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Eric Setzekorn

University of California, Irvine

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Building Beijing

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By Eric Setzekorn

Even before Beijing was awarded the Olympic Games in 2001, the pace of construction in the city was frantic and relentless. A combination of expansive central planning, low interest loans, and a real estate bubble have all contributed to the construction of hundreds of new buildings and massive infrastructure development. Lax regulatory and environmental laws combined with a desire by politicians to make Beijing a "showcase" have enticed dozens of the world's best architects to experiment with new designs and new materials on a scale not possible in New York, London or Berlin. While some critics bemoan these new designs as "shock and awe" architecture and others point to the loss of culturally significant areas such as the *hutongs*, the scale and pace of development will likely continue well into the next decade as Beijing continues to grow in population and international importance. A more subtle but lingering problem will be integrating these massive center-pieces into Beijing life in a way that is natural and beneficial to residents struggling to adapt to the ever-changing city-scape.



For all Olympic tourists coming from abroad their first experience in Beijing is the massive Terminal 3 building of Beijing Capital airport opening this spring. As the world's largest building at 10 million square feet (displacing the Pentagon from the top of the list), it overawes visitors with soaring ceilings and a full range of restaurants, shops and convenient services. The Norman Foster-designed structure cost just under \$4 billion and went from proposal to completion in less than four years. In addition to its vast scale, the open building layout and obvious attention to diffusing human traffic flow makes the check-in, security and boarding process relatively painless and less like the rugby scrum atmosphere of LAX. This past week the airport express light rail system opened, linking the airport to the rapidly growing subway system. Gushing domestic news reports with riders saying boilerplate phrases such as "Riding it makes me proud to be Chinese" perhaps overstate the importance of the fairly basic light rail link similar to San Francisco's BART system. However, with tickets costing 25 RMB one way it eliminates the need for a 100-150 RMB journey into Beijing by taxi, the only previous option. The airport link not only makes traffic sense but importantly, for foreign tourists, eliminates the potential for price gouging by taxi drivers on new arrivals which made many first experiences in China a less than happy one. Terminal 3 is not without flaws: food and beverage prices are high, limited electrical outlets and no wireless internet service hinders business travelers, and baggage service is slow. But compared to Heathrow or LAX, it is a comfortable airport.



Perhaps more than any other, the new CCTV headquarters currently being finished in Chaoyang is the most innovative of the new buildings. The lead architect, Ole Scheeren (partner of Rem Koolhaas; the two are in charge of the design), is a household name to many Chinese not only for his architectural work but as the boyfriend of movie star Maggie Cheung, who has reportedly settled in Beijing with him. The main feature of the design is an angled center section joining two towers and that extends dozens of meters at a ninety-degree angle out over the street without independent support. The towers are also angled counter to the joined section at 6 degrees which creates a unique and somewhat disorientating visual effect. A rigid exoskeleton provides support and gives the building the appearance of deep etches at odd, seemingly random angles which adds to the overall effect. At 234 meters in height with a space of 550,000 meters it is planned to hold over 10,000 personnel for China's CCTV programs.



One of the most important areas of Beijing's development is a massive investment in academic and educational infrastructure taking place throughout the Haidian University district. Research institutes for the Chinese Academy of Sciences are now scattered around Haidian and outside of town, in the

northwest, a new “Space City” is growing as a center of training, research and experimentation for China’s extra-terrestrial ambitions. The new funding dramatically highlights the winners and losers of China’s education system as it enters the twenty-first century. International relations, finance, business and law departments work and study in modern, state-of-the-art facilities, while social sciences and humanities generally remain in drab, concrete boxes with poor lighting and unspeakable bathrooms that retain their mid-50s Stalinist charm. To take one example, the new business and law building at People’s University (Ren Da) is the centerpiece of that campus’s re-development. Towering seventeen stories over a central courtyard, it divides into law department on the east side and business department on the west. However, while the classrooms and offices may be new, the building is at best ill-suited and at worst blights the surrounding campus environment. The courtyard is paved with gray stone which is cold in the winter and hot in the summer. No vegetation of any kind softens the area and there are no benches for workers to eat lunch or students to read. The stark power of the design makes individuals feel insignificant in size and importance—a valuable effect for government buildings but not appropriate for a university campus.



As the capital of a country pegged by many as the next superpower, Beijing has also seen an embassy building boom as nations from around the world seek to bolster their presence and influence. The largest of the new embassies is the American embassy which, except for the Vatican City-sized monstrosity in Iraq’s Green Zone, is the largest American embassy in the world. Opening ceremonies for the embassy are due to be conducted by President Bush during his visit during the Olympics. Surrounded by a drab, sandstone colored blast wall, the mainly glass and silver coated steel embassy main buildings are in the center of the ten acre compound to protect against attack. On-site facilities include housing for much of the six hundred staff and the ambassador’s villa. The embassy is fronted by a water sculpture inside the security wall which serves both a decorative and protective function. Starbucks operates a small stand in the old embassy but will presumably have a larger facility inside the new grounds to compensate for the increased staff. South Korea, Canada, Australia, Iran, India and Germany have all opened new embassies over the past 24 months, mostly outside the traditional diplomatic area around Sanlitun. All the new embassy complexes feature high blast walls that, however necessary in today’s security environment, make the new embassy area a series of grey or beige bunkers standing apart from the city—a sharp contrast to the leafy quiet streets of the old Sanlitun diplomatic area.

The nerve center of the permanent construction revolution in the capital is the Beijing Municipal Commission of Urban Planning, which operates a large exhibition space south of Tiananmen Square that explains the larger agenda and program of building under their direction. The 16,000 square meter building draws more tourist than locals, mainly due to the 30 RMB entrance fee, and offers an antiseptic vision of future Beijing with all the hubris of Disney’s Tomorrowland. Vital issues to Beijing, such as completion of the water pipeline from the Yangzi river scheduled to bring 1 billion cubic

meters of water per year to Beijing after 2010, are relegated to dark corners, while soaring models of shiny skyscrapers take center-stage. Lingering public health issues such as water safety, sewage treatment, and pollution, which were supposed to be part of Beijing's pre-Olympic infrastructure modernization, are likewise dismissed with colorful charts and optimistic verbiage. The exhibition's pride and joy is the 302 square meter model of Beijing in 2020 (much like another in Shanghai's Urban Planning Hall) which, in contrast to "primitive" old Beijing, is a "modern Beijing of the future." The attention to detail is truly impressive, with buildings that delight many visitors as they try to find their neighborhoods (which may or may not exist in 2020).

To be continued in Part 2.

Eric Setzekorn is a graduate student at UC Irvine specializing in military history and is currently finishing an exchange semester with the Beijing University history department.

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