape Valley, from the north. Besides enjoying its own fertile land and climate, Kashgar played a significant role between these two productive valleys on a micro-level on the Silk Road. It was also clearly central to multi-directional movements around the

[1] Chandler, D., *Semiotics: The Basics*, London: Routledge, 2002.

region. Today Kashgar is the westernmost city in China and widely accepted as the cultural capital of Uyghurs, who live largely in the Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR).

Uyghur people are the Turkic-speaking minorities, as officially recognised by the Chinese authorities. Urumqi, the capital city of XUAR, is located in the north of Kashgar.

Traveling by plane to Kashgar requires a transfer from Urumqi, a two-hour flight from Kashgar. Geographically, this ancient town is three time zones behind Beijing time.

China, however, uses a single, country-wide, official time zone. Local people set their watches three (for very old people) or two hours (generally) behind the official time and officers, who are largely appointed from different parts of China, serve according to official time.

The discrepancy between official and local time adds another level of complexity to social life in Kashgar. The city, as a result, remains active almost twenty-four hours a day.

This photobook portrays Kashgar through our lenses, simplifying a complex reality just as any medium

or interpretation will do. The photos were taken during three visits to Kashgar (May 2015, August 2015 and October 2015) to collect data for a digital heritage project of the School of Architecture, Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand.

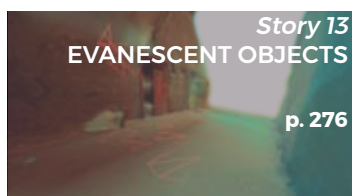
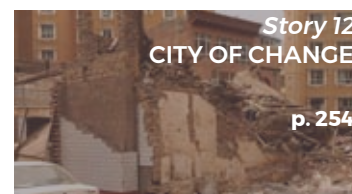
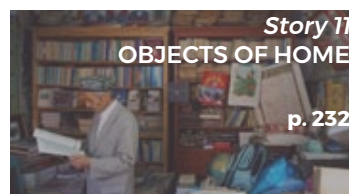
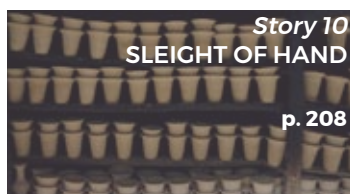
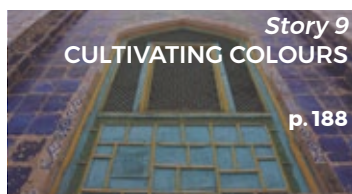
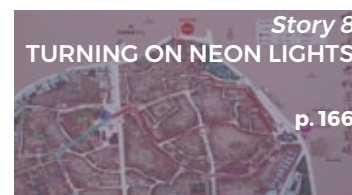
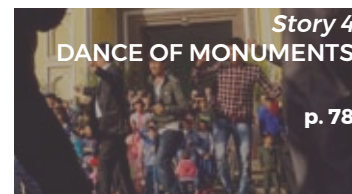
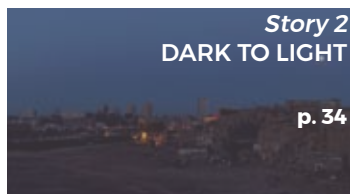
“Decoding Kashgar”, the title of our project, has been presented in several venues to international audiences. We experiment in this project with a range of design-research practices, transcoding heritage content from Kashgar into digital and interactive formats. The design-research outcome of

Decoding Kashgar is shared with the public via “[www.themuseumofgamers.org](http://www.themuseumofgamers.org)”.

It would be impossible to publish this book without the help of many people and friends from Kashgar, Urumqi, Beijing, Guangzhou and Hong Kong. We are very lucky, and grateful for their friendship.

Serdar Aydin and Marc Aurel Schnabel  
Wellington, March 2017

## OVERVIEW



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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## CREDIT

All photo credits by Serdar Aydin, 2015-2017,  
— except the aerial photos from page 104 to 119 which are extracted from an aerial video recorded with a UAV piloted by Yakupjan Ismayil (亚合甫江·司马义), 2015;  
— except the photos on page 285 which are taken by James Holth and Scott Meekings, 2016.

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## BIOGRAPHIES

**Serdar Aydın** is a design-researcher based in Wellington, New Zealand. He teaches digital design courses at School of Architecture and Design in Victoria University of Wellington (VUW). In Wellington, Serdar continues his PhD that started at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). After his

graduation with a BArch degree from Karadeniz Technical University, Serdar practiced at different architecture offices in Turkey. He completed his Masters' degree with merit at the School of Architecture, University of Liverpool in the UK. In Hong Kong, Serdar worked at Zaha Hadid Architects

for their Changsha Meixihu International Culture and Arts Centre in China. His PhD, The Museum of Gamers is a design-research which is about active participation for the making of digital heritage in the context of Kashgar, the westernmost city in China. The project involves insurmountable challenges such

as authenticity. To deal with them, a set of computational methods is deployed based on photogrammetry, game design, immersive and interactive virtual reality techniques.

For details:  
[www.themuseumofgamers.org](http://www.themuseumofgamers.org)

**Marc Aurel Schnabel** is the Dean of the Faculty of Architecture and Design, Professor in Architectural Technology at the School of Architecture, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand and Visiting Professor at School of Architecture, Sheffield University. Trained as an Architect, he is leading research and education in the field of

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augmented- and virtual reality, digital heritage, parametric design learning and inter-professional development. He has established the Digital Architecture Research Alliance, DARA, as well as the online social network Urban Digitalics connecting professionals and researchers in innovative digital spatial design.





This photobook portrays Kashgar, the westernmost city in China and once considered one of the best preserved examples of a traditional Islamic city in Central Asia. With a renewal project, a large portion of old houses have been replaced with new ones that just look sufficiently old to make a visitor feel in a fictional world of Kashgar's maze-like urban pattern with narrow alleyways and tunnels. This book offers a visual engagement with Kashgar in 13 sections, each with their own stories and themes based on a series of specific content ranging from historical architecture to people of Kashgar and from black-and-white urban scenes to 3D digital reconstructions.

