This year six MURP students were placed in two Chinese cities. While two students spent their summer internships in Beijing, four of us went to Shenzhen working for two different institutions. I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to spend nine weeks at the Urban Planning and Design Institute of Shenzhen (UPDIS) assisting an urban design group on the 4th floor of a 10 story building. Let me introduce the city I called home for two and a half months and share with you my experiences in China.

The City

Shenzhen is a city of the first Special Economic Zone created by the Chinese government in 1980 to boost business and investments. It was supported by supporting flexible economic policies and governmental measures. This has provided the city an unbelievable growth over the past 33 years. A town of 300,000 inhabitants (not exactly what I would call a “fishing village” as it is often referred to) became a metropolis, home for at least 10 million people. I say at least because of the significant amount of migrant workers in the city. 70 percent of the people do not have Shenzhen hukou (official registration) so is difficult to keep track how many people actually live there. According to estimates, the population is at least 14 million, but some even speculate that the real number may be above 18 million. Shenzhen also has also achieved the highest GDP per capita (over $14,000) in China, therefore many people move there in hope for a better life. That is the reason why it is a rare occasion when inquiring about where one was from, the answer is Shenzhen. I personally only met two people who told me they were born there.
The city is full of young people. The average age is currently 28.7 years with 36 percent of the population being between the ages 20-29. How long this city is visible in everyday life: it is a rare site seeing older people.

This city is a prime location for manufacturing and services. If one is looking for electronics or even eye glasses, Shenzhen is the place to go. The banking, financial industry was also thriving in Shenzhen, however this has been less part of the significant industries in the last few years. At the Yantian port mega container vessels arrive every day as it is China’s second busiest ports. The city is full of energy. Seeing new developments, constructions and reconstructions were my daily experiences.

One of the more chaotic areas of the city is where I stayed for 9 months: in the Futian district. The streets are full of people almost every part of the day trying to get to work, running errands, meeting up with friends and so on. Sidewalks and roads, on this side of town and elsewhere, have serious cracks or break often, either due to bad construction or because of heavy use by pedestrians and more significantly by motor bicycles or vehicles carrying heavy loads. It’s advisable to look out for (all kinds of) vehicles while one is on the street especially because it seems like only cars adhere to traffic lights. However, I did not witness any accidents while I was there and I found people there having very quick reflexes (both pedestrians and those driving vehicles).

While the traffic is heavy I found great amount of green space in the city and people living in Shenzhen are the most proud of this asset of their city. Many believe that this makes this city more livable than any other big cities in China. Indeed there are lots of parks there, and I visited quite a few. I was intrigued by the lush green vegetation as well as the liveliness of people using the place for dancing, playing music and doing exercises.
While some Shenzheners told me that there’s nothing to see in Shenzhen, I did not find this being the case. I always found things to see and do. There are even a few things I missed and now I wish I have done. To me everything was interesting! The distinctively different neighborhoods, the beautiful large gates, the chaotic traffic, the large avenues intersecting small neighborhood streets, the signs (which sometimes was translated funny in English), the recycling bins, the stairs, the tall and fancy skyscrapers right next to the poor neighborhood of urban villages, the food and so on. I did find a lot of places that were worth a visit and not just for an urban planner but an average tourist too.

It was remarkably east to get around in Shenzhen, even with limited Chinese knowledge. The public transportation system is very efficient. In Shenzhen Metro a new train arrives every few minutes, and even places further away from the center are usually well connected with busses. The Metro lines are extensive and the expansion of the system has been remarkable in the last few years.

**Working at the Urban Planning and Design Institute of Shenzhen (UPDIS)**

The UPDIS is located in the Futian District, an always busy area full of restaurants, retail stores, entertainment and office buildings on the street level and residential on top. The office was located right across the street to where I stayed, in a hotel on the corner of Yannan Road. This area is in a centrally located location, walking distance to not one but three subway stations (of different lines).

A lot of my work during my internship was consisted, similarly to many other foreign interns there, of case studies. Planners wanted to know how other cities overcome a particular problem or solved a planning or/and design issue, and used the researched best practices as part of the plan. I have also worked on a couple of other projects (some of these together with interns from China) such as on an area of a railway station and its surroundings in Nanning, an internationally strategic location. Another fascinating plan was near the city of Wenzhou, in the east coast of China, where the underground
area is utilized and developed for transportation, services, retail and defense. Yet another project I worked on partially was in Shenzhen in the Xiangmi Lake Area.

Most planners and interns could speak English, but in varying levels so the work (and life) there was not without linguistic challenges. It was an interesting experience to work in China because it had a different rhythm to it. Within a couple of hours of starting the workday music invited workers for a workout at their desk (I believe these focus on the eyes and legs, but I am not completely sure). I have seen no one actually doing the workout myself, but I have heard that some people do. I confess that I would have tried it if I understood the instructions. After a few minutes of this workout music the work continues (or never stops) and within an hour or so lunch and naptime comes. People at UPDIS go to lunch mainly at one of the five nearby restaurants because the office partially subsidizes food purchases at these establishments. Most people take a nap after lunch; as people usually live too far to go home so they stay at their desk that has a pull put bed built into it. I myself rarely took advantage of that. I usually went for a walk, run some errands or continued working in my hotel room. After returning to work within a couple of hours there is workout music again, and we ended the day later in the afternoon (except when deadlines were approaching and was asked to stay later). The work week in China is long. Many urban planners and designers work in the weekends, and they rarely have any vacation. This I definitely something that I don’t envy.

Travels

Shenzhen is a great location for traveling, both domestically and internationally. Hong Kong is very close and accessible by subway. The Shenzhen Metro runs right to the border. After going through passport control and customs it is easy to catch the connecting Hong Kong Metro. Therefore me, as well as my fellow mates from the MURP program, made visits to this city often.
Kong is a much more international city than Shenzhen, full of tourists and people from around the world, and English is used much more common too which can be a nice break from using hand signals and our limited Chinese to avoid misunderstandings.

Macau is also located close to Shenzhen. It is worth a visit for its Portuguese architecture and nice beaches. In the weekends it gets very crowded. We experienced this once with Pam another intern from the MURP program working for CAUPD. In fact it got so crowded we jumped on a bus to the ocean to escape and had a wonderful, long hike along the beach.

Guangzhou (formerly Canton) is a large city north of Shenzhen. In fact it is the third largest city in China. It is just a short train ride away. A short one because it is a fast ride! It was the fastest train ride I have ever experienced with its 305 km/hr (189.5 mile/hr) speed. It was also the first time I got the glimpse of the countryside of China, the agricultural fields and smaller towns located between the two cities. Guangzhou has great transportation system (similarly to Shenzhen), famous traditional cuisine, several impressive towers, and it is also the home of the oldest mosque in China.

I was also fortunate to visit Dapeng, which is a town about an hour drive from inner Shenzhen. This was a two day trip planned by UPDIS, and everyone in our department, including interns, were invited to join free of charge. The town catered towards tourists with its Mediterranean architecture (imitation), beach activities and bazaars. But there were also some history to see: the ancient part of town with its intriguing old architecture and a large fortress. Visiting Dapeng was as interesting as interacting with my fellow colleagues and interns in a low key, informal way: having dinner, celebrating a birthday and pedaling in the sea.

At the end of my stay in China I also visited Taipei (Taiwan). I chose this destination because of its closeness, and because I wanted to experience Chinese culture that
may be a little different. I was amazed by the architecture, the food, as well as the extreme amount of motor bicycles on the roads (it seemed like everyone owned one there). I found this country very open, the people very friendly, helpful and interested in talking to someone from another country. I even met someone who grew up in Portland while enjoying the hot springs that I went to visit several times.

My Takeaway

I learned a lot in China. I learned about planning, but also about living in the largest city I ever visited much less lived. It was intriguing for its dynamics and ever-changing, never-ending development. When someone told me before that there is a city where supposedly one high-rise a day is built I would not have really believed it. But after experiencing Shenzhen, I can definitely believe that.

I also learned about a different way of life, working environments, and how to adapt to a place and people where a language is spoken that I had not mastered (to say the least). This experience also created questions about people, places, the future of China and the world, the advantages and disadvantages different types of leadership and planning, sustainability and growth, just to name a few. Developments happen so fast that it is hard to believe that it can be done in a sustainable way. How long can this go on? How much more economic growth can be made at the expense of the environment and people until serious consequences occur which cannot be reversed? Maybe things will turn around. I really hope so because the people I met were honestly striving to do their best work and to advance China in every way possible.

Thank You!

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