A Random Sample of Things I Have To Say about China

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Introduction:
Thanks to a partnership between the Toulan School of Urban Studies and Planning at Portland State University (PSU) and the Urban Planning and Design Institute of Shenzhen, China (UPDIS), I was lucky enough to spend eight weeks during the summer of 2011 interning as a planner in the People’s Republic. What follows is a personal account of expectations and perceptions about the current state of planning in China, as I was able to understand it, and some naïve thoughts about what might improve Planning in the PRC. It is necessarily full of simplifications and based on anecdotal evidence, and is likely patently false on occasion. It may seem that I focus on the negative aspects of my time there, but rest assured that these are just the things I find most interesting and I had nothing less than an amazing time in this amazing place.

The city of Shenzhen is located at the mouth of the Pearl River delta and borders Hong Kong. It was the first “Special Economic Zone” opened up to foreign investment in the late 1970s, before which it was a small village. Today, Shenzhen is home to China’s third-busiest container port, the Chinese Stock Exchange, and over ten million residents. Like most cities in China, Shenzhen is still expanding at a breakneck pace due to migration from rural areas to cities.

Planning as practiced in China is a technical field, more akin to landscape design or architecture than what we practice in the United States. Planners focus almost exclusively on physical “plan-making,” with few economic, political, or social tools to draw upon. UPDIS was originally a government entity responsible for planning in the city, but recently (I’m unsure exactly when) became a private entity that bids for planning contracts throughout the nation. I worked for the policy wing of Unit 2.

Knowing, in some abstract way, that Shenzhen is huge and growing did not prepare me for the experience of visiting it in person, and reading about the practice of planning in China only somewhat eased the culture shock I would experience working for UPDIS.

Things I Saw:
The built environment of China is full of contradictions. Streets in some (wealthy) areas have large separated bicycle paths that are, often as not, used by automobiles. Shenzhen experiences more rainfall than Portland, concentrated in the summer months, but the sidewalk is often constructed of material that is dangerously slick when wet. All sidewalks have a textured path intended to serve as a guide for the blind, but often make hair-pin turns around obstacles or run straight into open manhole covers (lucky, I essentially never saw a blind person). Grandiose pedestrian overpasses and subways cross the 6+ lane roads that criss-cross the city, but are rarely used because jaywalking is much more convenient. Public spaces are very common and well-used, but their use is well-controlled with paved paths and fencing. Often times, little attention seems to be paid to how a development interfaces with its surroundings.
We arrived at a very interesting time for the city, as it was preparing for the Universiade collegiate games. Much of the city was receiving a facelift prior to its first international event, and scores of manual laborers transformed whole blocks (with fresh paint and cheap grating to cover the ubiquitous air conditioning units on each window) overnight. A brand new subway line was built, and some 100,000 “undesirables” had been evicted from the city just prior to my arrival.

I feel that my observations were corroborated by Michael, a mysterious figure who is apparently a westerner that has been working for UPDIS for many years. He writes for the quarterly magazine published by UPDIS and has his own blog. One funny anecdote: Chinese planners find it odd that foreigners are so infatuated with the old low-income worker housing that still exists in this city of grandiose malls. These dense, walkable neighborhoods with windy roads are considered a problem by Chinese planners, while I found them much more fun to explore than Shenzhen’s oversized superblocks.

Things I Did:

The life of a foreign intern at UPDIS is pretty fantastic. The dress code is very casual (a new hire wore a “Go Punk Yourself” t-shirt on his first day of work). Alison Wicks and I lived literally one block from our office, in an interesting hotel located above a Karaoke club. Work started between 8 and 9am, with a hypothetical calisthenics break at about 11:00. The music played every day, but I never saw anyone respond in any way. Lunch was from noon to about 1:00, after which the lights were turned off and naptime began. IKEA fold-out cots were attached to our desks. For me, work ended at about 6:00, but many other interns and employees stayed much later into the night, and it was not unusual for my roommate to spend 36 hours straight at work.

The Chinese Government has stated its commitment to reducing the nation’s greenhouse gas emissions. To this extent, the PRC has required each municipality to draft its own “eco-city” guidelines. UPDIS was creating these guidelines for the City of Shenzhen with great haste, and in secret. See, each city is competing for the prestige of being the first to reveal their guidelines, and therefore are not sharing their ideas readily with one another. And of course, given China’s political environment, once implemented it will be very difficult to change these guidelines.

I assisted the effort by researching and making presentations about sustainability “best practices” in the US and internationally. Among the topics I researched were: The Living Building Challenge and Oregon Sustainability Center, Portland’s emerging EcoDistricts, the LEED-ND Rating System, Low-Impact Development in Seattle, London’s BedZED district, and much more.

Each presentation seemed to frustrate my employers somewhat, as evidenced by the kinds of questions asked. “How much green roof does Portland require? How much is sustainable?” “How often do trees need to be spaced on a “Green Street?” “How many electric vehicle charging stations do we need?” “How much parking do we need to eliminate to reduce car ownership by x amount?” “What means this, Public Engagement?”

It took me quite some time to wrap my head around what my employers were seeking. This was due, I believe, to differing conceptions of What Planning Is. I had been giving examples of indicators,
incentive strategies, and goals to strive for. But these tools were not within the purview of Chinese planners, having to do with individual building envelopes (the Architect’s realm), market-based incentive strategies, or social programs. There were also real concerns with freedom given to planners and developers, who could make claims of sustainability that the government wouldn’t be able to evaluate.

The outcome of this project was described to me as an “index” and “checklist” on several occasions, and finally clicked in my mind that what they were seeking was a the “cookbook” of correct planning that Dr. Ozawa and Dr. Adler assured us did not exist.

But it does! I have seen it! I failed to get an electronic version of the document, but the City of Shenzhen has an index of Planning Guidelines, which give precise rules for the number of water treatment facilities, schools, police stations, petrol stations, etc for a given area. UPDIS was charged with adding to this “index” things like green infrastructure, solar panels, and low-carbon development in proscribed ways. Realizing this, my mind was fairly blown. The inconsistencies in the urban form that I had observed in Shenzhen made perfect sense when one realized that they were the effect of these checklists, drawn at the “30,000 feet” level and rarely ground-truthed.

A Concluding Ramble:
It is my opinion that as the Chinese economy continues to open, and as economic and physical planners add market-based implementation methods to their toolbox, we may begin to see the kinds of bottom-up measures that can compliment China’s typical approach and better achieve policy aims. Many scholars agree that this is an important, and currently absent, component of planning in China.

China faces a very difficult situation. The pressure to keep up rapid growth in cities is immense because of the pressure migration (legal and otherwise) is putting on public infrastructure and housing prices nationwide. But the breakneck pace of development has been responsible for numerous high-profile accidents, such as the collapse of a luxury condo under construction, the deadly high-speed train crash that occurred while I was in Shenzhen, and now the realization that the behemoth Three-Gorges Dam was poorly engineered and will require another US$18 billion (more than the initial cost) to repair.

So I now face a very real decision that will reflect my sense of purpose in the world and impact my future career. I’ve known for some time that I need to learn another language, as German doesn’t really help me in the line of work I hope to have. Should I learn Chinese, and throw my lot in with continued mega-expansion in the developing world and easy international travel, or should I learn Spanish and expect to help local communities become more sustainable and resilient in more mundane ways? Tough call!

For more of our observations about our excellent summer in the People’s Republic, visit our blog at http://transplanet.blogspot.com.