China Academy of Urban Planning and Design  
Summer '09 Internship

I was in Beijing for nine and a half weeks – was quarantined for one and traveled for another week and a half, meaning that I spent seven weeks interning at the China Academy of Urban Planning and Design. I was assigned to the Urban Environmental Institute, but soon discovered that these institutional distinctions are fairly meaningless, as all divisions create master plans for various urban areas throughout the country; they do not coordinate with one another in any way.

I was assigned to the Nanshan Resort project, helping to plan a private resort community housed within a National Park. The developer needed to borrow a significant amount of money in order to complete the project, meaning the central government had to approve the plan in order for him to get a bank loan.

Prior to the site visit, I was asked to look at resort transportation within the U.S. (e.g., trolleys, monorails, bus lines, car sharing, etc.) and think about what may or may not be appropriate for moving people from Sanya city to the national park, approximately 40 km west on the South China Sea. I assembled a PowerPoint presentation with some options prior to the visit, but when we arrived, discovered that the developer had already set up a public cart system for within the park, and was working with Sanya travel agencies to establish additional, private bus routes between the park and the city – in other words, my project was suddenly moot. The option they had chosen was fairly expensive for the tourist, but it was explained to me that they were trying to attract a certain “class” of tourists to the park, and they achieved this through expensive transport options.

We spent several days in Nanshan touring the resort and meeting with the developer. In terms of work, I had no idea what I was doing – I was told to take pictures of certain things on occasion, but for the most part, I just enjoyed myself and looked around. I attended a number of meetings with park officials about expanding the focal point of the
park, the Guanyin statue, but I understood little of these meetings; Yu Wei, my supervisor, was usually kind enough to debrief me later.

When we returned to Beijing, I was asked to pull together some information on tourism incentives – both to attract tourists and developers to newly designated tourism areas. I was told that within the next ten years, the Chinese government would likely declare the entire Hainan island province a designated tourism zone, and they were looking for specific policies to incentivize development, and later tourism itself. Again, I produced a PowerPoint presentation on what different states in the U.S. and several other countries do. This presentation was translated and incorporated into the final presentation my supervisor gave to the developer. I was actually pretty proud of my contribution.

However, when this project ended, I still had 3 weeks of work left – and though I had nothing to work on and they did not want to assign me to another project, I was expected to come in every day, which was frustrating.

I used the time to work on my final presentation for CAUPD staff (we were each required to give a 30-40 minute presentation our last day) – I chose to focus on the Beijing pedestrian environment. I spent several days walking around taking pictures of dangerous intersections and side streets, and proposed some ideas for traffic calming, safer crossing points, and increased pedestrian connectivity within superblocks. I attempted to stress that the pedestrian environment was critical to the success of the public transit infrastructure they are so keen on building. Beijing, which once had an amazing bike and pedestrian environment, has sacrificed safety and connectivity as priority has shifted rapidly to the automobile.

In addition to my planning project and my final presentation, I had more regular responsibilities in terms of coordinating meetings between U.S. interns and CAUPD staff traveling to UCLA this fall – for whatever reason, I was selected by CAUPD staff as the spokesperson for all of the U.S. interns. The groups met approximately every other week and gave PowerPoint presentations, discussing planning topics in addition to general topics about life in the United States. Because these meetings were extremely informal,
we were all more comfortable asking “stupid” questions about differences between U.S. and China planning models, and as a group we were able to really flesh out similarities and differences. This group of seven CAUPD staff also turned into my closest group of friends at work. At least two of them are planning to visit me at some point this fall, so maybe I could arrange for them to come in and speak to students about planning in China?

To be perfectly honest, I’m not sure yet how my experience relates to the MURP curriculum. The Chinese system is so vastly different from the U.S. model – there is no genuine public participation process, and master plans for large cities are completed, on average, within two weeks. The process is largely apolitical and employees are incredibly proud of the speed at which they work. CAUPD, with a staff of only 400, works at a scale and a pace that is incomprehensible here. On a side note, the lack of public participation makes CAUPD staff powerful decision-makers, and bribery is a problem that constantly plagues the office.

One of the biggest insights to come out of this for me was an explanation for the lack of widespread place-based planning innovation in many areas I visited. The slower process in the U.S., in combination with public differences of opinion, breeds creativity and examination of the problem from many points of view. By contrast, because decisions are made so quickly in China, concepts are literally cut and paste in their entirety from other cities to Chinese cities – there simply isn’t time to do much else. Differences in topography, existing design, and community needs, are not always taken into account in any meaningful way.

I learned a great deal from traveling, both for work, and on my own. While in China, I was able to visit Sanya, Haikou, Shanghai, Guilin, Yangshuo, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong; I visited Xian in December. I was able to ride the trolleys in Hong Kong, the BRT in Beijing and the maglev train in Shanghai – in addition to experiencing new lows in pedestrian safety walking around Beijing. The trip opened up my mind to what is possible when it comes to planning and was an excellent introduction to foreign planning
systems; I realized I should not take for granted many of the things I do in terms of process, and I came away with a renewed respect for the Oregon system – I don’t believe I’ll fully process all that I learned this summer for quite some time.

In sum, the experience was amazing. It was confusing and frustrating at times (and the food gets really old really fast), but I learned a ton. I would recommend the internship highly to anyone with an adventurous spirit. I do have a few thoughts – a few odds and ends and then some recommendations for next year.

Odds and ends:

- CAUPD staff smoke in their offices – not in the hall, but in their cubes – it’s hard to escape.
- Interns will have stomach issues no matter what precautions they take – it’s just the way it is. Be prepared to have nearly chronic diarrhea the first two weeks of work.
- Interns must be assertive in asking for work and in daily negotiation or the experience will be miserable – nearly EVERYTHING in China is negotiable – assertiveness is respected.
- The Chinese firewall is massive – Facebook, MySpace, and most websites ending in .net or .org are blocked. This can make keeping in touch with friends difficult in addition to RESEARCH difficult. Do the best you can. We used blockers, but these made our computers incredibly slow.
- Lining up or “queuing” is not a part of Chinese culture. People push and cut you off – they’re not being rude – it’s just the way it is.

Recommendations for Coordinator

- Work out compensation details in advance – rent, utilities, lunch card, airport transportation, vacation policy. Knowing these things in advance would have saved all of us a TON of stress – and probably some money.
- Ask CAUPD staff to email in advance what the intern will be working on. This is not for the interns’ benefit, but so that CAUPD staff members begin thinking about what work they can delegate – my institute was completely unprepared for my arrival.

Recommendations for Interns

- Put it out there. You’re going to make an idiot out of yourself. We were all laughed at. We were all yelled at and had no clue why. Most people are incredibly kind and want to help you. Don’t let it get to you. Don’t stop trying to communicate. Keep a smile plastered on your face.
“don’t want,” “make it cheaper.” More than this is helpful, but you NEED to know these things.

- When you have access to clean water, drink a TON of it.
- Always carry tissues and sanitary wipes with you. Public restrooms are routinely filthy and rarely have soap or tissue paper. The office bathrooms however, were quite nice.
- If someone pours you alcohol, you are expected to drink it. If you don’t want alcohol (which quite frankly is frowned on), let them know BEFORE they pour.
- Bring TWO nice outfits (slacks and a short sleeve button down, or a dress, etc.) and the rest super casual. CAUPD staff wear flip flops and shorts to work every day unless they have a meeting – seriously, anything goes.
- Bring: vitamins, medicines (Advil, antacids, etc.), sunscreen – what you buy in China will likely be knock-offs, and you need these things to be real.
- Be patient – you will only understand what’s going on about 20% of the time – at some point, you just have to be comfortable with that and stumble through. If you smile, people will try to help.
- People do not tip in China. They may tell you to tip, but you don’t need to.
- There will be other interns from USC and UCLA – chances are one or two of them will have superiority complexes and try to engage you. Don’t engage. It’s just insecurity. Seriously. All of the interns live together, so if relations start to go sour, everyone will feel it.
- Join a gym. It’s cheap (we joined Hokay/Hosa Sports) and sweating out toxins will make you feel better; every single U.S. intern in Beijing eventually joined the gym.