*What To Bring*

Prior to traveling to China I had never been out the country, let alone even been on a plane for that matter either. With that said, one could only imagine my excitement and nervousness leading up to the day of departure. Given that this trip would span over two weeks, I made sure to pack adequately enough to sustain myself overseas expecting the bare minimum. Amongst the top of my list of packing was personal hygiene. I made sure to pack three tooth just incase I should misplace or drop one in a dirty place, and one tube of toothpaste. Beyond that I packed one of the most basic personal hygienic accessories such as deodorant, shampoo, shower flip-flops, lotion, and etc. Moreover, in terms of laundry and how much clothes to bring, I made sure to first pack at least 16 pairs of underwear to last me for the entirety of the two weeks, followed by three pairs of jeans, three pairs of shorts, one coat incase it got cold, and about 8-10 pairs of shirts. In retrospect though I wore all my clothes while there, honestly speaking you could probably slide by with far less which a couple of my classmates did. Furthermore, after having traveled through China, one thing I would highly recommend bringing, that never really occurred to me to do so until after landing in China, is a small kit of personal napkins/paper towel, and a small tube of hand sanitizer. I say personal napkins are amongst one the best things you could bring along with you because about 90% of the places outside your personal living accommodations in the hotel or dorms, will not provide toilet paper in stalls or bathrooms, and even at some restaurants. Secondly I would stress to bring hand sanitizer because without a doubt you are going to end up a situation where you are going to need to cleanse your hands.

Moreover, moving past the hygienic assets to bring with you to China. I would highly recommend bring a camera of some sort to capture ever moment of the trip. For those anything like me who lounges a camera a everywhere they go a camera carrying bag is also a great thing to bring to one keep the camera safe when not need and two it acts as small carrying porch to store other things in as well when strolling down the street. In terms of safety and theft in the places we visited and stayed, personally myself I wouldn’t be worried but nevertheless stay vigilant and always keep the stuff you bring out of your room on you at all times in public. In terms of debating on whether to bring a laptop with you in China, honestly speaking though I brought my own with me I barely ever used it and would even say I probably I let others borrow my laptop more than I used it myself. With that said if your worried about your laptop getting stolen in the hotel room or dorms you’ll stay at, don’t let that be the only reason not to bring it. However, in all honesty given your hectic schedule and curiosity to explore the city when given free time, you will most likely never use your laptop while there. Even more so, given that you only have two weeks in China, I would highly recommend using that time while there to drop all personal electronics besides your camera, and get out of you comfort zone in the hotel and dorms and explore the city. If your worried about keeping in contact with your parents or loved ones back home make sure to register your parents to the teacher mailing list, who will inform everyone you register of your whereabouts and status. Lastly, a reason to not bring a computer along with you is the censorship in China. Just about 70% of the entertainment sites we use here in the states is banned (i.e. Youtube, Google, Facebook, Vimeo, etc), with that said if your thinking about bringing a computer along with for entertainment, I would advise otherwise. Last but not least, in terms of money and getting around in China, cash is 100% the way to go. One thing I would advise is letting your bank know prior than jetting off into to China. Prior to leaving for China I withdrew about a 100 USD from my account and exchanged it for Chinese currency once

*Reflection Essay*

While one can watch numerous movies or read countless books on China and traveling, nothing comes even remotely close to the real thing as to actually being there. Beyond the initial excitement of being in a new place 7000 miles away from home where your language is not the primary language spoken and you’re the pink elephant in the room. One cannot help but feel that they are in a whole different world upon their initial arrival to China. However, after spending a couple of days in China, interacting with local natives, and getting over the hump of your initial culture-shock; one can see China and the Chinese are a lot like us in terms of everyday activities, from shopping, working, and entertaining themselves. Overall, China especially now today with its sudden urban expansion and its increasing interest and influence from the west is a particularly interesting place to visit and learn from. In my case what initially attracted me most to China was my general skepticism and discomfort in the sudden rise of mega-cities erupting throughout China. Even more so, I wanted experience first hand the sustainable urban practices if any going on in the construction of these mega-cities.

Furthermore, although this class is called *Sustainable Urbanism*, during my entire trip throughout China, I often question and ponder the real meaning behind “sustainable”. Being an architecture student myself and I have heard countless varying definitions and theories behind the term and concept of sustainable; thus coming into this course I have developed a skeptical mindset for the word sustainability and all the supposed wonders and joy behind it. For me personally, I really do not buy the term or ideal sustainability being adequate method or solution for providing for our future generations to come. Even more so, I feel like more often than any other the term ‘sustainable” is often misconstrued giving way for the ideology we can continuing do what we are doing now whether it be wrong or not, but do a little less than what we have done before thus making us in the present more *sustainable*. With that said during my time in China, I tried to stray away from the scholarly mindset of believing every statistics and data sheets praising the “sustainable” practices in effect in China, but rather tried to embrace and experience China as is and what it is *actually* doing now at this very moment. In efforts to better understand the positives and negatives in China urban practices I tried to focused primarily on the pedestrian experience getting around the city via foot, safety and comfort while using public transportation, and the density and sense of scale of buildings in relationship to people, and last but not least the vernacular building practices, aesthetics, and cultural motifs pertaining to China and its tradition.

Amongst my first initial surprises upon arriving into Beijing was the sense of building to human scale, which seemed almost none existent. Besides old historical houses with interior central outdoor gathering space in the center, traveling around Beijing, I was blown away to see almost every new building whether it be housing complex or office building soared into the sky, even more so the density and how tightly compact these mega-buildings were in proximity to each other. Although, I understand some of the perks creating a dense urban-core to keep everything from shops, to offices, to houses, all within proximity to each other, seeing it in scale as large as Beijing was almost frightening. I could only imagine 20-50 years down the line what your going to see in Beijing is a concrete forest 2-4 times taller and compacted than New York, with a whole lot less order and structure than New York. Moreover, going back to keeping the pedestrian as of now in mind, being in Beijing I couldn’t help but feel overwhelmed by clumps of high-rise skyscrapers sprouting out the land making one almost feel insignificant next to them. Besides, the scale of the buildings in Beijing in terms of size, I was also taken back by the speed and constant *build now, think later* mentality present throughout Beijing. Although, as a student studying architecture I was impressed by some of the building forms I saw throughout Beijing; I was also sadden by a lot of them as well. Sadly, for me at least it seemed given the *build now, think later* mentality running rampant through out Beijing and China, architects and the businesses funding creating these large scale buildings were more interested in creating exuberant displays of architectural feats with little consideration for the context of the area it inhabitants.

This issue of erupting large exuberant buildings with little consideration for context of the surrounding area or overall function occurring now in China presents a couple of challenges and issues China will have to address sooner or later. First and foremost, while China is without a doubt is expanding and rising in population, statistical data only goes so. To exert boat loads of buildings based entirely off statistics can be fairly risky in terms of long-term development and adequate urban planning. For instance take the ghost city of Ordos, in China, where architects and developers have crafted large beautiful buildings and event spaces, yet of the last four years the city of Ordos has remained empty. Though, wealthy individuals have invested and bought land in the city of Ordos, the city itself remains as ghost-town, and who exactly this city was built for or when it will be occupied remains unclear till this day (cite\_source). Moreover, the city of Ordos, is just one of many ghost towns springing up throughout China, created by developers and designed by architects and planners with the *build now, think later* mentality. Although cities like Ordos erupting throughout China are claiming to be providing for and thinking of the future generations to come, are in many ways more than anything doing the exact opposite of that. Rather than preserving land for anticipated future use and development, developers are rushing to build on every piece of land they can grasp regardless if anyone will actually use that set piece of land.

In correlation to mega-cities like Ordos, an issue in China’s urbanism rarely address is the displacement of individuals and the destruction of towns and villages destroyed to make way for mega-cities and ghost towns like Ordos that serve the elite and ignore the common men. Interestingly enough, while giving my presentation at BJUT on smart growth and speaking on the subject matter of urban development and infrastructure, a couple students there who have experienced first hand displacement in more way than anything felt opposed to idea of *more* urban development and infrastructure. Thus showing a disconnect between the development and planning going on now in Beijing and the actual individuals living there. All in all, in terms of architecture and development in China, given what I saw first hand in Jinan and more so in Beijing, I feel a little at ease where exactly China is heading in terms of development and planning. Although, as of now China has the means and resources to erect whatever they what under the sun, there is absolutely no way financially uphold this practice, or even socially for that matter, for sooner or later one might start to see a up rise in opposition of individuals, towns and villages bring displaced, much like the elderly couple who refused to evacuate their house now in the center of a mega highway (cite\_source).

Last but not least, while on the subject of architecture and displacement of villages and towns in lieu of mega-structures and high rises, China in terms of culture, traditions, and vernacular building practices/aesthetics is also in face of adversity in China. Regardless of my foreign status in Beijing, while traveling throughout Beijing the high rise skyscrapers in more ways than other for me at least masked the cultural identity of the given providence and district I was in. In many cases strolling down the street in Beijing and Jinan, felt in terms of architectural tectonics more Western than Chinese. While high-risers and skyscrapers are efficient in some aspect in terms of preserving space and function, form in terms of reflecting the context of a given area is just as equally important. From what I saw in Beijing and in Jinan, much of the architectural language expressed in the majority of the building is Western or European as opposed to Chinese. While I am pleased to see China growing to some extent I think it also important for countries such as China experiencing such a sudden economic boom to keep their traditions and culture in mind when designing urban spaces and buildings. For sooner or later I can predict China in the nearly future being an architectural zoo with no real identity or characteristic. Furthermore, in terms of architecture in China, amongst one of my favorite experiences was being able to speak to Chinese born and raised architect Yun Du, of BLVD architecture firm, who also touched based on the various issues and challenges facing the architectural and urban expression of China. Being able to hear first hand and interact with a architect born and raised in Beijing in was really enriching academically for those interested in architecture and urban planning.

Besides the architecture in major cities like Beijing and Jinan, another issue I found troublesome for the pedestrian in the city was traffic. Traffic congestion in Beijing and Jinan, hands down was the number one thing I was not ready to handle in real life. Even till this day, I am blown away how people in Beijing are able to continue on with their everyday lives having to deal with such dangerous road conditions on a daily basis. Going back to the pedestrian experience in the city, traffic is probably one of the biggest issues Beijing and Jinan has yet to resolve. Although, I admit Beijing and Jinan even more so does a great job at providing your average pedestrian with no car cheap easy access to metro-buses, taxis, and subways; walking down the street is still a nightmare for the pedestrian. Unlike in the states cars followed by motorcycles and scooters have the right away, while the pedestrian stays at the bottom of the pecking order; meaning cars do not and will not stop or yield for a pedestrian, which makes crossing the street by foot a dangerous endeavor. Even more so, the street layout itself is another major issue in Beijing and Jinan, given that the average street stretches nearly 2-3 times as wide as some of your widest streets in America and traffic regulation loosely enforced; cars are free to switch, merge, and drive however they please. Even on the sidewalk for pedestrians you think one could walk safely by foot were still at risk getting hit by cars disregarding pedestrian lines or bikes and scooters zipping across the sidewalk as well. Based on my personal experiences as a pedestrian trying to walk down the street in China, it is blatantly obvious stronger traffic regulation and enforcement is an absolute must for China if it expects to continue expanding and growing, or even to maintain a sense of order as it is today. For without a doubt if China continues addressing what they are doing today in terms of traffic congestion and regulation, the infrastructure of the city will eventually begin to collapse in on itself.

All in all, as a collective whole, I thoroughly enjoyed China in terms of life experiences gained and it just being plain fun in general. However, speaking as an honest individual focusing on the urbanism practices exercised today in China. I will have to say China by no means is “sustainable.” From the rise in poorly constructed high-rise buildings being plotted throughout the land, to large numbers of groups being displaced and swept from their lands, to air pollution, and the traffic congestion; Beijing as well as the rest of China has a long road ahead of itself if they expect to continue growing as an country shifting towards urbanism. While I can sit here all day and compare and contrast cities around the world doing things right and how China can learn from that place and implement this strategy and such and such, I understand a lot of the issues China faces is unique to China given the large scale at which the city has to accommodate for as well as the culture and inhabitants of China itself. Although I was only in China for a total duration of two weeks I for one will never forget the experiences and journeys I had over there. Hands down possibly one of my favorite aspects of the trip besides learning about the urbanism in effect in China, was being able to interact with students of BJUT, and Shandong. I think being able to learn and grow from one another with individuals of ages was the most enriching part of the trip and I will always remember that. To those looking for a culturally enriching class, a sense of adventure, or even fulfillment I strongly recommend this class to them. In closing, I would just like to say a big thank you to Prof. Ming Ming, Ming Tang, and Chris Auffery for organizing, planning, and enduring us students overseas; you professors really made this trip worthwhile in every shape and way.