

Reflective Essay on Sustainable Urbanism in China

Travel:

- Instructors and UC International did all the heavy lifting, all I had to do was show up

Sustainability:

A common definition of sustainable development is meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. From my short visit, Chinese cities (or at least Beijing) are unsustainable based on the smog, congestion, and numerous ring roads. A smart guy by the name of Robert Park (1967, p. 3) wrote that, “The city and the urban environment represent man’s most consistent and, on the whole, his most successful attempt to remake the world he lives in more after his heart’s desire. But if the city is the world which man created, it is the world in which he is henceforth condemned to live.” Although I may not want to live in an urban environment like Beijing, for many Chinese who are poor or live in rural areas the opportunities for a better life in an urban setting will remain a strong draw. These people with little or nothing are the ones who are condemned to live in Beijing.

Although this development takes place in a setting with a top-down planning, the government itself is not all powerful and in many ways is overwhelmed by the scale of urbanization taking place, always playing catch-up. And it’s not just the scale of development, but the rapid pace. When Stella, a kid, started to get nostalgic for blue skies in Jinan, she sounded like an old man. As an example, the idea that three of the ring roads in Beijing could be cobbled together along with the majority of subway lines in little more than decade represents incredibly rapid development. Another challenge besides both pace and scale is the impression I have that local governments are often selective in following central government edicts, which complicates comprehensive policy initiatives (Economist, 2013).

The result from a planning point of view appears to be incrementalism and path dependence on a massive level, with the engineers doing a great job of projecting future NO_x and SO_x levels and architects focused on meeting unrealistic deadlines. Everyone working diligently towards running off a cliff. Not only does incrementalism favor those currently in power, perhaps more importantly in this case is that wrong turns have little chance of being corrected at a later point

because of the scale involved (David, 1985 and Lindblom, 1959). The solution tends to be more of the same; such as more ring roads, you can never have too many. As pointed out, the more roads and the more parking that are built simply serve to attract more autos and more miles driven. Urban development in such a piecemeal, disjointed fashion is likely to generate a lot of negative costs. These externalities are already taking the form of increased premature deaths, poor health, and environmental degradation (Wong, 2013).

Making a broad judgment based on a short visit, Chinese society as a whole put a high status on their place in world based on the country's long history and size. Historically, this is seen in those who get to have 9 x 9 knobs on the doors and are authorized use of certain colors. Maybe today this is seen in driving status cars such as Buick and modern architecture with no ties to the past. Not that the Chinese are unique; as a U.S. citizen I know all about seeking status. I just wonder if such a worldview currently precludes the introspection and self-criticism necessary to evaluate appropriate models of sustainable development. Think about the over the top opening ceremony for the 2008 Olympics, while London was happy just to have James Bond drop in for the 2012 Olympics.

Often the focus appeared to be on doing things that pollute more efficiently, so to speak, rather than looking at doing things differently. For instance, China is dependent on coal for power production and so reduction of carbon emissions would seem pretty important, but who's looking at alternatives that don't involve coal? The visit to the Confucius Institute located at Shandong University provided a great example on how to garner soft power. Who wasn't impressed by the bathrooms? Equally important to note along with the bathrooms was the contrast with the National Engineering Laboratory on the Qianfoshan campus, where the facilities weren't so nice. If reducing coal emissions were truly a national priority, you'd think the facilities would be a little nicer. Nicer facilities for the engineering lab don't necessarily mean solutions could then be discovered for pollution, but it does give a sense of priorities.

Sustainable development would seem to require a good orientation towards the future, as we're often stuck with the built environment that we create. Cincinnati's reliance on canals, rather than jumping on the railroad bandwagon or the failure to finish off the subway still shape how we live our lives today. An orientation towards a more rounded quality of life rather than simply economic development is also necessary for sustainable development. Existing policies in China that generate development fees as a source of revenue for local governments rather than more

mundane property taxes illustrate an orientation focused on economic growth. The Great Wall provides ample evidence that China can plan and execute successfully on a large scale. However, with the current focus is on economic development, the outlook for sustainability is awfully bleak. On a lighter note the trip was great, the people were wonderful, and China certainly holds a lot of job opportunities for planners, architects and environmental engineers in the future.

References

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