

the quanzhou community planning studio

Implications of Quanzhou Community Planning Studio

CHINA is now experiencing a rate of urbanization as fast as any before seen in the world. In terms of absolute volume of urbanization, China's current transformation is simply unprecedented. Urban planning is in the middle of this maelstrom. In the name of speed and efficiency in accomplishing its mission to modernize urban living and working conditions and keep pace with China's phenomenal growth, urban planning in China has been practiced primarily as a technical profession, dominated by engineering and design. It is commonly understood that those with expert knowledge and with the interests of the majority of people at heart are best able to make decisions about development, and that they should be empowered to make them as quickly as possible.

HOWEVER, with the rise of market influences in development and growing disparities in the material living conditions of different regions and social groups across China, there is also an increase in the diversity of interests and means among the people. The "majority" appears to be shrinking, and its priorities are no longer as easily discerned as they once seemed to be. Important decisions about urban development are increasingly being made at local levels of government. In this context, two central government initiatives stand out as being especially significant with respect to urban planning: (1) the recent legal enshrinement of private property rights in the Chinese constitution, and (2) the government's growing support for community-based governance and social service provision. The first initiative stems from the central government's determination to enhance the power of the individual acting in the market, while the second stems from its desire to find the appropriate scale and mode of collective action and communal responsibility. Both represent the shrinking and decentralization of the welfare state.

UNDER THESE emerging conditions, Chinese policy-makers and professionals are finding new roles for urban planning. They are also seeing the need to make planning more transparent, participatory, democratic, and responsive both to market and community. Indeed, one of the first legal tests of the new constitutional provision for private property was a complaint by residents of Beijing against the city's planning authority over their displacement and the demolition of their homes by urban redevelopment. The residents won their case. Urban planning authorities throughout China are now concerned about implementing plans that do not adequately take into account the interests of all stakeholders.

FAR FROM BEIJING, the city of Quanzhou is a very special place to explore innovative ways to address the new challenges facing urban planning in China. An ancient port, eight and nine centuries ago Quanzhou was the destination of traders from across the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. The city has long had an especially strong tradition of small-scale commerce and de facto private property rights that survived even the most radical periods of China's revolutionary collectivization. After centuries of decline and out-migration, Quanzhou has seen its economy grow phenomenally since the Reform and Opening of the late 1970s – not so much through government initiative, but through a remarkably decentralized web of private, family-based connections to wealthier relatives in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, and throughout the diasporic Chinese communities of Southeast Asia. Once again the city is a destination, but now for migrants from around China who come to make goods for export in its factories.

QUANZHOU is thus a city where cosmopolitanism and local character are inextricably intertwined – a city where globalization itself is a part of its local identity. This poses special problems for the preservation of heritage, and also for the definition of community. The municipal government is cognizant of these challenges, and has welcomed a series of participatory planning activities of which the Summer 2004 Community Planning Studio was only the latest. These activities, supported since 1999 by the Ford Foundation with its first grant to an urban project in China, focused on an historic preservation district in Quanzhou's Chengnan area, and sought to build a community consensus on how to preserve old houses while upgrading infrastructure and public space. They represented an innovative approach to planning primarily by encouraging the extensive and unrestricted involvement of residents in meetings with each other and with government officials to discuss preservation and upgrading plans.

THE 2004 Quanzhou Community Planning Studio represented further innovation in a number of respects. First, while in China urban planning is generally seen as a technical activity, the studio explicitly treated it also as a political enterprise – i.e. as a means to identify and resolve conflicts. The studio was almost entirely "unscripted;" that is, it did not begin with a program determined in advance by one stakeholder, but instead, in a very short time, developed a program based on the responses of many stakeholders to a qualitative social research process. Generally, the studio emphasized process rather than product, and explicitly described a set of research and planning tools useful in multi-stakeholder processes. These tools, and the findings they produced in Quanzhou, were summarized in pamphlets that will be available to planners throughout China through the Ford Foundation and the Chinese Urban Planning Society.

SUBSTANTIVELY, too, the studio was unusual in China in that one team focused on migrants and peri-urban villages as communities in their own right, rather than assuming they are moveable, dispensable "clean slates" for planned urban expansion. The speed and scale with which China's cities have grown over the past two decades has often obscured the persistence and resilience of community ties. Now that the government recognizes the importance of these ties, it will need to balance the benefits of growth against the costs of endless displacement and environmental degradation at the edges of expanding cities. It may need to consider how cities can absorb, rather than wipe out these communities.

SIMILARLY, heritage preservation, while given a higher priority in Quanzhou than in most Chinese cities, will increasingly become a focus of government concern as less and less of the nation's historic urban fabric is left in the wake of development. Community support for preservation will then be the chief objective of heritage planning, which will need more participatory approaches.

FINALLY, the studio brought together students from a much wider range of disciplines than is usually the case in studios or field exercises in China or anywhere else. By grappling with the problems of language gaps and the communicability of spatial design and policy ideas among themselves and between themselves and the community members with whom they engaged, the students foreshadowed what professional planners are likely to face throughout China in the very near future. By struggling with the formation of multidisciplinary teams, the students also pushed the limits of planning education and the very definition of planning practice in China. Indeed, the implications of all these innovations extend not only to China, but to the education and practice of planners everywhere in the world, who seek to collaborate across national and cultural boundaries.

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