

Equipped with hand sanitizer, a travel guide book, and walking shoes I arrived in Beijing for the 2008 APA China Study Tour. Although the media had bombarded me with stories on China's development and politics for more than a year, I was unsure of exactly what to expect. I knew that China was industrializing and developing at lightening speed but I was completely unprepared for the scale of Beijing. Beijing did not simply clean house or settle for a makeover in preparation for the world games. Instead Beijing is in the midst of a complete transformation without looking back at the past. Nowhere else in China is it so obvious that this country is racing forward announcing to the rest of the industrialized world "watch out, here I come".

In fact nothing happens at a slow or steady pace in China and there are no small feats. The Cultural Revolution was just one of the many revolutions that make up China's histories, cultures and societies. From one dynasty to the next China's past is splattered with political unrest and transition, tyrannical emperors, foreign invasions, sieges by the underclass, masterful and grand public works and communist rule. Well preserved remnants remain of each period in time dating back to the first dynasty. In Beijing alone the Imperial Palace, the Forbidden City, Tiananmen Square and the Temple of Heaven remind us of each period of China's development.

The Forbidden City and the few preserved hutongs that remain are fenced in and dwarfed by mammoth skyscrapers resembling something from “Blade Runner” or Corbusier’s Radiant City. The traditional charming alleyways that once made up the city’s transportation network are now overshadowed by six massive beltways and boulevards enveloping the city with a frightening fusion of bike, moped and auto traffic day and night. The pedestrian does not dare cross the street in Beijing, a city with more than 1,000



automobiles licensed daily. Instead, Beijing forfeited to the automobile and placed pedestrian networks underground. Above ground sidewalks are interrupted by frequent curb cuts and the buildings are set back from the street front to accommodate parking. Even the many street trees planted throughout the city are not enough to create a feeling of safety for the pedestrian. The long repetitive blocks discourage the types of activity, interactions and the diversity of uses that weave the social fabric of older communities. As Jane Jacobs stated, “streets and their sidewalks, the main public places of a city, are its most vital organs”. It seems that Beijing has forgotten that streets are not just a means for carrying pedestrians and vehicles. They provide a venue for social interactions, commerce, and culture that is lost when the goal becomes the efficient movement of cars.

The traffic is not the only culprit that challenges the pedestrian. The new developments surpass human scale. Walking along the street one feels lost beneath glass and concrete towers. Although Beijing clearly embraces the density component of Smart Growth, the design components that create a



walkable atmosphere have been replaced with superhuman design elements. Where the traditional neighborhoods were carefully laid out using fengshui techniques that respected the environment and created a distinctive identity and sense of place, this does not exist in new Beijing. The iconic architecture undoubtedly creates an exciting visual experience, but looking around one truly feels like they could be in any major new metropolis.



Another stark difference between old and new China is the intergenerational gap. China's hip, technologically savvy, and fashionable youth clearly contrast with the older generation, who fill the many parks and public spaces with traditional games,

exercises and customary dances. The global homogenization of culture has created a modern and westernized revolution of young adults that embrace the all American mentality of "bigger, better and more". One hopes that many Chinese traditions are not lost with this new generation.

A journey to the Great Wall reconnected us with nature, fresh air and a nearly untouched piece of China's history. This was truly one of the highlights of the trip. The size and scale of this great public work is breathtaking. The trek up hundreds of stairs was a welcome respite from the chaos of the city, the surrounding industry, and the subsequent layer of smog visible from the top of the wall. A simple traditional lunch at a local fish farm following the excursion to the wall provided the best cuisine and most authentic dining experience on the trip.

Next on the agenda was the 2008 Olympic grounds, another great but modern public work. Despite the awe inducing design and scale of the structures, it was difficult to not focus on the sustainability issues that go hand and hand with the world games. Envisioning a future for the Olympic grounds once tourist interest dissipates is a challenge. Unlike Barcelona, who invested in existing inner city neighborhoods, public spaces and the waterfront in preparation for the Olympic Games, Beijing's Olympic grounds are isolated outside the city center. While Beijing made major infrastructure improvements in the entire city, the Olympic grounds are now a collection of mostly unused structures that provide very little long-term benefit for the city.



Next stop was Xian, a more traditional working class Chinese city. However even there it was impossible to avoid the western influence of Wal-Mart, McDonalds and the California Noodle House. In fact it was easy to forget we were in a communist country when we were constantly surrounded by consumerism and capitalist ideals. The streets were filled with cell phones, laptops, luxury cars, high fashion and fast food. Even the traditional bicycles that were the primary mode of transportation not long ago, have been primarily replaced by flashy electric bikes.

An exclusive field trip to the archeological dig site of the Terracotta Soldiers outside of Xian was an unparalleled experience. The chance to stand face to face with the lifelike

figures dating back to 210 BC was an opportunity normally only available to VIP's. The 8,000T soldier Teracotta Army was constructed by the ruler of the Qin Dynasty in order to maintain and protect his empire in the afterlife. Constructed in just 11 years, the terracotta army was destroyed by fire during a raid of the emperor's tomb. The remains were buried until 1974 when local farmers stumbled upon relics. Soldiers are still being unearthed and are in various stages of reconstruction and repair. The Terracotta Soldiers are truly one of the most significant archaeological finds of the 20th century and a highlight of the China Study Tour that is not to be missed.



On our last day in Xian, we ended our trip with a leisurely bike ride along the ancient 16 km wall that enclosed the old city of Xian. While riding along one could not help but notice the contrast between old and new. The original city, which is reasonably well preserved with small-scale storefronts and more traditional architecture, was enclosed by the mostly original city wall that separated it from an eclectic mix of high-rise modern development outside. Standing on the wall was like standing between two completely different cities.

At some point during our bike ride we stopped to listen to a loudspeaker blaring into a partially demolished neighborhood adjacent to the wall. The ground was covered with hills of bricks and concrete and a few displaced squatters had set up camp among the remains. The buildings that were still in tact were marked with a distinct symbol. Although none of us speak or read mandarin, it did not take long to realize that the loud

speaker and mark were announcing the upcoming demolition of the buildings. We confirmed this with a local later.



This was not an uncommon site in any of the cities we toured. In fact on our first day in Beijing we listened to a lecture from author Wang Jun, also known as the “Chinese Jane Jacobs”. Mr. Jun discussed the destruction of historic neighborhoods in Beijing for new development opportunities, but until we began witnessing it in city after city, I don’t think we fully understood the magnitude and impacts of this movement. The careless and swift demolition brought back memories of the tragedies of Urban Renewal in the United States. “Blighted” neighborhoods wiped out in the name of progress, and the modern developments that replaced them never revitalized the city or alleviated the plight of poor families as promised. On the contrary it perpetuated segregation, erased history and destroyed the sense of community and place.

I asked our guides and instructors many questions about the Chinese redevelopment process: “Where and how are families relocated? Are residents involved in this process? Who is benefiting from this redevelopment?” The responses varied and my attention was quickly diverted to other subjects. Although I never got the straightforward responses I was looking for, one thing was clear - Chinese government may be more efficient with

redevelopment but they are not accountable to the people they are impacting. Towers and infrastructure go up in record time, but the cost is great for those who are victims to land seizures and evictions.

The final part of the tour took us to Hangzhou, Nanjing and Zhenjiang, all smaller cities by Chinese standards. However, even these once quaint and sleepy towns are quickly becoming bustling and sprawling cities. Real estate development and industry are replacing silk and agricultural production, as they strive to compete with their big brothers as the next destination for international business and commerce. The new CBD on the outskirts of Nanjing and the luxury western style condos, shopping malls and factories springing up around Zhenjing and Hangzhou demonstrate that China is the world's fastest growing economy.

My journey ended in Shanghai in front of an opportune billboard. The billboard displayed a pastoral setting with deer and wild animals grazing in a meadow. A very peaceful setting except for the very large factory with smoke stacks comprising the skyline in the near background. I'm not sure what message the company was trying to send. Maybe they were saying "we embrace nature but we embrace progress more", or maybe they were trying to say "watch out nature we will conquer". In fact that seems to be the general message that China is sending the rest of the world - nothing can stop us. I left China hoping that they will be able to balance this pursuit for global prosperity with long-term equity, sustainability and quality of life.

My tour through China impressed upon me several lessons in urban development. These lessons include the importance of history and identity, the significance of place and community, the necessity for integration and equality, the value of public voices, and the importance of transparency in governance. Cities are constantly changing and change is not necessarily a bad thing. It is unlikely that old neighborhoods can ever again be the romanticized communities of yesteryear. In fact the “New Urbanism” movement in the United States has demonstrated the inability to successfully and authentically replicate the past. Nevertheless it is important to understand how cities have evolved and what has influenced that evolution in order to learn from mistakes of the past and plan for a better future. Although I already embraced these concepts, the China Study Tour reminded me to promote history and culture and to respect people and place as I move forward with my career in planning.