URBAN PLANNING & DESIGN INSTITUTE OF SHENZHEN

INTERNSHIP REPORT

Rae-Leigh Stark
Master of Urban & Regional Planning Candidate, Portland State University
October 2015
Shenzhen is a very young city and has only begun to develop within the last 35 years. It was declared a Special Economic Zone in 1979. Prior to its industrial boom and rapid development, the city was non-existent. It went from an area with a few small fishing towns to a city of 12 million. The first metro station opened in 2004; now there are 131 stations. In 2014 there were three metro new lines being built simultaneously.

To put it into perspective I thought about the last two cities I lived in. Columbus, Indiana, a small city south of Indianapolis, has a population of 48,000 - **Shenzhen is 250 times larger**. Portland, Oregon, where I live now, has a population of 620,000 - **Shenzhen is 20 times larger**.

I have found many places in Shenzhen that are just fantastic. Here are my favorites to show you the wide diversity of the city. They range from old dense housing to a modern industrial park. Some of these places were created quite organically, while others were thoroughly planned to the smallest detail. Each place creates a different human experience based on how they were planned and who they were designed for.

**OCT LOFT**

The OCT Loft was a redevelopment of a vacant factory. It’s home to art galleries, restaurants, shops, and entertainment. The area has kept its industrial feel with an artistic flair – they repurposed the buildings perfectly. On Saturdays the OCT Loft hosts an outdoor market with vendors selling their art and crafts, the restaurants have live music, and there are many people out enjoying the day. The OCT Loft is also home to many art studios, architecture and urban design firms, and creative spaces for hair, crafts, or graphic design. From what I can tell, the area attracts a wide range of people, but mostly young people. Shenzhen is a city of young people, so it a perfect city for a place like this.
There are several urban villages in Shenzhen. The urban villages represent the original housing in Shenzhen. They were built quickly and densely to handle the huge influx of people moving to the city. Since their construction, they’ve become home to many people, as it is one of the only affordable options in the city. It is amazing to see the different eras represented throughout the buildings in the villages. You can see layers of time among them. The alleys are narrow and electric wires are exposed. While these are considered as not the perfect example of housing, these villages create neighborhoods and promote interaction among the residents. People of all ages are out playing games, running around, or enjoying a moment to relax. People take care of their daily shopping here and live with their windows and doors wide open. It is a nice change of pace from modern Shenzhen that consists of skyscrapers and wide roads.

Qianhai is home to the Innovation and Entrepreneur Hub as well as a new industrial park, which opened in December 2014. Qianhai is located on the far west side of Shenzhen. There is also a large development (largest in Shenzhen) under construction and a new Metro line that will connect to the rest of the city’s system. The Innovation and Entrepreneur Hub and industrial park isn’t up to capacity yet. Once the Metro line is finished, it will help populate this area and reach its potential. At the Innovation and Entrepreneur Hub you can see groups of people working together. The environment looks like it supports creativity and allows innovators to brainstorm together over a cup of coffee. I wouldn’t mind working there!
I live at Difu Hotel, which is conveniently located right across the street from UPDIS in the Futian District. The location is very convenient – just minutes walk from 2 Metro lines and close to many shops, restaurants, and parks. Futian is a large district that also includes the CBD. Our area within Futian is called Old Futian. I’m glad we’re located where we are because there is a lot of street life, it is the older part of the city, which gives it a lot of charm, and it is a joyfully chaotic area to wander around day or night.

The hotel has the nicest staff that is ready help whenever needed! Difu Hotel quickly felt like home soon after arriving. UPDIS hires many interns during the summer and they all stay at Difu Hotel. It is a bustling place in the summer because of its convenience to UPDIS. In addition to Difu Hotel, there is a convenience store, a massage parlor, a restaurant, a bank, and karaoke all in the same building. There is some sort of activity going on day and night.

My work schedule begins at 9:00 AM Monday through Friday. At 10:55 AM (and 3:55 PM) some charming music and friendly voice comes through the intercom leading everyone in a series of exercises. No one follows this, but it’s the thought of keeping employees healthy and active that counts! At noon we head to lunch. After lunch is a period of rest or work until 2:00 PM. Most people in the office pull out their cots for a short nap to reenergize. During this time I typically head back to Difu Hotel to do laundry in my room, rest, run errands, or take a walk. At 1:55 PM chirping birds come over the intercom to slowly wake people up from their naps. Everyone works until 6:00 PM and then they head out for dinner. The employees of UPDIS work very hard. My colleagues say most nights they work until 9:00 or 10:00 PM.

In the evenings after work I go to yoga on Mondays and Fridays. Other evenings I spend at the pool or walking around. I’ll get together with other interns for dinner and occasionally we head out to do some exploring of the city.
UPDIS

UPDIS is a large planning firm, which does contract work all over China and even in Africa. I work within the transportation department. Our department is a year old and is made up of about 30 people. The department hired 9 recent graduates, from all over China, who arrived shortly before I did. We had a celebratory department dinner to welcome their arrival with delicious food and a chance to get to know each other.

I unfortunately didn’t get too deep into Chinese planning (mostly due to the language barrier and the workload the transportation manager and employees are dealing with), but from my little experience, it is very different than what I’m used to in the US. I’ve been a part of a few meetings dealing with the strategic planning of a new district, Xiang Jiang, in the Hunan Province. It currently has a population of 850,000 with plans to become the home of 1,600,000 by 2025. UPDIS is creating a new city center and they’re envisioning this area as a transportation hub. They’re looking at the transportation system at a regional scale with development plans for roads, transit lines, and an airport. They determined that the existing airport is not in the right location and is not suited to keep up with the future demand. They’re looking at a new airport location and how to best connect it within the city and the transit system.

During one of the meetings to discuss the new district, they asked me how I would start a city with a blank slate. Planning is unreal here. I cannot even imagine starting a city, a large city, from basically a blank slate like they’ve been doing. The population, density, and migration to urban areas are on a whole different scale than the US.

PROJECTS

I was tasked with finding transportation planning books we use in the US. Using my knowledge of books I’ve read or used in class/planning practice and Planetizen’s Top 100 Planning Books, I compiled a list. My supervisor chose from that list and we had them shipped to the office. The books we ordered included: Essays in Transportation Economics and Policy, Urban Transportation Planning in the United States: History, Policy, and Practice, The Economics of Urban Transportation, NACTO Urban Street Design Guide, Sustainable Transportation Planning, NACTO Urban Bikeway Design Guide, and City Cycling.

My supervisor, Mr. Liu, is very interested in planning and transportation theory. From what I gathered, it is not as common to study theory during transportation courses at the universities here. Not only did he want to learn more, but he wanted his employees to as well. To make the research most useful, I compiled my research into: Theories & Ideas That Have Shaped Cities: A Planner’s Guide. The guide discusses Historic Planning Theory, Modern Planning Ideas, and Transportation Demand Theory. Using six common planning topics (land use, urban design, economic growth, social justice, transportation, and resource preservation), I indicate which planning topic the theory or idea is most applicable. In addition, throughout the guide there is a “play button” icon that links to online resources to help further the understanding of the theory or idea. The online resources include films, project examples, case studies, research, and how the theory or idea can be applied through practice.

I presented, Cities Designed for People, By People, during a monthly event called Coffee & Cookies. Coffee & Cookies is an event to learn from the experiences of the many different
interns working at UPDIS. I focused on my work in Columbus, Indiana and Portland, Oregon. I wanted to show how public participation is a crucial part of planning in the US and how the cities have been shaped because of the public participation.

I wrote memos and compiled research for both Regional Travel Among the Elderly and Future Trends in Transportation. These research projects helped the department with a current project where they are creating a new district, Xiang Jiang, in the Hunan Province. For Regional Travel Among the Elderly, I looked at three different scales of transportation – 1) within one’s neighborhood, 2) within one’s city for daily needs, and 3) within the intercity/region for travel purposes – and how they connect together to make a seamless, effortless system for users of all ages and abilities. I compiled best practices and examples from cities mostly in the US.

For Future Trends in Transportation, I looked at a handful of future trends happening in transportation: 1) Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) Innovations, 2) Congestion Pricing, 3) Self-Driving Cars, 4) Electric Cars, 5) Portland’s Multi-Modal Bridge, and 6) Cities Making Driving Unappealing. For each of these trends I discussed their innovations and how the lessons learned can be applied to China.
TRANSPORTATION

BEING A PEDESTRIAN

What I can’t keep my mind off of is transportation! I love looking at how people get around - do they look comfortable, do they look stressed, or are they going about their day and enjoying their travel? In Shenzhen people are everywhere. The sidewalks are crowded and the streets are overflowing with cars, people, buses, scooters, and bikes. If you give people the space, they will be there. Yet, with all the people in China, limited space, and a low car ownership (11% according to Ministry of Public Security statistics), the majority of the space on city streets has been planned for cars.

Shenzhen began to develop in the early 80s. The city was designed with the car on the forefront of the plans and it was at the peak of the economic boom in China. I have found it difficult to walk around some parts of Shenzhen. There are many physical barriers and bollards separating people from streets, only some of the intersections have ramps on them, and broken sidewalks are in abundance. The barriers and bollards are used to prevent cars and scooters from riding on the sidewalks. I don’t know the solution for this issue, but police enforcement to change the behavior of the drivers might result in change.

If I find it difficult as an able-bodied person, I can’t imagine what it’s like for someone with a physical disability or even a stroller. Throughout the city and others in China, the sidewalks have a strip of textured concrete indicating to someone who is vision impaired that this is the correct route to take. They thought this through, and from what I can tell, it’s a mainstream form of transportation planning throughout China. Other than this textured strip, many other details have gotten lost. While ADA in the US is not perfect, it has paved the way for people to get around more easily. There are some details that I wish were applied here, including the minimum walkway width of 5 feet and required curb ramps at intersections.

At some of the busiest intersections, white fence-like barriers are placed all over the intersection to prevent people from crossing the road. Instead of providing street-level crosswalks, a series of pedestrian tunnels were built to cross the roads. These tunnels are dark, uninviting, and are uncomfortable places to walk. It’s quite confusing to navigate and it requires you to have the ability to walk down stairs. I have no idea what it costs or how long it takes to build tunnels like that, but I think a better solution would be to provide crosswalks, refuge islands, and other infrastructure at these intersections instead of requiring people to travel underground.

In China, I have ridden on some of the best metro systems. You can take the subway anywhere and everywhere. It is super easy to navigate, the user experience as been well thought out, and the system is very efficient. I’m definitely not saying the transportation system is bad here, but I do wish some of the same thoughts were spent on moving pedestrians around on city streets. I love walking around my neighborhood and throughout the city. There is so much to look at, different smells to smell, and people to watch. Shenzhen is a great city to enjoy by foot, but it would be much more enjoyable if you didn’t continually have to watch your step or figure out how to maneuver around the many barriers.
How Do I Cross This Street?

Small Opening

I Tripped and Fell Over This Bar

1 foot? Too narrow to pass

Good Solution

Too narrow to pass

Bollards are Found at Many Intersections

Even my friend is scared

Crosswalk

Trip Hazard

Textured Concrete

Stairs to Street Level

Textured Concrete
TRAVELS

Shenzhen is located in a great location. I was able to do quite a bit of traveling because of its close proximity to other cities and China’s extensive network of high-speed rail. This summer was my first time to China, so I made an effort to see some of the country’s diversity.

Hong Kong

Hong Kong rocked my world. The views alone of the skyscrapers and topography were breathtaking. We explored many parts of the city, both on the island and the northern part connected to China. I experienced rush hour on the Metro, which was nothing like I’ve seen before. I couldn’t tell you how many flights of stairs we climbed, but the topography made for some great amount of exercise and calf workouts.

Macau

Macau was an interesting place. It was originally settled by Portuguese, which gave it an interesting mix of Chinese and Portuguese flare. It has since become a major destination for gambling. It is the “Las Vegas of China.” The range of development over time was quite different. We did a lot of walking to see the architecture, the dense development, and even threw $20 on the ole roulette table.

Guilin and Yangshuo

Both Guilin and Yangshuo are tourist destinations. Guilin is filled with mountains that look like they’re straight out of a Dr. Seuss book. Pretty amazing! We toured the area by a chaotic rush of gas-powered boats and then by a peaceful, bamboo float powered by a paddle. I was able to ride a bike for the first time in China! We woke up early in the morning to hit the road by 5:30 am. We had to get to our boat ride by 7:00 am and we wanted to beat the morning traffic. It was beautiful. We stayed at a hostel in Yangshuo. It was a small city with lots of charm. The streets were narrow and somewhat windy. We had some of the local cuisine, which were spicy, homemade rice noodles that the area is known for.

Qingyuan

Thank heavens for the Internet and social people! I found a group on Meetup that was traveling to Qingyuan for a weekend of rafting, mountain climbing, and biking. I’ve used Meetup in Portland and other cities, but I was happy to see there were quite a bit of Meetup events in Shenzhen. A few people knew each other in the group, but for the most part we were about 20 strangers. I met a family from Hong Kong and some other young people working in China from Australia, Madagascar, Columbia, and the US. We all were looking forward to a weekend away from the city. I enjoyed the rafting and biking. I also rode my first motor scooter. The weekend was an adventure and became a way to meet some great friends who I ended up spending a lot of time with in Shenzhen.

Guangzhou

A fellow intern and I took a day trip to Guangzhou, which is about an hour train ride from Shenzhen. I was surprised how much the smog changed from Shenzhen to Guangzhou. Even though Guangzhou’s pollution is also not as bad as most of China, it was still noticeably worse. During our trip we explored the largest Urban Village in Guangzhou. It was very different and much denser than the ones I had been to in Shenzhen. We went to the island that was originally inhabited by Europeans. It felt very European in the architecture and city parks. We spent some time exploring the main public square in the city center and a temple.