What did you do this Summer?

Oh not much...went to work in China, helped plan cities...you know, the usual. While a bit of an exaggeration, I have gotten a lot of mileage out of that statement, and I have my two-month internship with the China Academy of Urban Planning and Design (CAUPD) to thank for it. Over the course of my internship, I was able to get a rare look at the planning profession in China while working with a welcoming and patient team of urban planning and design professionals. In what follows I will relate my personal and professional experiences and throw in a few helpful tips for future Portland State interns.

No way! China? What city?

Yes way. I was lucky enough to be placed at a branch office in the city of Shenzhen. Located in Guangdong province just across China's administrative border with Hong Kong, this bustling boomtown has grown from roughly 30,000 inhabitants in 1980 to a city of over 10 million people. That's right, million...with a capital M. The prefecture of Shenzhen was incorporated in 1979 and was the first of Deng Xiaopeng's special economic zones. An experiment in free market reforms, the city was “planned” from its inception with gridded streets, dense multi-family housing, and economic growth in mind.

Shenzhen is a city of immigrants. Chinese from western provinces have flooded into the region over the past 30 years in hopes of securing factory jobs, prosperity, and a better life for their families. As manufacturing has steadily moved to the outskirts of town, factories have been replaced by shiny new high-rises and hordes of busy office workers. The morning commute is a sight to behold—elevators, escalators, and subway trains are pushed to their breaking point as people rush to their respective steel and glass towers.

**Shenzhen Fun Facts:**

-70% of the mobile phones in Africa originate in Shenzhen.*

-Shenzhen is the world capital for knock-off clothing and electronics.*

*Based on anecdotal evidence
Were you on vacation or something?

“Or something” is a pretty good way to describe it. While my employers at CAUPD were very accommodating of long weekends, there was real work to be done. CAUPD is a state-owned enterprise, but it operates like a consulting firm. It is housed within the Ministry of Construction and receives clients directly from the central government. These clients tend to be municipalities in Guangdong province, but projects can come from pretty much anywhere in the country. The finer details of how the organization operates and who exactly answers to whom are still largely a mystery to me, as bureaucracy in China tends to be fairly opaque.

The CAUPD office is brand new and beautiful. As a point of process, I was informed on my first day that it was custom-built by an interior designer from Hong Kong. Located along Shenzhen’s main thoroughfare, Shennan Road, the office occupied the top three floors of a modern high-rise. A sea of low cubicles was occasionally broken up by some architectural models, collaborative work spaces, or an ornate Chinese tea table. It was inspiring, airy, and the views of Shenzhen were unreal. If only drab U.S. planning offices could look like this!

So did they name a new city after you?

Don’t be silly, I was only there for two months. It takes at least a year before you even get your first bridge dedication. All kidding aside, I was given the opportunity to contribute to a number of interesting projects during my internship. As an outsider, most of what I did was research but I also had the opportunity to get involved in some interesting design projects.

Canals and Street Networks

For this research project, I was tasked with determining the best street network configuration for a new canal district. Utilizing international examples of how canals and streets interact, I created a set of recommendations for efficiency, connectivity, and liveability.
Curb Radius

My supervisor was curious about how reducing curb radius can be used as a traffic calming measure. I researched a number of different intersection configurations in different contexts and provided scenarios and recommendations.

Houhai CBD - Parking Strategy

The project to which I dedicated most of my time involved designing an underground parking circulation system for a newly built central business district. Located at the edge of Shenzhen's Nanshan district, Houhai CBD was built atop reclaimed land, dredged from Nanshan bay. In order to reduce anticipated congestion, planners at CAUPD sought a way to avoid added traffic pressures from drivers who were searching for a place to park. They hoped to funnel these drivers into an underground street network that would direct them to an appropriate parking garage. I was tasked with creating 3-dimensional visualizations and animations that would help municipal planners communicate these ideas to their clients.

Portland Bike/Ped Presentation

In addition to working on CAUPD projects, I was asked to give a presentation on bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure in Portland. Recreational bicycling is becoming more popular in China so my co-workers wanted to know all about cycle tracks and multi-use paths. I also talked about the challenges of planning for freight mobility and bike/ped safety using a case study from NE Couch Street in the eastside industrial district of Portland.
Hey now, it wasn’t all work. What’s the point of being in China if you’re not going to spend at least some time as a tourist? I and the other Shenzhen interns made a point of exploring some interesting new part of China whenever possible. Long-haul sleeper busses are really inexpensive and trains are a great way to see the countryside—even if small children decide to use your bunk as a jungle-gym at 3am!

Hong Kong is an amazing world-class city and with fantastic rail connections, you can be in the heart of HK island in just over an hour...just don’t forget your passport. Make sure to explore the lesser known islands, they are pretty incredible too!

The central Chinese city of Guilin is a great tourist destination for striking and iconic Chinese scenery. Make sure you visit the town of Yangshuo. You can gawk at hordes of Chinese tourists or rent a snazzy electric scooter.

We also met up with some Beijing interns in Shanghai, rode in a psychedelic tunnel tram, ate unhealthy amounts of soup dumplings.

In Shenzhen there were also plenty of opportunities for discovery. I had a blast exploring new parts of the city on foot, by bicycle, and on the brand new metro system. Food is everywhere and it is all strange and new for a Westerner. Sometimes it is delicious, sometimes it makes you ill, but that is part of the adventure!

While there are not many tourist attractions in Shenzhen, I thoroughly enjoyed more mundane things like people-watching and trying to infiltrate some of the taller buildings for a good view. Lizhi Park was a favorite among the Shenzhen interns and King Key 100, the tallest building in the city, should have a great observation deck by 2012.

Working for CAUPD in Shenzhen was an enriching experience that I won’t soon forget. The map to the right is my attempt at reconstructing the locations of my favorite places in Shenzhen. The names are largely made-up or adapted from Mandarin, but it should give future interns an idea of some of the great things that await them.