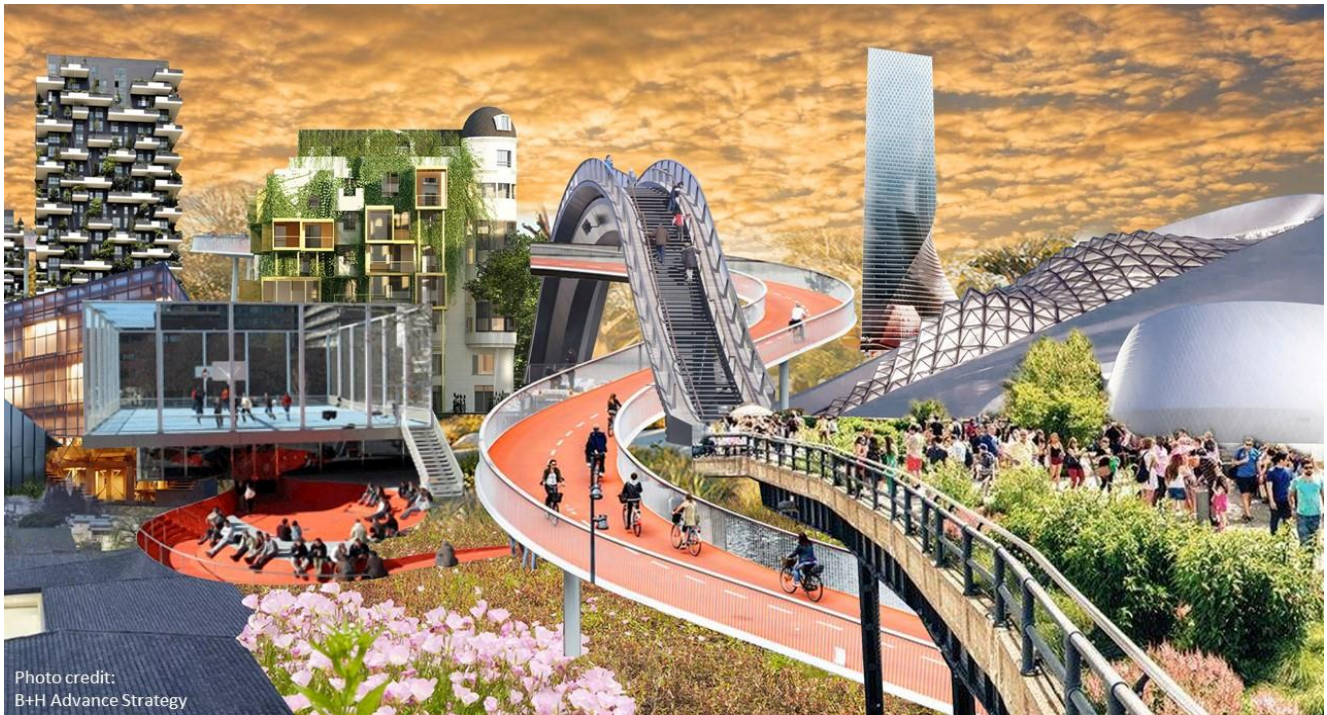


East Meets West: Planning Lessons Learned From China



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I have spent 15 years living in Beijing and Shanghai, designing and planning projects (from remote locations to mega cities) across China. After moving to Seattle, I am struck by some differences between planning developments for the Far East versus the West.

Let's Talk About Scale!

In China, growth is happening on a massive scale. New super-scale cities emerge where industry and agriculture once stood, while vast corporate campuses bloom around elaborate infrastructure systems. Some take the form of "Elevated Cities", where extensive subterranean logistics, services, and infrastructure networks are built to free up the airspace above for expanding hi-tech industry campuses and to make room for residential development (please refer to

Diagram 1). The Chinese take this growth and expansion as a sign of prosperity. Although development is happening on a large scale, there are lessons to be learned to ensure that it doesn't eradicate structures that are steep in heritage and culture.

In Seattle, there seems to be a general perception that new developments tower over buildings that existed there before. Density and height discussions on aesthetics and visual impact seem to take precedence over benefits for the common good. The long-term socio-economic benefits and opportunities are often overlooked and depreciated.



Diagram 1: Artist impression of “Elevated City” in Foshan, Guangdong Province, stacks new residential above existing light-manufacturing/industrial buildings with a connected public park above existing infrastructure. (Photo credit: B+H Advance Strategy)

Planning with Interests at Heart

Projects in China set out with the highest of intentions. Clients are often driven by the desire to do what it takes to create truly sustainable solutions to environmental, social and economic prosperity.

Trade-offs diminish barriers that many developers face. For example, China makes it economically viable for developers to provide housing for displaced citizens and communities. The proportion of these units is significant, compared to the scale of the overall mix of market-value units tucked in the density of the new development. In some instances, displaced citizens object to relocation or hold-out for greater compensation from the developer. This can result in citizens becoming physically isolated while construction proceeds around them, insisting on holding their grounds until a resolution is agreed with the developer (please refer to Diagram 2).



Diagram 2: At one of B+H’s projects outside Beijing, occupants of the remaining residential block refused to leave, even as half of the building had been dismantled and services were cut - they wanted more in their compensation package. (Photo credit: B+H Advance Strategy)

For the developer, the belief is that this approach improves living standards and creates better access to jobs. However, the homogeneous norms designed to attract new residents to “destination” cities, do eradicate the cultural and historical foundations that anchor communities to a sense of place.

High Tide Lifts All Boats

As the Puget Sound region (a coastal area of the Pacific Northwest in the U.S. - State of Washington), and Seattle in particular, strives to densify, there are lessons to be learned from China’s human-focused development practices.

Developers in Seattle can take advantage of a high tide that could lift all boats. There are tremendous opportunities to reframe our mindset towards future developments, especially as we invest in new transit links that will create opportunities for better city and community building. As city planners, we should:

1. Look beyond the fence. In our strategic planning practice, we invest a lot of time in thinking holistically about the mix of adjacent businesses, services and opportunities beyond site boundaries. What is already there, and what is missing?

Thinking how adjacent stakeholders can benefit through a shared vision creates opportunity for extended capital partners and serves the entire community, not just the development’s target population.

2. Paint an irresistible vision. The most sustainable developments are those embraced by the community at large because they create local economic engines that benefit the whole. A compelling vision of community living provides desired amenities, services, jobs and social attractors. This vision becomes a narration that animates communities and turns naysayers into strong advocates.

While the approach in the past in China has been to gamify a community through thematic approaches, future generations desire a sense of authenticity that reflects a region's unique assets and attributes.

3. Density creates room for old and new. Despite the government's best intentions, swanky new developments in China have created enough density to support housing for existing and new populations, but have no sense of history or culture. New populations struggle to bridge the economic divide that separates the new middle class from the developer's image of prosperity for all.

As we look to solve our own increasing disparity, we need to create more than just the density to support affordable housing. We must seek to intermingle low-income and affordable units within a development that also provides easy access to well-paying jobs, childcare and support services for all segments of the population, removing the "us" from "them" stigmatization. (Please refer to Diagram 3)



Diagram 3: This master plan for the Guangzhou/Foshan corridor integrates local villages and supports affordable housing. (Photo credit: B+H Advance Strategy)

4. Mix, scale, flex, apply. We often over complicate simple things. Programming is easily adaptable, and the model is flexible. Each development can have a different driver: a community college, a hospital, a corporate headquarter. The secret lies in identifying the critical mix of social and community spaces, services and amenities that will allow each neighbourhood to thrive. Residential developments cannot be the driver alone.

As we plan communities, we should pay more attention to human factors that matter

most. Desirable places to live offer a diverse mix of programmes that create a self-sustaining, locally relevant socio-economic environment. Short-term profit margins and schedules will ultimately fall short over time if they ignore the importance of the very things that bind us.

Conclusion

Planning cities that will continue to thrive in uncertain times requires a strategy that supports long-term resilience.

The built form of our cities is the infrastructure that supports human, social and economic activity. It is interdependent with the surrounding natural environment. Recognising that cities are an expression of human needs and desires, requires that resilience planning begins at the community level. As each of the risk that surrounds us increases in scale, our planning must enable us to respond at scale.

The high tide that lifts all boats can be the global knowledge acquired through the urbanisation and development of our cities over time. Many problems faced in one location have already been solved in another. Much can be learned and many issues addressed through open connectivity and communication. To achieve this heightened awareness and global knowledge, we need to build both the physical and the digital infrastructure to share information and solutions effectively. Global connectivity creates a living network of diverse experience that can be shared and built upon to solve today's complex urban challenges and anticipate future change.

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