

Summer Internship Report

China Academy of Urban Planning and Design
PSU-China Innovations in Urbanization Program



By Collin Roughton
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Introduction

The opportunity to live and work in China for a summer sparked my imagination, shifted my perspective, and pushed me to think about the local and global impacts of China's unprecedented rate of economic growth and urbanization in fresh, tangible ways. The experience was both deeply disconcerting and highly inspirational, and I wouldn't trade it for more "practical" domestic work experience if I could.

Work experience

I spent 8 weeks as an intern at CAUPD's Beijing office. I was assigned to the Housing department, where I researched the history of social housing policy in the United Kingdom and produced two case studies of resort developments in the United States.

The first few weeks at the office were a little frustrating. My supervisor asked me to read two full-length textbooks and over 1,500 pages of government documents on British housing policy, but never quite answered my questions about why CAUPD was interested in British housing policy or what kind of product might come from my reading assignment. I felt like they were unprepared for my arrival, and in general weren't quite sure what to do with me.

I found out later that urban planning in China is considered a matter of national security, so there is a reluctance to share detailed information about planning projects to foreigners. This, combined with the language barrier and short duration of our stay, is why most of us ended up developing case studies on projects in other countries that might be relevant to things they're working on. (Side note: I also learned that the



The office is super nice.

transportation planners are in a separate building across the street, which is good for future interns to know if they're really hoping to focus on transportation. At least at the Beijing office, there is no transportation planning department within CAUPD.)

Eventually I made a presentation to a handful of co-workers that attempted to relate some of the lessons from British housing policy to efforts by the Chinese government to develop a stable real estate market

and leverage housing production as an economic development strategy. I also tried to convince my co-workers that additional intervention was required in the housing market to increase affordability and avoid the marginalization of the poor. It turned out to be a really interesting project for me, and I learned a great deal about a topic I previously knew nothing about.

My second assignment was researching resort developments in Colorado and Florida. Of particular interest to my supervisor was a large housing development northwest of Miami, which appeared in one of his “best practices” books on resort developments. Many American planners would likely consider it the worst kind of sprawl – 5,000 cookie-cutter single-family homes plopped down next to a freeway onramp, built around five (!) 18-hole golf courses. Portions of the ecologically sensitive Florida Everglades were also filled during the development process. My boss explained that the Communist Party hoped to build a similar type of resort community outside Beijing. It would be oriented towards top officials who are beginning to desire second homes away from the hustle and bustle of the city. He was particularly interested in the floor to area ratios used in the south Florida development. I was particularly interested in convincing him that it was a bad model to emulate.



This gated community in Florida, developed by the Professional Golf Association [of America], was in my boss’s “Best Practices” guide. Oddly enough, I grew up only a couple hours from here.

My supervisor had no idea that I grew up in Florida, or that part of what initially got me interested in urban planning was my desire to prevent the kind of luxury golf course developments like the one in his book from being built. The assignment challenged me to think carefully about how to communicate my views on the topic in a way that was persuasive and respectful.

My approach mostly involved telling stories and asking questions. Since my department was also interested in ski resorts, I told the story of the 1990’s Vail Ski Resort expansion and subsequent torching of one of the lodges by the Animal Liberation Front (they got a kick out of this). I asked questions about how much water golf courses required on an annual basis, and how much water was available (northern China, where the development was proposed, is experiencing severe water shortages). I asked about the distribution of costs and

benefits, environmental impacts, and whether or not it was really possible for golf course developments to be “sustainable”. I saw it as my role as an outsider to present a different perspective in a firm but gentle way. I have no doubt that my boss will deliver whatever it is his boss and ultimately what the Party wants, but my hope is that perhaps I planted a seed or two.

Finally, I made a presentation about the livable streets movement in the United States, progress in planning for pedestrians and bicyclists, and how some of these ideas might be transferred to the streets of Beijing.

Reflections

Planning in China: thoughts on the process and the beneficiaries

If CAUPD at all reflects what urban planning is like across China (and it may not), the profession appears to be mostly about 1) making zoning maps for new cities in AutoCAD, 2) a variety of activities we’d call “urban design”, and 3) real estate development. All of it must work within the objectives of the party (relentless GDP growth) and bring glory and prestige to government officials. Nearly all work is physical planning, and it’s more of an art than a science. Public engagement, as in nearly all areas of government decision-making, is not a part of the paradigm.

Despite the fact that CAUPD is a state-owned enterprise, the firm does not function at all like a public agency in the United States. In addition to assisting with planning in municipalities across China, CAUPD also works as a consultant for private companies seeking to develop luxury condominiums, resorts, and other projects that do not have a clear public benefit. The group of American interns in Beijing noticed that nearly all of our departments seemed to be primarily working on luxury housing or some sort of “eco-tourism” project aimed at attracting wealthy domestic and foreign travelers. We learned that CAUPD is transitioning from being a hybrid of public/private organization to completely private company.

Overall my impression was that planning in



Chinese planners are really good at making pretty maps and visualizations.

China tended to benefit those at the top of the pyramid – real estate developers, the new upper middle class, and high-ranking government officials. Mao Zedong would not be pleased. Yet in trying to compare the beneficiaries of planning in China and the US I realized that it's extremely easy to be critical of the way a system works in another place, and lazy not to continually reexamine the dynamics of one's own system. Despite differences in process, planning efforts in the US often benefit the same class of people. I found it helpful to be reminded of this, even though it's somewhat uncomfortable to recognize. This is one of the big things I took away from the experience.

Pedagogy in US Planning Education: “Towers in the Park” urbanism

One of the things planning students in the US are taught to hate is the modernist vision of “towers in the park” urbanism. It was fascinating to see that in China, a slightly tweaked version of this model has actually been adopted and implemented on a grand scale. Widely spaced concrete towers rise repetitively from patches of internal green spaces and urban freeway networks all over Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Shenzhen. Attempts at full grade separation by mode via tunnels and bridges exist at many locations to facilitate the efficient flow of people. At “planning exhibition halls” in Beijing and Shanghai, renderings and physical models of current and future development look ominously similar to Le Corbusier’s Plan Voisin.



Left: Rendering of an award-winning housing complex recently completed in Beijing. **Right:** A model of a (built) section of Shanghai’s existing urban fabric.

While I remain critical of the superblocks, highly repetitive structures, and rivers of high-speed traffic, on some level it works. The critical difference between the modernist vision and Beijing’s urban form, I think, is that instead of the towers being strictly single-use as Corbusier proposed, uses are mixed at a very fine grain.

It's sort of Radiant City meets Neighborhood Unit. An article I read recently described large Chinese cities as "high density sprawl," which I think captures the feeling nicely. However, the densities are high enough to support world-class public transit and a diversity of markets, shops, and restaurants. Public exercise facilities are also integrated into the streetscape throughout the city. So even though the street is in some ways a very unpleasant environment, it is very well used by pedestrians.

While I'm not ready to accept this model of urbanism as ideal, it definitely got me thinking about the puzzle of urban design for megacities in developing countries in a different way. Obviously they have a different set of challenges and constraints, but experiencing the distinctive feel of several Chinese cities with 15+ million people helped me recognize and break out of my dogmatism. The experience definitely strengthened my view that urban design is an extremely important but often overlooked part of the planning process.

Transportation

Beijing has some really interesting and conflicting things going on with their transportation policies and street design approach. On the one hand they're building an extensive, efficient, world-class public transportation system at a rapid pace. Beijing has a rich heritage of utilitarian bicycling, and as a result nearly every road in Beijing continues to be bikeable. I was also blown away by the use of cargo tricycle to haul all kinds of freight. Wide sidewalks complete with aids for the visually impaired also line every street. Officials have even instituted some relatively aggressive auto-taming policies in recent years such as limiting the number of days each car may be driven in a week based on license plate numbers and banning large trucks from the majority of the city.



Left: Me riding my Beijing bike, a 1970's Flying Pigeon (built in neighboring Tianjin.) **Right:** A typical arterial in Beijing.

On the other hand, the design of major arterials and extensive network of urban freeways makes Beijing feel extremely auto-dominated. In the hierarchy of road users, private cars are clearly at the top, and enforcement practices reinforce the status of drivers. I think part of this has to do with national policy designed to stimulate growth in the auto industry, and the fact that those making the policies are more likely to be able to afford a car.

The impacts of favoring automobiles were immediately apparent when I arrived in Beijing. The air pollution is nothing less than horrific. Instead of inviting public spaces, the streets feel like racetracks. They're noisy, ugly, and dangerous. For me the lesson is clear: the automobile is a tremendously destructive force in urban environments and must be aggressively managed. It's not enough for a transportation system to be multi-modal; it must recognize the non-transportation benefits of streets as public spaces, and that means making driving less attractive than any other mode.

Since this is getting sort of long and I've already shared my most important reflections in some depth, I'll keep the rest of them to bullet points:

- **Access to information**

I couldn't believe the amount of information that was inaccessible on the Internet without a virtual private network (VPN). I think the impact of government censorship is much greater than the Chinese people acknowledge or imagine. Sometimes I tend to get all postmodern and relativistic about stuff but seriously, blocking people's access to information and using fear to restrict what they can and cannot say is morally wrong. I feel that more strongly than ever after living in China.

- **"China Speed" and the whole-hearted embrace of modernization**

China Speed, and the embrace of sweeping change in general, is amazing to watch. You can really feel the excitement about the rapid transition China is making. The public expects rapid and continuous change, and they have great hope for the future. Of course the trade offs involved with designing and building a high-speed rail line in six months is that sometimes the trains crash and kill hundreds of people, which is very tragic. And of course the public doesn't really get a say in what the future holds. I'm certainly not saying it's acceptable, just exciting to watch in contrast to our system.



Modern propaganda at the Shanghai Planning Exhibition. Pretty much sums up the approach.

- **Search for “the Formula”**

Many of the Chinese planners I interacted with seemed to be convinced that there one “best” solution exists for most situations. They also tend to think of solutions in quantitative terms, like a floor area ratio that will unlock the secrets of ideal urban form. I found it really interesting that they did not consider the context of a given situation to be all that important. I think this might have something to do with the nature of their educational system, which tends to focus more on memorization and math?

- **Food**

Previous intern reports have commented that the food gets old quickly. I found this to be completely inaccurate. The food in Beijing is incredible and delicious. Chinese restaurants put an ton of time and effort in their culinary creations. Roast duck, traditional Beijing noodles, spicy-eggy-tofu-stew, and Sichuan green beans with pork were some of my favorite dishes. You’re never more than 100 yards from a stand selling exotic, succulent fruit like mangosteens, yum berries (yep), dragon fruit, and lychees. You can get steamed buns, dumplings, and other amazing street food for the same price you can get a snack from a vending machine in the US. Disclaimer: It’s nearly impossible to eat vegetarian. I think I ate about 50 pounds of pork. And everything’s soaked in oil and MSG. But that just makes it more delicious!



From Left: Me about to eat a scorpion, fresh fruit, and the most amazing mobile BBQ ever.

- **People**

Probably my favorite part was getting to know some of my co-workers at CAUPD. They were really warm and taught me a lot about Chinese culture and history. I especially enjoyed the insight I received from the Chinese interns (of which there are 100 per summer at the Beijing branch!) and from our host Gao Han.

Conclusion

Overall, I had a fantastic experience. I feel extremely fortunate that I had the opportunity to experience Beijing for a summer, especially during this particular moment in time. I'd recommend it to any MURP with an adventuresome spirit who is curious about what planning is like in a radically different political and cultural environment.



Clockwise from top left: Veggies for sale on the street, an amazing load, the CCTV tower from the perspective of the neighbors, and preparing to demolish a communist-era apartment building.