

Finding Houston in Shanghai, Beijing, and Shenzhen



The most startling aspect of China is the feeling that everything is moving in fast forward. But not everything is moving at the same rate or direction. From the windows of the Beijing airport express train, speeding on its way from the Norman-Foster designed terminal of the second busiest airport in the world, I could see farmers working small plots by hand. From their small houses they can see the five-star hotels and modern office buildings of the airport business park. The farmers, it seems, exist in 1911 and the airport in 2011.

In the West, we look back at the history of urbanization as an orderly sequence: technology advanced, demographics shifted over time, planning ideas were tried, and those ideas gave rise to new ideas. But nothing about China seems so orderly. It's no stretch to say that a century of American urbanism—the civic beautification of the 1920s, the migration to the cities of the 1930s, the industrial decentralization of the 1940s, the freeway-driven suburbanization of the 1950s, the urban clearances of the 1960s, the megablock redevelopments of the 1970s, the instant skylines of the 1980s, the historic preservation movement of the 1990s, the green building movement of the 2000s, and the place-making of the 2010s—is playing out all at once in China. All our mistakes and all our successes, plus all the chaos of a century of figuring out what a city should be, are here alongside each other with older Chinese urbanisms.

In the past 30 years, the population of Chinese cities has grown by 300 million; secondary cities like Chongqing, Wuhan, and Chengdu are now bigger than Houston, and Shanghai's metropolitan area has 3 million more people than New York's. These cities are a preview of the future. Just as Chinese planners once toured American and European cities for inspiration, planners and architects from all over the world are touring Chinese cities now. Just as American developers helped create China's skylines, Chinese developers are starting to invest around the world, and the burgeoning ranks of young, talented Chinese architects will soon be working across the globe. China's cities are the cities of the future.

I spent two weeks in China last summer to see what these cities are like on the ground. I came away simultaneously impressed, depressed, startled, and awed. I was also left with an odd feeling of familiarity. We can see China as a way of looking at ourselves, a mirror reflecting our own cities back to us. In looking at Beijing or Shanghai, we see how another culture sees us. Often it's an unsettling view. In the extremes of Chinese city building, I can see the basic flaws in our own cities: buildings that don't quite add up to places, traffic projects that divide as much as

they connect, walled compounds that segregate rich and poor, and a disregard for local history and culture. I can also see the same spirit and the same forces that drove our cities' growth. China has a different culture, a different history, and a different political system, but it can feel very familiar.

POST OAK ON THE HUANGPU

Above the Lujiazui subway station in Shanghai, where Century Avenue shoots out from a tunnel under the Huangpu River, streets converge onto a massive traffic circle. Five boulevards combine into three lanes of traffic speeding around ornamental landscaping. A circular walkway above, 400 feet in diameter, carries pedestrians over the chaos. All around, buildings compete for attention. The pink spheres of the Pearl Tower perch on a concrete tripod. The International Convention Center combines a neoclassical façade with a pair of huge glass globes depicting the world, China shaded in red. Nearby, an office building is clad with tiers of ionic columns, like a Roman temple-turned-shelving system. Next to it, a glass cylinder perches on a pair of stone shards.

At ground level, I found the place vast and forbidding. The buildings are cut off from the sidewalks by broad lawns and granite driveways. Traffic speeds by on six-lane streets. The pedestrians—and there are many in a city where only the wealthy few own cars—look lost. On a map, Lujiazui Green appears to be an inviting oasis in the midst of Shanghai's bustle; in reality, it's an empty park, a decorative foreground for the buildings around it rather than a gathering space.

Instead the life takes place inside the buildings. At one side of the circular walkway is the Super Brand Mall. At 13 levels, it's so tall that there are two Starbucks, one almost directly above the other. Nearly every building in the area includes a mall of some kind, and they're all busy on a Monday afternoon.

This is Pudong, Shanghai's new central business district. Designated as a development zone in 1990,



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LEFT THE PUDONG SKYLINE RISES ABOVE A MASSIVE TRAFFIC CIRCLE SPANNED BY A CIRCULAR FOOTBRIDGE LEADING TO A 13-LEVEL MALL.



ing each block to a developer along with a zoning requirement for how many housing units it must accommodate. This is the modern Chinese version of the 1811 New York City grid: a tool for the conversion of land into developable property on a massive scale.

This technique has dramatic implications for urban form. The blocks are big—a quarter mile by a quarter mile is typical—and divided by a network of wide streets. The size of the blocks and the lanes of traffic surrounding them create self-contained enclaves.

The monotony of these landscapes is apparent from elevated subway lines in Beijing, Shenzhen, and Shanghai alike. Block after block are full of towers, sometimes five stories tall, sometimes ten, sometimes taller, each model repeated ten or 20 or 30 times per block in an endless vertical sprawl.

I wandered into one of these megablocks just north of the old core of Shanghai. The Chinese version of a planned community, it had 30 highrise residential towers, each 30 stories tall, all behind gates and security guards. Enough people live there to support an entire shopping complex, including a full-sized supermarket within the gates. A whole private riverfront, too, on the banks of the newly cleaned up Suzhou Creek, is for residents only. We can't imagine housing at this density in Houston, but we are building much the same kind of place: a city designed as a series of self-contained gated enclaves, marketed for their private amenities and perceived safety.

These compounds can be very pleasant places. In Beijing's CBD, I found Jianwai SOHO, completed in 2005, with 7.5 million square feet of retail and residential on 42 acres. One level is reserved for pedestrians and retail, with access roads, parking, and loading docks placed below, while the 2,110 residential units occupy a series of matching towers above. The strategy of separating people and cars works—the pathways along the buildings are quiet and comfortable, and there's no risk of being plowed over by a taxicab or a delivery moped. The buildings are well detailed, and the shops face outward to enliven the public spaces, which include landscaping, benches, and trees for shade.

Where Jianwai SOHO fails is along streets where it meets other superblocks. The CBD—Beijing's

it now has half of Shanghai's class A office space, including the fourth and 13th tallest buildings in the world, with the future second tallest under construction. The urban plan was developed in conjunction with the French agency IAURIF, and the long axis of Century Avenue echoes La Defense in Paris. To a Houstonian, Pudong with its broad streets and showy towers feels like Post Oak, only bigger.

Business districts like this one are the signs of urban success in the new capitalist China: every city must have one, and many have several. Shanghai, like Houston, is marked by clusters of skyscrapers all over the urban core, each with its own activity center and each enthusiastically promoted by its own district government.

Like Pudong, most of China's new "downtowns" don't really resemble downtowns at all: their broad streets, self-contained building complexes, and manicured greenery resemble nothing more than 1980s edge cities in the United States. We've figured out the shortcomings of those places since then: the traffic gridlock, the monotony, the lack of a public life. We're now revitalizing our downtowns, adding residential space to areas that previously had only offices, and trying to make places like Uptown more pedestrian-friendly. But then, shiny glass buildings behind broad lawns always looked better in renderings than in practice, especially since the renderings left out the traffic. That image is what China is after: modern, sleek, and tidy. It looks good on a website. These new Chinese CBDs are diagrams that have transferred all too literally to real life.

MEGABLOCKS

Ultimately, the shape of Chinese cities is being defined by the linked needs of traffic engineering and real estate development. Beijing gained 6 million more people (the entire population of metropolitan Houston) over the past decade. This growth requires massive real estate development, accomplished by a partnership of government planners and private developers. The government subdivides rural land into blocks, assign-

“OLD” DOWNTOWN, NEW DOWNTOWN

Pudong was not the first of China's new downtowns. After all, the economic boom in China did not begin in Shanghai or Beijing, but in the south, where four coastal cities and an island province were designated special economic zones. The most famous of these is Shenzhen, a onetime fishing village just across the Hong Kong border in 1980 and now a city the size of Houston. In 1985, when Chinese economic reform was only seven years old, the 50-story International Foreign Trade Center, with its rotating restaurant, was the tallest building in China. Thomas J. Campanella notes in *The Concrete Dragon* that its construction at a floor every three days became known as “Shenzhen Speed.” Today, the trade center is not even among the ten tallest buildings in Shenzhen. But it's not only the building that seems outdated; it's the whole neighborhood.

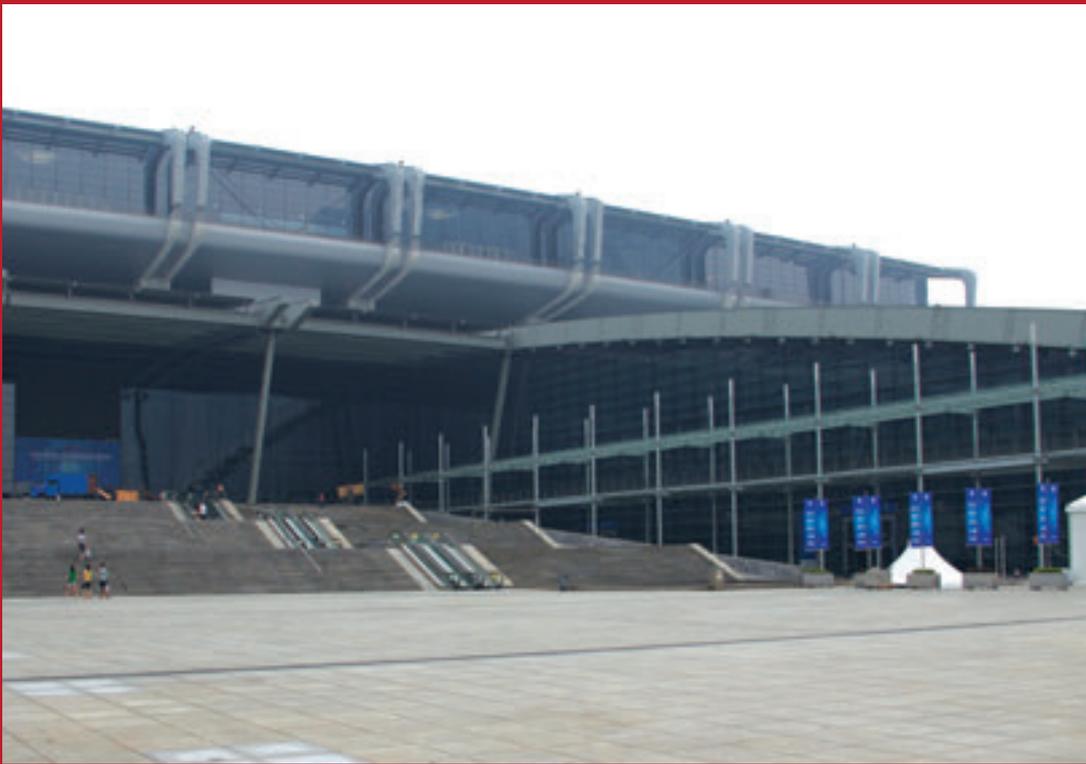
Shenzhen's “old” downtown—the area developed in the 1980s and 1990s—is a thriving, cluttered place. Office buildings, malls, and highrise apartments press in on each other across narrow streets (top). The main shopping area feels almost like an old city in Europe, with curving pedestrianized streets, retail buildings leaning out over the sidewalk, and narrow mid-block alleys lined with stalls selling fast food, cheap clothes, and cellphone cases. On the corner, diners at a three-story McDonald's—the first in mainland China—look out on the crowd of shoppers below.

Shenzhen is no longer a new boomtown. Appearances matter, and a city concerned with appearances needs an impressive downtown, so Shenzhen has built one five miles down the road from the old one. Called the CBD, it connects the convention center, the city hall, the concert hall, and the library along a one-mile axis lined on both sides with office buildings showcasing every possible architectural variation of smoked glass. On a satellite image, the clarity of its plan contrasts with the chaotic road network of old Shenzhen. This new center must have looked great as a 1:1000 scale model. But on the ground, it's even more alienating than Pudong.

The convention center (center), a third of a mile wide, faces the street with a stepped plaza so long and high that a dozen escalators have been installed to speed the trip from the sidewalk to the front door. In the renderings by Von Gerkan, Marg, and Partners, these steps are full of stylishly dressed people; on a day with no convention they are simply desolate.

Across the street from the convention center is the central park, built on the roof of a partially buried shopping center, surrounded by shiny office towers, including OMA's new stock exchange (bottom). This park, the centerpiece of the new Shenzhen, may be the least people-friendly park I've ever seen. It has what you expect from a park—trees, lawns, benches, paths—but nothing is quite right. The benches are uncomfortable. The paths don't really connect anything to anything. And when they get to the real centerpiece of the city, a highway interchange, you find yourself separated from the city hall by 17 lanes of traffic and multiple landscaped traffic islands with no way to cross (bottom). Actually getting to the building you see directly in front of you takes a half-mile detour. There's no direct connection to the shopping mall below. Nor is there a good way to get from the office buildings to the park. In Shenzhen, a crowded city where people love gathering outdoors, the park is nearly vacant.

This park is not a park at all. It's a design move. It's a grand axis that looks good on a postcard. It's a beautiful view from an office tower. Some of this is inevitable in a place that is growing so fast, since it is much easier to sketch a grand axis on a map than it is to get all the details of a public space right. Some of it may be expected in a country where the idea of central business districts is relatively new. But in fact many of the ideas behind places like this “non-park” are imported, brought directly to China by Western architects or simply inspired by US and European precedents. This new downtown could be seen as the worst of Chinese boomtowns—but it's also the worst of Western urban planning.



biggest business district—is centered on the grade-separated interchange of a 12-lane arterial and an elevated highway with ten lanes of frontage road. In the shadow of two massive overpasses, pedestrians make their way across the street on a 300-foot long crosswalk with a concrete traffic island in the middle. Nearby, the main entrances to the local subway station come at the end of a 200-foot long sidewalk flanked by high-speed traffic on one side and a loading dock on the other.

This scene is typical of Beijing. My first impression of central Beijing as I emerged from the subway at Chongwenmen station was one of overscaled roads. Here, even the arterial streets have frontage roads. At Tiananmen Square, the mausoleum of Chairman Mao looks out over 18 lanes of traffic at grade, and pedestrians must go down the stairs to cross underneath. Westheimer in Houston looks like a side street by comparison. At this size, streets become major obstacles. Crossing on foot takes some courage, especially since pedestrians are expected to yield to cars, bikes, mopeds, and buses. At major intersections, orange-vested traffic wardens try (with varying degrees of success) to keep order.

These large-scale streets are the result of a massive effort to reshape Chinese cities for cars. Numerous streets in Beijing have been widened, displacing tens of thousands of residents and businesses. Still, traffic is a mess, and the vast majority of residents don't even drive: where the United States has 828 vehicles

per 1,000 people, China has only 37. It's impossible to imagine how Beijing will ever be able to accommodate the traffic that will result from even half its residents commuting by car, but traffic engineers seem to be doing their best to discourage pedestrians.

The new avenues are lined with sparkling new office buildings, but no matter how spectacular the buildings are, or how nicely landscaped their entry drives, the experience on the ground remains one of incoherence. Places like Jianwai SOHO—or even Super Brand Mall—are an attempt to overcome this by turning inward: developers and architects can't change the overall structure of the city and overcome its fundamental problems, so they try to create good places within it. Even transport links take this approach: the new Beijing South high speed rail station has a beautiful concourse, but, surrounded by tracks, ramps, and parking lots, it has no relationship to the surrounding neighborhoods. That seems familiar to me: American cities tried it in the 1970s and 1980s, and it failed. Embarcadero Center in San Francisco, Peachtree Center in Atlanta, and Houston Center all tried to solve the problem of American downtowns by creating self-contained, vertically separated, mixed-use complexes. But not only did the projects themselves fail to generate enough activity to sustain much more than food courts, they further weakened the city around them.

View from above, the Beijing South station reveals itself as a perfect oval, a pristine object in the city.

Likewise, seen from only a few stories up, the CBD begins to resemble its architectural renderings: a series of towers floating above the ground plane. Those towers themselves are spectacular—OMA's China Central Television (CCTV) headquarters is every bit as vertiginous and shimmering in real life as it is in a magazine—but they don't add up to a place.

That leaves me with an unsatisfying thought: in the fast-growing cities of China, architecture doesn't matter all that much. Once the urban form is established, the buildings themselves can do only so much to change it. The CCTV headquarters is an extraordinary building—but in the context of the CBD's oversized streets and noisy traffic, it feels little different from the ordinary buildings that surround it. The role architecture plays in China is not so much city-shaping as symbolism. Western "starchitects" are hired to lend prestige to a development, to brand a corporation, or to mark a city's economic success. They are not hired to make better places. If architects wanted to do that, they would need to be involved earlier, before the streets are laid out and the overpasses planned.

A HISTORY OF URBANISM

I walk down a busy street in Beijing, just north of the Forbidden City. It's crowded with buses, cabs,



mopeds, bikes, and people. But then I turn into an alley—a hutong—maybe 25-foot wide, between two buildings. I pass a store selling groceries, a four-table restaurant grilling meat over a charcoal burner, a small workshop. Then the alley becomes residential. The homes themselves are hidden behind lines of walls; occasionally a portal opens into a courtyard crammed with small buildings. There is life everywhere: laundry hanging out to dry, old men playing mahjong, kids running around, men loading a truck. The alley twists and turns until the busy city is lost somewhere behind me. As it gets narrower, I'm sure I've hit a dead end, but there's a narrow way through, a path only six feet wide between buildings. After a few more twists, I suddenly emerge onto a major street again, back in modern Beijing.

In a commercial alley south of Tiananmen Square, shops face each other across perhaps 30 feet of pavement, with no curbs to separate the pedestrians, bikes, mopeds, cars, and delivery vans. Businesses spill out onto the street with their tables, chairs, and racks of merchandise. Electric signs hang overhead. It's visually chaotic, but unlike in the modern streets of Beijing, traffic is surprisingly polite. Cars slowly make their way through the crowd, people step aside, and nobody seems bothered.

The urbanism of Beijing is very old. There's been a city in this spot since before the 1200s, when Marco Polo visited here. In the 16th century, Beijing was the world's biggest city. The supreme irony of Beijing

the tree-lined streets of mansions, and the blocks of courtyard apartments. Much of this remains surprisingly intact. Standing on the riverfront in Shanghai, I looked across the Huangpu at the highrises of Pudong, then turned the other way to see one of the best preserved 1920s business districts in the world. I wandered northwards across the Garden Bridge where I found much of the old city still intact: three- and four-story buildings with ground floor shops, apartments above, and courtyards in mid-block that could be in Paris. Despite the foreign architecture, the street life felt much as it did in the hutongs of Beijing. Chinese urbanism and Western urbanism had melded here.

This traditional Chinese urbanism has persisted. I found it just off Beijing's CBD in the alleys behind Jianwai SOHO. This part of the city developed in the 1970s and 1980s, and there's certainly nothing quaint about the mid-rise apartment buildings and cinder block shops. But the roads are narrow. Gates open onto walled courtyards. The stores are small. The buildings feel lived in. Cars, bikes, mopeds, and pedestrians mix freely. A remarkable urban life flourishes here, sometimes directly across the street from the granite drives and manicured lawns of office towers.

But the original Chinese cities are now being steadily destroyed by a potent combination of capitalism, central planning, and Western architects. More than half of the old hutongs of Beijing are gone, as are most of Shanghai's courtyard apartments. Their former residents scattered, they've been replaced by government buildings, office towers, and highrise apartments. This has attracted some disapproving attention in the West, but of course we did the same thing long ago in our own cities, and we're still doing it today.

For now, the demolitions seem to have slowed down. The

government has put protections in place and is talking up a program to rehabilitate what remains. But I have a sinking feeling that the hutongs as we know them are doomed. Preservation, after all, usually means preserving buildings; no development regulation can preserve a community of people. This land is too optimally located in the heart of the huge city to house poor families forever. The hutongs are in a literal time warp, preserved for the moment as the city changes around them. Like on those farms near the airport, time may have moved more slowly here than elsewhere in Beijing, but the clock will catch up. I hope these buildings will be saved, so that people 30 years from now will be able to see what the old cities of China looked like. But I also hope that their lessons will be learned so that new places can embrace some of the same virtues.

NOSTALGIA

On the wall of the Beijing Planning Exhibition, a bronze model depicts Beijing before the revolution. Seen at a small scale, the city reads as texture. A city wall five miles east to west and five and a half miles north to south encloses a dense fabric of hutongs. Much of this is gone now, as is the city wall itself. But the defining center of old Beijing is still there: the Forbidden City, its vast and orderly sequence of courtyards, the symbols of imperial power, contrasting with the city around it.

After the emperor fell, the Japanese were driven out, the nationalists were defeated, and the People's Liberation Army marched into Beijing in 1948, the communists appropriated the symbols of the imperial dynasties. The palaces were kept intact, and Tiananmen Square was widened into a huge parade ground, surrounded by the buildings of the new regime and centered on a monument to the soldiers who fought in the revolution. In 1976, Mao's mausoleum was placed directly in line with the old gates. This axis remains one of the key organizing principles of Beijing; it was extended northwards in 2008 to form the centerpiece of Olympic Park, an extension that was envisioned, perhaps ironically or perhaps appropriately, by Albert Speer, the son of Hitler's architect. The historic east-west axis, which intersects at Tiananmen Square, has also been strengthened: it's now anchored by the CBD on one end and another major office district, Beijing Finance Street, on the other.

I walked across Olympic Park the day after I went to the Forbidden City. It was a hot August afternoon as the sun beat down on the crowds of Chinese tourists. The vast paved plaza that marks the axis—two and a half miles long, up to 600 feet wide—has no benches, no trees, and no shade. There is not much to do here on an ordinary day but be awed by the surrounding buildings. The Bird's Nest and the Water Cube look a little worn now; they do not quite have the same sparkle they did on TV during the games. But they remain jaw-droppingly impressive, huge otherworldly objects at an inhuman scale standing in magnificent isolation on the plaza. They look nothing like the Forbidden City, but they send the same message of power and strength. Mao successfully appropriated the symbols of imperial China to reunite a country torn by civil war under a strong central government, and today's regime is using similar symbols to underline a message of common purpose.

The emotional power of history is also being exploited to commercial ends. Just south of Tiananmen Square on the central axis, Qianmen has been rebuilt as a pedestrian street. It's lined by 1920s buildings—some, according to the plaques, real, restored to their earlier appearance, and others no doubt imaginative re-creations. Antique lampposts, stone benches, a replica streetcar plodding slowly down the street, and thousands of red lanterns create a stage-set atmosphere of an imagined 1920s Beijing. The buildings are occupied by shops for the brand-conscious: Sephora, H&M, Häagen-Dazs, Zara. The place is a hit: it's the busiest outdoor public space I saw in

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OPPOSITE CARS SPEED BY THE NEW SHENZHEN CITY HALL.

is that it had no need to look to the United States or France for a precedent for how to build a great urban place; that precedent existed here already.

The hutongs were not perfect, of course: they were often overcrowded, badly heated, and unsanitary. But they offered things that the new office towers and residential complexes lack: a relatively congenial mixing of cars, bikes, mopeds, and people, social public outdoor space, individual identity, a human scale, and a sense of community.

In Shanghai, this older urban tradition met the 19th-century European city. The International Settlement and French Concession, established in the 1840s and ruled by foreign powers until World War II, became home to tens of thousands of Westerners. They designed the Art Deco highrises lining the riverfront of the Bund, the department stores of Nanjing Road,



Beijing. Nostalgia clearly sells.

In Shanghai, too, the past is being celebrated again. The Bund has been restored. The French Concession is prestigious. In the underground concourse that connects the Urban Planning Exhibition Center to the subway, a re-created “Shanghai Traditional Street in the 1930s” features stores selling iPod cases, fast food, and bottled water behind fake European storefronts, with yet another replica streetcar at the end.

There’s a contradiction built into all of this. After all, the Concessions—territory outside of Chinese jurisdiction seized by foreign powers at gunboat-point—were a central part of the foreign humiliation of China that led to the communist revolution. In Shanghai, this history is blunted by memories of a common enemy: in 1937, when the Japanese invaded, the foreign territories became a refuge, then after Pearl Harbor, when the Japanese invaded the Concessions, too, the Westerners suffered as the Chinese did. But the images of Westerners riding in rickshaws pulled by Chinese that are displayed in the “Traditional Street” still give pause.

The ironies in these revivals of Shanghai history are most obvious at Xintiandi, perhaps the most famous commercial historic preservation project in China. In 2003, two blocks of old buildings in Shanghai were rebuilt or restored as high-end retail. They now house a Starbucks, a Häagen-Dazs, a BMW Lifestyle Boutique, and a Lawry’s Steakhouse. Western restaurants in rehabilitated buildings recall an era when the West ruled most of Shanghai, yet there’s one more building in the complex: the place where the Chinese Communist Party held its first meeting in July 1921.

Nostalgia, however, is not the same as preservation. Nostalgia for the past has grown alongside widespread destruction, with replicas of history being built even as real historic buildings have been demolished. As in the hutongs, the government may respond to rising public concern by trying to protect old buildings, but there’s no assurance the old neighborhoods will keep their character. Perhaps the buildings will remain—the government can assure that—but it may be different people who live there. I saw a Mercedes in a hutong, which could be a sign of the future. Once the fad for Western ideas has passed, the new rich and upper middle class may rediscover these old places, fix them up, and enjoy a more comfortable, less crowded version of hutong life.

NEW ATTITUDES

In the Shanghai office of the landscape architecture firm SWA Group, transplanted Houstonian Scott Slaney is hopeful about the prospects of urban planning in China. He laments the obvious problems: he says that a decade ago, new developments still included bike lanes and narrower streets but now he’s seeing wider and wider boulevards. He also agrees that most parks are planned as greenspaces and not gathering places, and he remembers the Shanghai neighborhoods that have been demolished. But, he says, attitudes are changing, and urban planning in China is getting more sophisticated.

I spent two days in Shanghai seeing some of what Slaney was talking about, starting at the building that houses SWA’s offices. Highstreet Lofts is an old factory converted into offices and stores by Italian expats Kokai Studios, who were also responsible for the renovation of one of the landmark buildings on the Bund. A central light court, opened up within a framework of existing beams and columns, floods the high-ceilinged offices with light, and the old loading docks have become a quiet courtyard. The outside skin is a mix of existing walls and windows, and inserted screens and signage, with no attempt made to disguise the alterations as

historic fabric. At the front entrance, a coffee shop faces a narrow Shanghai street across a small plaza. In a city where many new buildings face the street with walls and security cameras, the shop and plaza are a welcome public gesture.

The Highstreet Lofts is an example of something that’s happening both in Shanghai and in the United States. Industrial uses are moving further from the urban core, leaving old factory complexes, now replaced by larger and more efficient facilities, empty. And here, as in the United States, the old industries are being converted. Near the river, the former Shanghai Oil Plant has been converted into bars, restaurants, and a boutique hotel. It’s called, rather transparently, Cool Docks. As at the Highstreet Lofts, the modern alterations are unapologetic, and while there is some of Xintiandi’s nostalgic architecture, many of the rough edges of the old buildings have been allowed to remain. Cool Docks may be historic, but it’s not quaint.

To the north, on the banks of once polluted Suzhou Creek, the M50 arts complex occupies an old textile mill. Much of the old fabric here has been torn down, and a long graffiti-covered wall hides an empty field that awaits cleanup and redevelopment.



The supreme irony of Beijing is that there was no need to look to the United States or France for a precedent of how to build a great urban place; that precedent was there already.

OPPOSITE THE WIDE STREETS OF BEIJING REPLACED OLD HUTONGS LIKE THIS ONE.

ABOVE IN SHANGHAI, THE OLD CITY IS BEING REPLICATED IN AN UNDERGROUND ARCADE AND REPURPOSED AS GALLERIES AT M50.

But at M50 the old buildings were converted into a series of galleries. The former factory gates, set in a tall wall that surrounds the compound, open into a series of irregular courtyards lying between the old brick buildings. Again, there was no attempt at pastiche; the existing finishes mingle with modern steel, glass, and concrete, and planes of primary color mark the gallery entrances.

These reinvented places have a human scale that's entirely lacking in much of modern China. But I did see something of the same scale in a few new places as well. The most dramatic was actually an SWA project. Beijing Financial Street is the counterpart to the CBD on the opposite side of the city. It too is home to branded corporate headquarters and luxury boutiques. But unlike the CBD, the district is centered not on a highway interchange but on a park. The roads are at an urban scale, with two to four lanes and wide, tree-shaded sidewalks. Opposite the park, the street is lined with restaurants, which occupy the ground floor of an office building. It was the only business district I saw in China where I actually enjoyed walking around. And so did others, it seemed: on one Saturday afternoon, with the office workers at home, the adjacent mall was empty, but

families lingered on the sidewalk in front of the restaurants.

Do projects like this reflect a new, more sophisticated version of urban design? In Shanghai's urban planning museum, the exhibitions about historic preservation, sustainability, and new urban villages inevitably present an idealized view, reflecting aspirations more than reality. But they are an indication, at least, of government planners' awareness of public concerns, and those planners can steer China's cities into more livable directions. I imagine that the same planners who first noticed the gleaming highrises on their trips to the West have since returned to note a shift toward more context-sensitive design, and now they're responding. But the Beijing Finance Street and the CBD were built at the same time, and even as Cool Docks and M50 draw crowds, other warehouses are being torn down for new office parks.

AMBITION

The centerpiece of Beijing's planning exhibition is a huge scale model of the urban core. Families can stand around and see what their city will look like—the activity centers, the neighborhoods, the expressways, the transport hubs, the monuments, the parks.

In China, planning is overt. That's in contrast to Houston, where agencies justify new highway projects by saying things like "this capacity is required for future traffic needs." In China, they tell you that they want to convert farmland to neighborhoods housing hundreds of thousands of people, and that they want to create clusters of corporate headquarters around the edges of the city, and so they're building a highway to enable that plan. It's ironic that China—a regime where the public has no input on any of these projects—is having a more honest discussion about planning than we are.

The infrastructure that the Chinese are building for their new cities is truly impressive. Shanghai opened its first subway line in 1995, and today it has 270 miles of subway lines, more than New York, London, or Paris. All were built in two decades, and plans are on the books to double that system. Shanghai isn't alone: Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen all have subway systems of over 100 miles, surpassing Washington, D.C., and Chicago, and another eight cities have smaller systems. The subways I rode were all up-to-date, with sliding doors at the platform edge for safety, excellent signage, easy-to-use vending machines, and "smart card" fares.

China is building all kinds of infrastructure at this same scale. Across the countryside, I saw miles of new six-lane highways (albeit nearly empty). China's ports, full of new wharves and state-of-the-art container cranes, include seven of the world's ten busiest. The airports are big, shiny, comfortable, and passenger-friendly. China has the longest overwater bridge in the world, the longest cable-stayed bridge span, and five of the

ten longest suspension bridge spans.

Perhaps the most prominent symbol of Chinese infrastructure is the country's high-speed rail network. The Beijing to Shanghai high-speed rail line opened on June 30; I rode it four days later. Cruising along smoothly at 190 mph, I could not help but be impressed by the ambition of this project. Of its 800 miles of new, double-track, grade-separated electrified railway, 86 percent is elevated, including two major river crossings, and 22 tunnels go right through any hills that got in the way. Twenty brand new stations serve cities along the way, and the Beijing and Shanghai stations were completely rebuilt to serve the new demands of high-speed rail. Imagine traveling from Houston to Atlanta by train in five hours and you get the idea.

Now 90 trains a day travel between Shanghai and Beijing carrying 165,000 riders.

It's nothing short of remarkable that China has reached this point. In 1999, China was the last country on earth still building new steam locomotives for regular service. Then in 2003, the first new, dedicated high-speed rail line opened. China began importing high-speed rail trains from Europe and Japan in 2006; by 2008 the Chinese were building foreign-designed trains under license; and today, a Chinese-designed and Chinese-built train is the fastest mass-produced train in the world. By comparison, the United States built its last steam locomotive in 1953 and still has neither a dedicated high-speed rail line nor the capability to design or build high-speed trains domestically.

Spurring all this expansion is China's sense of optimism. Developers are building because they have every reason to think they'll make a profit. The people support (or at least tolerate) the government because they think that their future—or their children's future—is getting better. In the same way, the government's infrastructure spending is a statement of positive expectation: new highways, railroads, and ports will create economic growth, and that growth will justify the spending. That's the same motivation that created the highways of Houston and the subways of New York, and it's what felt most familiar to me about China, even as we've lost some of that optimism back in the United States.

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF ARCHITECTURE

In Beijing, Mao's portrait overlooks the city. In Shenzhen, that place is held by a billboard of Deng Xiaoping, who led China from 1978 to 1992. It was Deng who designated Shenzhen as a special economic zone in 1980, and his triumphant 1992 tour of Shenzhen cemented the economic reforms after the Tiananmen Square massacre. Shenzhen was the prototype for the new Chinese city, with monuments to economic success, not military victories.

A small park in a residential area of Shenzhen tells an alternate history of China. The park rests

on the site of the fishing village the city started from, and was built when the village residents were rehoused in modern apartment towers. A series of bronze plaques tells the history of the fishing village, starting with a summary [reproduced here as written]:

"The beautiful Fisherman village borders Hong Kong. It is by the side of Shenzhen River. Great Changes have taken place in the last decades. In the early 1940s the Dongguan fisherman used to live and set up thatched cottages on the semi waste peninsula and float on the river to fish. When the People's Republic of China was founded, the fisherman began to move onto the bank gradually and live in one-story tiled houses. The village was formed and the name of Litoujian was later replaced by Fisherman Village. The extreme "Left" trend of "Cultural Revolution" (1966-1976) was as violent as typhoon and it made the people's life poorer and poorer with each passing day and people began escaping to Hong Kong one after another. At the beginning of the reform an opening up of the country, Shenzhen Special Economic Zone was set up. Great changes took place in the fisherman village. The people there worked hand in hand to develop multiple trades and they reached the goal of being the first village of 10-thousand RMB households in China. Thirty-five two-story buildings appeared by the side of the Shenzhen River for the first time. It began the first phase of the Chinese peasants exploring the ways of better life.

"On January 25, 1984, Comrade Deng Xiaoping visited Fisherman Village. He chatted with the villagers and was solicitous for their welfare. Knowing that the people's livelihood was improving, Xiaoping was very gratified."

This display is extraordinary and telling. Its take on the past is blunt: there is actually a bas-relief of mean-looking Chinese border guards in front of a barbed-wire fence, blocking the peasants' escape to Hong Kong during the Cultural Revolution. But like every historical marker, it provides an edited view of history.

This notion of communal progress is at odds with what I saw in China. On average, society has taken huge strides forward; there is no doubt average Chinese citizens are better off than they were before Deng. But that progress has not been evenly shared. The farmers outside the airport can see China changing around them, but are their lives any better? Today, one of the biggest sources of political unrest in China—and instigators of some of the rare instances of public protest—are peasants who are losing their land to new development.

What really rings true in the Shenzhen park memorial, however, is the adamant belief in the virtue of development. The measure of progress has become economic, not political: the failure of the Cultural Revolution was that it kept people in poverty, and today's success is measured in household income.

And the manifestation of this economic progress is built form: people moving from boats to "thatched cottages" to "tiled houses" to "two-story houses" to apartment buildings of "high standards, strict requirements, and good quality." I saw this extolling of development everywhere. On a construction site, a red banner read, "Like surging waves, never stop developing." In Beijing, a sign urged us to "develop and enjoy together." The Shanghai paper reported an incident of panic on a subway train when a man ran through yelling that there was a bomb on board. There wasn't, and when police tracked down the passenger, his excuse was that he was trying to get away from an overzealous real estate broker.

Halfway around the world, I came to a conclusion that was hardly new: cities are shaped by money more than by design. Economic imperatives transcend political systems, and this is as true in centrally planned China as it is in supposedly laissez-faire Houston. Architecture works, as it always has, in the service of the economy. Theories of urban planning and the social impact of architectural styles are insignificant in comparison. Cool Docks, Beijing Finance Street, Jianwai SOHO, and Qianmen have little in common on the surface, but they are all tools for making money.

The view from the airport train proved telling: in making up for decades of lost time, China is completely jumbling the usually orderly timeline of how cities have traditionally evolved. Instead of a succession of styles and ideas, the history of urban planning has become a grab bag of ideas to mash up, try out, and celebrate. The neat progression implied in the Shenzhen park is misleading: a two-story house is obviously an advancement from a thatched cottage—but it's not clear that the new downtown Shenzhen is a beneficial evolution from the old one. I could assemble what I saw in China into a story, echoing the story of Western development: an old, pedestrian-oriented urbanism gives way to car-oriented cities, and then planners realize the shortcomings of that approach and rediscover a more sophisticated solution. But it's hard to maintain a linear narrative when everything is all happening at once. If Chinese cities are the cities of the future, then the future is certain to be disorienting. 文明

It's ironic that China—a regime where the public has no input on any of these projects—is having a more honest discussion about planning than we are.

OPPOSITE FARMS OUTSIDE BEIJING GIVE WAY TO THE NEW CITY DEPICTED IN A MASSIVE SCALE MODEL.

