

# the **Wagner Planner**

*Global Connections*



Summer/Fall 2011

# The Wagner Planner

## Global Connections

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Front cover image: Pudong waterfront, courtesy of Sam Filler.

Back cover image: Model of Shanghai, courtesy of Kimisha Sellers.

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Amy Brisson & Alan Lightfeldt

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Current students interested in planning issues, alumni, and faculty of NYU Wagner are eligible and encouraged to submit materials.

# Entering Haiti

## Scenes from a Country in Repair



Haitian American Sugar Corporation (HASCO) plant. Photo courtesy of Aaron Meyerson.

### By Aaron Meyerson, MUP '12

*The Post-Catastrophe Reconstruction course offered through NYU's Shack School of Real Estate includes the option of traveling to a country currently rebuilding after a disaster. This semester, we traveled to Haiti.*

As I stepped off the airplane and entered the terminal at Port-au-Prince's Toussaint Louverture International Airport, I was instantly reminded that this was no cover story, no textbook picture or graduate class lecture slide and talking point. This was real; this was Haiti. I was processed through immigration, a wooden desk with a banner reading "Immigration" hanging above, then found my luggage amongst a pile that was left over from Flight 837's dumping. We continued through Customs and out the door into the summer sun. Hundreds of yelling cab drivers, most wearing a uniform of beige shirts with cargo pants and generic name badges, greeted us outside.

Our class had been told not to talk nor give luggage to anybody that was not identified as 'safe.' Recent kidnappings and violence towards international travelers had been on the rise in recent months, so NYU wanted to protect our class from any possible harm. We huddled 10-deep, like penguins trying to keep warm, as we found our security guards and drivers. They were eight men dressed just like the others we had seen, but they were 'our' men. We packed into three SUVs with

one driver and security guard per car. Even our luggage, which was loaded into a separate pickup truck, had a security guard who rode in the back so looters and street hooligans couldn't snatch our bags at stoplights.

As we meandered through the streets of Port au Prince in the direction of our hotel, we passed the many challenges that Haiti has been struggling with since the earthquake of January 10, 2010, and for all intents and purposes, for many decades. There were the overcrowded streets, lack of solid infrastructure, and the rubble and debris that blocked pedestrian and vehicle traffic, as well as the tent villages and ramshackle housing that squatted wherever room permitted. Children sat at gas stations and stoplights in groups of three or 15, waiting to beg at your window when you stopped.

Gypsy cabs, unlike those that litter the outer boroughs of NYC, were ingenious and pervasive contraptions. They were pick-up trucks with seats added in the back and an elevated covering, with eight or more passengers squeezed on or hanging off. They were called "Tap-taps" because riders would tap the rear window with Haitian Guordes, the local currency, to hop off at their desired location.

We passed many piles of rubble that people were wheel-barrowing away to create new un-safe housing structures. Many of the tent villages spanned large swaths of land, likely

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# Nanjing's Silent Protest

## How Social Media Saved the Phoenix Trees

By Shuai Ren, MUP '12

Social media is extremely popular among younger generations in China. It turns communication into informal, interactive dialogue. We use websites to contribute our own knowledge collaboratively on the internet, and we use multimedia to visualize information and broadcast. This is the way the young generation in China is living. It has reduced the cost of participation in public conversations, and is even beginning to play a role in urban planning and local decision-making. One of the famous mottos in China this year is: "Concern is power; Onlookers to change China."

In early March 2011, residents in Nanjing found dozens of famous "Phoenix Trees" along a downtown street had disappeared, and hundreds more were marked for removal to clear the way for new subway lines. The French Phoenix Trees were first introduced to Nanjing in the 1920s when it was the capital, and have thus become the symbol of the city. Local residents love the trees because they have grown with the city and represent the character and history of Nanjing. An immediate public outcry on the internet followed their removal, and quickly spread. Several celebrities who were living or lived in Nanjing stated their opinions on Weibo.com—the largest micro blog-



ging website in China, with more than 140 million registered users. One of the celebrities formed a group on Weibo called "Phoenix Tree in Nanjing." The group gathered more than ten thousand members, including many outside the city, within the first three days. In Nanjing, residents began tying green ribbons on the trees to express their desire

to save them, and the green ribbon was seen as the symbol of this urban issue.

Some residents protested individually in the first few days, but a protesting event was posted in the Weibo group and spread quickly in Nanjing. On March 19th, around 500 young people staged a silent sit-in in front of Nanjing Public Library. Many of them were wearing green ribbons, like the ones they tied on the trees. Another force for protecting the trees came from Taiwan. For long historical reasons, these trees are also highly valued by historians and politicians in Taiwan, who also joined in the outcry on Weibo. The local government of Nanjing thus faced great pressure from many groups, organized through digital communication and social networking.

The result turned out to be a victory for the public. One day after the protest, the tree-moving project was completely stopped; and the government said that in the future they will collect public opinion to improve the subway construction process.

In a place where the planning system is not as open and public organizing is frowned upon, the use of the internet and social media in urban issues are be-

*(CONTINUED ON PAGE 11)*



### Letter from the Editors

## Global Connections

What does community mean in an increasingly interconnected world? How do physical places interact with online virtual spaces? What lessons can planners in the U.S. glean from the process of rapid urbanization around the world?

These are the type of crucial questions we, as emerging planners and policy makers at Wagner, need to confront. Regardless of whether we are pursuing an international or domestic specialization, we will need to navigate a highly networked and global world in the course of our careers.

In the Summer/Fall edition of *The Wagner Planner*, current students take a close look at these issues in a collection of articles exploring international urban policy and the role of technology in planning. These topics take us from post-earthquake reconstruction in Haiti to state-of-the-art transportation planning in Bangkok, Thailand. We look at how communities in China are using social networks to influence local government decisions, and how free Google applications are transforming planning methods in New York City.

Turning back to the physical urban environment, several pieces consider the important role of "place" in the modern world. We look at the significance of design and "place-making" in Latin America, and the role of public spaces in the Tahrir Square protests in Cairo.

This edition of the *Wagner Planner* is packed with voices and ideas from around the world, but these articles can only skim the surface of these issues. And though we cannot begin to answer all of the questions posed, we hope that these stories challenge our readers to contemplate our role in a rapidly changing world.

Thank you for reading!

Amy Brisson & Alan Lightfeldt  
Editors in Chief

# Creating a Platform for Social Change

By Nicolás Galarza, MUP '13

While working at the Presidential Agency of Social International Cooperation in Colombia, my coworkers and I set out to harness the power of the internet to help us in deploying a comprehensive poverty alleviation strategy for the country's poorest citizens.

It was the Summer of 2011, and our challenge was to use technology to build a volunteer network that could help Colombian citizens. We first turned to the internet, and thought about how it could be used to create new possibilities for the poorest families in Colombia. Just over 50 percent of Colombian households have access to the internet, compared to 78 percent of American households.

Then we thought; if the poorest of Colombia cannot access the internet, we should deploy a strategy that involved volunteers that were already linked up.

Like in the United States, plenty of citizens in Colombia were willing to help, but many didn't know how. So we started working on a volunteer strategy based upon technology and social media. We were inspired by volunteermatch.org in the US, and "portal do voluntario" in Brazil.

Even though we knew most people were concerned about poverty, we wondered why they were not taking concrete actions to help the poorest population. We found that it was because they are largely unaware of the roots of the problem, much less the consequences and the policies that were being implemented to address it. To find the information, they would have to at the very least read a policy paper. This begged the question: should willing citizens have to read policy papers before they could help? The answer was self-evident.

We thought about how to make this information accessible to the public, and then we had it: we could launch a website with easy to digest content on poverty issues. Then we could set out to develop a volunteer campaign, using an E-Government strategy to engage citizens to take action on alleviating poverty in Co-

lombia. We started designing info graphic pieces, clearly stating the problem, why it was important to solve it, what the government and other organizations were doing, and what a citizen could do to collaborate.

Although our approach to poverty alleviation had been a comprehensive strategy, we decided to focus our project on housing. It seemed feasible that we could gather people to donate their time on a weekend to help improve the home of a poor family.

To begin, we selected one of our constituent families who was in need of a home improvement intervention. This particular household had dirt floors, a roof threatening to fall down, no private space for children, and very poor sanitation services.

We expected between 15 and 30 volunteers. After two weeks of campaigning, however, we had a startling 120 citizens sign up on the website and 70 actually showed up to volunteer. The project was funded by the government as well as private donations, which were used to supply labor, construction materials, and bedding for the children. Private and non-profit organizations also lent their time and technical expertise, including Architecture for Humanity, OrganiZmo and Somos más.

After the intervention, living conditions for this Colombian family were so improved that they were no longer considered poor according to the Colombian standards (which are higher than World Bank measures). The Colombian government recognized our initiative as the best "E-Government Solution" in 2011.

At the Presidential Agency, we knew we had figured out a way to use technology for development, despite limited access among poor families. And this was just the beginning. After this successful intervention, several organizations in different cities expressed their interest in implementing a similar initiative. As citizens committed to public service, we have to know technology is one of our biggest allies.

*Nicolás Galarza is a first year student in the Master of Urban Planning program. He previously worked at the Presidential Agency of Social International Cooperation in his native Colombia for nearly 4 years.*

## Reconstruction in Haiti

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2)

former parks or abandoned lots. Occasionally, we caught a glimpse of the informal commercial corridors within the tent villages, where swarms of people put out whatever little they had to sell to others. I felt odd and ashamed taking pictures. In their faces, I saw the country's larger problems of economic disinvestment, limited natural resources, and lack of a functioning government.

At first, I thought that these challenges surely made life a burden that no person should have to bear. While the sight of their lifestyles was a shock for me, I learned that the people of Haiti did not view their situation through the same lens that I did. People seemed lighthearted, and went about their daily business as usual.

Over the next few days of driving around Port-au-Prince, touring the city, and talking with NGOs working in the area, the streets seemed to change before my eyes from forlorn boulevards into local thoroughfares filled with hope and courage. In order to see how the Haitian people were rebuilding their country, I had to shift my perspective. Americans often think of redevelopment success as the opening of a new company, or a store; in Haiti however, an umbrella and a crate are all you need to run a business.

As the redevelopment of the country continues to progress, it will change from an initial disaster response to interim development and then to long-term planning and development. Through these stages, we need to continually refocus the lens of success on what is realistically attainable. It has taken over 10 years for the richest nation in the world to rebuild after the disaster on 9/11, and we are still not yet complete.

For Haiti, the earthquake of 2010 was only a reminder of the devastation and disinvestment the Haitian people have been trying to overcome for decades. Rebuilding will be slow, but the people of Haiti need grand visions and coordinated efforts among their many stakeholders to rebuild the city and country they deserve.

*Aaron Meyerson is a second year student in the Master of Urban Planning program.*

# Protest, Place, and Power

## *The Transformation of Tahrir Square*



*Egyptian protesters demonstrate on February 1, 2011, at Cairo's Tahrir Square. Photo courtesy of MOHAMMED ABED/AFP/Getty Images.*

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### By Sarah Church, PNP '12

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Most observers have credited online tools, such as Facebook, for the amazingly swift victory of protesters in the Egyptian Revolution. But there is another way to view the narrative of the uprising: as the successful use of urban public space.

On January 25th, 2011, protesters from over 20 meeting places converged to try to occupy Cairo's Tahrir Square, a dynamic public space that later became a powerful symbol of their movement. Though most of the protest starting points had been publicized widely on- and off-line, one was kept quiet: a tiled sidewalk plaza in front of a small sweet shop in Bulaq al-Dakrou, a slum on the city's western edge. When those gathered began marching downtown toward Tahrir, police forces were caught off-guard. As every other group of protesters was repelled by police attacks, these marchers advanced toward the square. Their occupation of Tahrir, though short-lived, was repeated in the following days and helped to catalyze the unfolding events that would lead to the end of President Hosni Mubarak's 30-year regime.

The sweet shop plaza gathering was the critical hip-fake that got the protestors into the square – but it was what happened in Tah-

rir that caught the world's attention. When Tahrir Square was occupied for the second time on January 28th, organizers established more than an activist encampment – they built a thriving protest city. To contain and serve the thousands pouring in, they constructed a campground, food stalls, trash bins, and toilets. There was also a stage for announcements, speeches, and projected television images to keep protestors informed of government actions. Bloggers occupied the center of the round plaza and stayed clustered together to share information. They opened a kindergarten for Tahrir Square's young residents and visitors. For those in need of medical attention, a pharmacy and two clinics provided low-charge and free services, which, for some Egyptians, was an improvement upon the medical attention they were able to access in their daily lives. In transforming the physical space to support each other, the Egyptian protestors broke down traditional barriers and created a unified front against the police.

The temporary community of the square also changed the nature of relations between protestors. Many women reported a significant difference in their treatment, both by fellow protestors and by police. Women led men in protest chants, prayed alongside them instead of behind them. "Men were not touching women; in fact, they were saying

sorry every time they bumped into a woman," said Azza Kamel, an activist and writer. And this kept women safer from police, who were less able to use groping, stripping and rape to intimidate crowds. While women typically had made up 10 percent of protestors in past demonstrations, in Tahrir Square they reportedly made up 40 to 50 percent. Mozn Hassan, director of the Nasra Feminist Studies Center in Cairo said that the freedom experienced by the women in the square kept them coming back, and bringing friends and relatives.

The impact of the encampment at Tahrir Square cannot be denied. The square became a symbol of opposition, a launching pad, and a reason and forum for connection. By protesting on the street, participants risked arrest, sexual assault, beatings, rubber bullets, hoses and tear gas. They slept on the wheels of nearby tanks - literally putting their bodies in the way of the army advancing into the square. For this reason, protest in a physical, public space carried a weight that could not be matched by online posts or blogs, no matter their content. And as people put their bodies on the line, they also built the kinds of emotional and social connections that could change power dynamics far beyond the square.

*Sarah Church is a second year student in the Public and Non-Profit Management and Policy program.*

# Getting Transit Off the Ground in Bangkok

## Skytrain Redefines Elevated Rail



*Bangkok Skytrain's Siam Station, the system's busiest, handles up to 50,000 passengers per day. Photo courtesy of Adam Eckstein.*

By Adam Eckstein, MUP '12

Within the world of transportation planning there are varying opinions on which type of transit systems works best and in under what conditions. Rail lines are usually held up by planners as the ideal mass transit system for large and dense cities (economics and politics notwithstanding). However, the elevated transit rail system is somewhat of a red-headed step child in this school of thought. Many of the older and traditional examples of these elevated rail systems would be considered at best, “un-preferred,” and at worst, something to be torn down. It is not that planners do not see the utility in these rail lines. But when speaking about systems such as the New York City Subway, one can see why they are viewed as unappealing: loud tracks, depressed views from buildings along train routes, unappealing and “blighting” support structures, and a greater vulnerability to weather than underground lines.

But is this true for every elevated train system? It is curious to note that there is a very successful and beloved elevated railway in the developing world, known as the Skytrain. The Skytrain, or BTS, is located in Bangkok, Thailand, and consists of two lines and 25 stations. It was named the “Skytrain” by the press during the planning process and has become one of the most well

loved modes of transportation in the city.

The Bangkok Skytrain looks and operates differently from earlier elevated railways, which has helped propel it to success. With over 500,000 daily trips on the skytrain, the BTS is financially sound enough to cover daily expenses of operations – a feat unheard of for our subsidized U.S. rail systems. While elevated railways in other cities are viewed with frustration, the BTS is quite popular with the general public. It sports a monorail design, which allows for greater turn-ability, fairly quiet trains, and a sleeker support structure. The system also has an extensive collection of connected elevated “skywalks” that lead from the train stations to the nearby malls, offices and residence buildings.



*Bangkok Skytrain's Sukhumvit Line travels above the city's heavily congested roadways. Photo courtesy of Adam Eckstein.*

There are many small kiosk-like shops on these skywalks, and these areas have turned into a whole new fabric of urban space.

The success of the Skytrain does not just lie with design or well-managed operations. In the 1990's, when the system was envisioned and constructed, Bangkok was world-renowned (and still is) for its extensive traffic and congestion. The BTS not only offered strategic relief along the most congested urban corridors, but also was only built in an area of the city known as “New Bangkok.” This area mainly consisted of brand new office buildings and residences, and so the BTS did not raise the same community outcry that would have resulted near the temples and monuments of “Old Bangkok.” The BTS lines are also connected to an Underground Subway Line, a Bus Rapid Transit line and a brand new airport express rail link.

All of these pieces coming together have created an integrated mass transit system and have helped make the BTS a great case study for a successfully planned and operated elevated rail system. The unique implementation and design of the Skytrain can act as a model for planners around the world, showing that the “un-preferred” elevated rail systems can, in fact, be implemented well.

*Adam Eckstein is a second year student in the Master of Urban Planning program and a GIS research assistant at the NYU Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy.*

# From Transport to Mobility

## Shifting the Paradigm for Public Transit

By Alan Lightfeldt, MUP '13

Waiting and stopping.

For public transportation users across the world, it is what defines their daily journey: waiting for the next bus or train, and then stopping several times before reaching the chosen destination. Waiting and stopping is so intrinsic to the public transportation experience that it is not often recognized, much less challenged. Imagine a world in which waiting and stopping were eliminated altogether, where the choice of when and how to get to a destination was chosen not by a transit system but by each individual user.

Such is the world envisioned by Georges Amar. He is the Director of Prospective and Innovative Design at Régie Autonome des Transports Parisiens (RATP), operator of the Paris subway and bus systems. In a recent lunch discussion hosted by the NYU Rudin Center for Transportation Policy and Management, Amar highlighted the potential for transit agencies to reinvent the way transportation is offered and utilized. At the center of his presentation was a distinction between two interacting (and often competing) concepts: transport and mobility.

Transport, Amar stresses, is a rather outdated concept. Transport is the steel and the pavement and the bus and the physical elements that comprise the traditional role of transportation. Mobility, however, is a distinctly separate idea. Mobility is the ability to move about indepen-

dently, without restrictions or barriers. Amar points out that our mobility is a function of the transport options available to us. More often than not, our desire for mobility transcends the physical restraints of transport. This concept is hardly surprising to anyone who has suffered through rush-hour traffic. The gap between our demands for mobility and the restraints put on us by transport are

transport. Offering new tools and services that allow users to embrace their own mobility is the next greatest challenge for transit agencies. In the old paradigm of transport, the one with which most of us still interact today, we have a choice between two or three methods of transport. Shifting the paradigm from transport to mobility means offering a broad menu of options – “trans-modality” – which can mean up to 20 or 30 choices of modes.

So, how well are the world's transit agencies doing at shifting the paradigm? Amar admits that even his own agency has a long way to go, but ideas and innovations are sprouting up. Amar points to the rise of carpooling, car sharing, bus rapid transit and bike sharing as early examples of a move towards “trans-modality.”

Moving beyond the one-size-fits-all approach to transport will require planners to start by asking, “what would the user want?” Responding to those wants, Amar believes, is at the very heart of the paradigm shift to trans-modality.

*Alan Lightfeldt is a first year student in the Master of Urban Planning program and a research assistant at the Rudin Center for Transportation Policy and Management. His interests and research at NYU Wagner focus on finance, public-private partnership, and transportation policy.*



*Clockwise from top: Georges Amar - Director of Prospective and Innovative Design for the Paris Metro system, Transmilenio Bus Rapid Transit station in Bogotá, bikeshare demonstration at the announcement of New York City's new bike sharing campaign. Photos courtesy of Flickr users SamuelHuron and Gerard and the New York City Department of Transportation.*

immense, and can be measured in the minutes one sits idle at a station or the hours one wastes in highway congestion each year.

Amar envisions a world in which transit agencies focus on mobility instead of just

# The Making of Placemaking Planning for the Human Scale

By Christian González-Rivera, MUP '12

Remember our first day of urban design class at Wagner, when measured each other so that we could calculate street widths and door heights in terms of paces and arm spans? At the time, I felt it was a strange introduction to graduate school. But now that I am on my way to becoming an urban planner, I appreciate the core concept behind the exercise: as people travel through and interact with an urban space, they measure it based on their own experiences. Any planned interventions in a place must consider first and foremost the scale at which humans experience it.

Historical, cultural, and economic associations are also then layered on the physical experience of a place. "A place is defined first by a physical intervention by architects, plan-

ners, engineers, and others, who constitute the formal intervention," says Clara Irazábal, a professor of urban planning at Columbia University who explores the concept of 'placemaking.' "This is followed by informal interventions, which are usually subjective and perhaps spiritual, in marked contrast to the physical. This informal intervention is crafted by individuals working as a collective."

***"Any planned interventions in a place must consider first and foremost the scale at which humans experience it."***

The Project for Public Spaces (PPS), a Manhattan-based organization whose mission

since 1975 has been to develop and implement the concept of placemaking defines it as "a multi-faceted approach to the planning, design, and management of public spaces. Put simply, it involves looking at, listening to, and asking questions of the people who live, work and play in a particular space, to discover their needs and aspirations." Fred Kent, the founder and executive director of PPS, emphasizes that "over-designing" a public space can actually make it less successful: "Washington Square Park is very open," he told me in a recent phone interview, "It is a dynamic, vital, self-managing place. The High Line, however, is not as flexible. If you design every square foot of a park or a neighborhood there is no room for flexibility."

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## Gambling With Building Codes

By Emily Olson, MUP '13

I have never been to Vegas, but I've seen Ocean's 13. Not the same thing, I know. On the other hand, I have been to NagaWorld in Phnom Penh – Cambodia's answer to the Bellagio. And although I like the idea of winning, I found that I always lose. The only time I actually 'won' money was when I sat down at the bar and found a misplaced video poker slot card worth 20 dollars.

Since I never win, you can assume that I try not to make any bets. But I later found out that simply entering NagaWorld was a gamble. As it turns out, Phnom Penh does not have any building codes or standards of its own. Instead, the government trusts foreign development and investment companies (mainly from China, South Korea and Malaysia) to adhere to the building codes from their respective countries. So it was no surprise when I read in a May 13, 2009, article in the Phnom Penh Post, that there have been several problems with NagaWorld's construction.

The building stands 14 stories tall with only

a 14-meter foundation. It was not designed to be so tall, but extra, unplanned stories were added to the design well after the foundation had been poured. The Phnom Penh article reported that a development consultancy firm, Runs and Walks Co., found that the shallow foundation is dangerously insufficient. It's overloaded beyond capacity, and cracks have formed in the foundation.

With NagaWorld's structural integrity in question, investors are hiring private consulting firms to inspect many other buildings in Phnom Penh for structural damage. As feared, NagaWorld is not the only building that suffers from poor planning and construction practices. The most notable is the 32-story Canadia Tower, which experienced sublevel flooding during its construction in 2009 and 2010, along with a multitude of other problems.

It is unclear how the rest of this story will unfold. Without building codes of its own, Phnom Penh has a hard time holding developers responsible, especially local Cambodian companies. Foreign developers are under contract to use their home country's build-



*NagaWorld, Phnom Penh, Cambodia  
Courtesy of <http://commons.wikimedia.org/>*

ing codes, but they face pressure to cut costs and to finish projects ahead of schedule, combined with a lack of accountability. With no sign that foreign investment is slowing down, the Cambodian government needs to stop gambling with safety, and begin to mandate its own set of building standards and codes. Only by enforcing a legally binding standard will the government be able to protect residents and visitors for years to come.

*Emily Olson served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Cambodia between 2008 and 2010. She is currently a first year student in the Master of Urban Planning program specializing in International Development Planning.*

# Planning in the Google Universe

By Nick Shears, MUP '12

As default taskmasters swinging from one group project to the next, Wagner students can nod in appreciation of Google's arsenal of online networking and communication programs. Google Documents, Photos, Groups, and old-fashioned Gmail have become the standard organizational tools for sharing ideas and maintaining responsibility among peers. (Seriously, it's hard to imagine a Google-less world these days).

And then there is Google Earth. Hardly a stranger to Planning students, it remains the more fun, affordable, and easy-going cousin of the digital mapping family. (GIS is the less affectionate, but perhaps more intelligent, older sibling). Not only does Google Earth provide hours of idle enjoyment in "flying" mode, it can be used as a highly effective and creative software tool in city land use processes, especially at non-profit organizations where resources are slim.

One of these processes is the creation of a Business Improvement District (BID). In New York City, there are over 60 BIDs, including the Downtown Alliance, The Bryant Park Corporation, and the Grand Central Partnership, and the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership. These areas vary in size and are created to exact a defined tax assessment on property owners in return for services that the city is unable to provide, such as park maintenance, street cleaning, and signage. The extra tax assessment is intended to increase property values in the long run.

Google Earth comes into play in the BID creation phase, particularly in drafting the District Plan. The District Plan is a required document in the BID process, and a significant chunk of the plan is devoted to objectively defining the existing conditions of the area and targeting improvement areas.

So, how do you obtain the existing conditions analysis? This was one of my main responsibilities as an intern at a park's advocacy on the West Side of Manhattan in their pursuit of a Neighborhood Improvement District. This particular proposed area contained over 180 blocks, stretching from West 59th Street in Hell's Kitchen to Chambers Street in Tribeca. Rather than attempt a block-by-block



Existing conditions for a BID created with the aid of Google Earth. Image courtesy of Nick Shears.

survey of the area, we prioritized our efforts by focusing on the 39 streets that had pedestrian crossings to the park over the highway. We called these streets "park corridors".

In designing the survey template (on Google SketchUp) we identified 19 street features—ranging from loading bays and tree pits to bike parking and plantings—that would help us categorize the street as objectively as possible. With copies of the survey attached to clip boards and multi-colored pens in hand, we set out in the field and tallied the number of features for each intersection and mid-block within the corridor, and then totaled those features for each of the 39 corridors.

The next step was categorizing the corridors into commercial, green, and retail types, depending on their total number of features. For instance, West 55th street is a commercial corridor because it has a higher number of loading bays, parking garages, and blank walls, than it does tree pits, plantings, and active store fronts.

To organize and interpret this large amount of data, we entered the information in a spreadsheet on Google Docs. We then linked it to Google Earth so that the Existing Conditions report for each intersection and mid-block appeared as an individual place-mark. (To do this you need to download the free Spreadsheet Mapper 2.0). For instance, on the existing conditions survey map there is a place-mark hovering over the corner of Ves-

try Street and Greenwich Street that, if clicked, displays a picture, a brief summary, and an itemized report of the features. We added 3D bar charts into our map so that, when looking at the district in its entirety from New Jersey, one can see how all of the 39 corridors vary in land use across the West Side. (The 3D software, called GE-Graph, is also free).

After analyzing our data and presenting it on Google Earth, we could see different patterns in the types of street conditions within the BID. This gave us valuable insight into the existing conditions of the District and served as a useful guide in drafting the content of the District Plan. We could then send edited versions of our map via email to document our progress for stakeholders, like our steering committee members and city officials.

There were some glitches, especially in the transfer of so much data from the spreadsheet to the map itself. But overall Google's technology proved to be indispensable in drafting the District Plan, not only for its powerful presentation but also for its convenience. For planning students and professionals, Google Earth's map-making applications should be recognized as valuable tools for collecting and presenting empirical analysis.

*Nick Shears is a second year student in the Master of Urban Planning program. He worked as a planning and policy intern at Friends of Hudson River Park and was a U.S. Fulbright student at the University of Turku in Finland.*



## In China's Growth, Lessons for U.S.

By Sam Filler, MUP '12

China's economic ascent offers valuable lessons in large-scale economic development that could help western countries like the United States revive their economies. One Chinese example, the Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP), combines high-quality public administration and management with economic development initiatives. Lessons learned from the SIP project could be applied to the Saint Elizabeths Redevelopment Initiative in Washington, D.C., to help the development spur new job growth and housing in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood.

Both SIP and Saint Elizabeths illustrate the importance of clear governance structures in public development projects. A joint venture between China and Singapore, SIP was planned, developed, and managed by a local government authority, Suzho Industrial Park Administration Committee (SIPAC). The support and attention of national officials fostered accountability while supplying needed financial and human resources. The powers they were granted as a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) freed SIP from national regulatory processes that could have prevented its development.

SIP's development process did initially derail because of communication breakdowns and cultural misunderstandings between Singapore and Suzhou officials. But they were able to put the project back on track after Singapore adjusted the incentives behind their agreement with China. After the change, Suzhou officials refocused on learning public administration software from the Singapore officials. This enabled SIP to maximize its infrastructure investments, and foreign investors started to trust the integrity and effectiveness of SIPAC. Today, SIP and SIPAC are recognized as international models of industrial development.

The Saint Elizabeths East Campus Redevelopment Initiative represents one of the most important development projects in D.C. and the United States. The East Campus forms part of a larger campus, known as Saint Elizabeths Hospital, which once served as civil war hospital and later as a hospital for the insane. In 1990, the hospital grounds received designation as a National Historic Landmark due to the buildings' significant architectural qualities and the advances the hospital made in mental health medicine. With over 170 acres, Saint Elizabeths East Campus is one of only a few properties larger than 50 acres available for redevelopment in the District of Columbia. Due to the size and scope of the opportunity, the redevelopment of the Saint Elizabeths East Campus will likely take 10-30 years and will occur in multiple phases.

Saint Elizabeths could serve as an example of quality urban redevelopment in the U.S., but local leaders should look at SIP and SIPAC as a model for successfully structuring a planning authority. The project requires clear management authority, funding sources, and better support from the federal government. The project would benefit from consolidating management authority within a Special Powers Authority (SPA). This would eliminate confusion that currently exists between D.C. agencies over project control. Also, the SPA would gain autonomy to decide on a development path it deemed to best fit the conditions of the Saint Elizabeths without being undermined by other D.C. agencies

The Federal Government could also designate Saint Elizabeths as an economic incubator zone similar to China's SEZs. The special zone could preclude the SPA from National Historic Presentation Act (NHPA) requirements and other regulations that slow the development process.

If the redevelopment is successful, it would spur job growth and provide economic development for an underserved area of D.C. Saint Elizabeths would provide local residents with exciting areas to shop and eat, and also the option to find housing walking distance from new job options. And it would attract businesses that provide support services to the federal government, like telecommunications, research labs, and other innovative industries involved in security. The key to the Saint Elizabeths SPA's effectiveness will be determined by its ability to mirror the type of visionary planning and effective management found at SIP and SIPAC.

*Sam Filler is a second year student in the Master of Urban Planning program. He will pursue a career specializing in regional economic development.*

# Go East, Young Planners!

By Kimisha Sellers, MUP '12

If you haven't noticed, China is experiencing an economic boom that has opened up many doors across various sectors. While much of the world is facing economic downfalls and unemployment, China is experiencing the opposite. Jobs are popping up everywhere, especially in the urban planning field.

Urban planners have kept busy implementing ideas that will allow China to catch up with the rest of the modern world. The country has pumped large sums of money into its economy and has also allowed an increasing number of global investments. More and more foreign urban planning firms are moving to China to take advantage of the opportunity to essentially build a country from scratch. It is practically any urban planner's dream career.

Being an urban planner in China offers many advantages. Planners are able to take ownership of more projects and see them develop more quickly. The process of planning in China can happen within 3 to 5 years, with little red tape to cross for any type of development that will improve the country's quality of life.

In addition to quick development, Chinese urban planning careers offer top salaries, as well as prestige statuses. Some of these urban planners have even become prominent figures in their city's government, awarding them with great power and control over how the city develops. Unfortunately, too much power has led to opportunities for corruption, resulting in long jail sentences.

And don't worry about transitioning to China, as many of the country's urban centers have superior transportation systems with signage in both Chinese and English. You will also see many Western products and stores, in addition to those that are unique to Chinese culture.

If you are wondering where all of the urban planning work is coming from, blame it on China's rapid urbanization. An increasing portion of China's popu-



*View of the Pudong skyline at night. Photo courtesy of Sam Filler.*

*On opposite page: Wagner students walk through a Shanghai neighborhood in the rain. Photo courtesy of Sharon Carney.*

lation is migrating from desolate, rural farm areas to growing, urban city centers and looking for better opportunities. This migration has placed a strain on existing resources and has sparked the need for rapid urbanization. City governments have taken this opportunity to expand their borders by increasing housing, building infrastructure, and updating the urban fabric.

As visitors travel from one growing city to the other, they will notice that the majority of these cities each have their own extensive urban plan that depicts future growth. It is possible to see how these cities will grow within the next 20 to 30 years. These plans have become so significant, that they are usually presented as small-scale, intricate models placed on display in a prominent museum or gallery space.

As long as the government continues to invest in the cities and race to meet the urbanization demands, urban planners will be in high demand for Chinese development. So if your luck is failing at finding an urban planning job in other economies, go to China.

*Kimisha Sellers is a second year student in the Master of Urban Planning program. She aspires to work internationally on economic and community development issues in impoverished, neglected or disaster areas.*

## Nanjing's Silent Protest

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coming increasingly common. This case in Nanjing, as well as several environmental conflicts that have happened in recent years, is evidence of a growing awareness from residents. These issues make the government reflect on the lack of public opinion in the planning process. And they also tell the residents that urban construction is not just a matter for the government, but also a matter for all the people in that city.

In this new era of life on the internet, planners in China should recognize this trend and learn from these individual cases. The challenge now is how to integrate social media in the whole planning system, and how to listen, broadcast, coordinate, and lead in urban issues on the internet. Will this improve the planning system in China? I am optimistic, and I am anticipating, that this question will be answered in the near future.

*Shuai Ren is a second year student in the Master of Urban Planning program specializing in Environment, Infrastructure and Transportation. She is interested in sustainable transportation policies, particularly in the U.S., Europe, and China.*

# A Tale of Two Cities

## Affordable Housing in Paris and New York City

By Ben Hagen, MUP '13

New York and Paris are two cities whose density and international appeal have led to extremely high housing costs. Both have historically struggled to provide affordable options, though their methods have differed considerably. Unlike America's federalist system of government, housing policy in France is generally more centralized at the national level, leaving local governments fewer opportunities – but also less responsibility – to tackle the problem.

Although public housing in France dates to 1890, the nation made no major forays into its provision until the 20th century. In 1948, a system known as *Habitations à Loyer Modéré* (HLM) was created to address a severe nation-wide housing shortage; further action followed in 1953, both with the passage of a law mandating employer contributions to housing and the creation of a new national agency to build and administer public housing.

***“The 2005 riots in Paris and its suburbs have re-focused public attention onto the plight of the city's poor.”***

The mid-century years saw France make many of the same mistakes as the United States in the construction of these units; the large, bulky buildings, in the style of French architect Le Corbusier, were christened *grands ensembles* – “large sets”. Resembling the complexes being built by Robert Moses and others in the US, they did little to ameliorate the social isolation experienced by those living in poverty.

Further exacerbating the problem was the program's initial focus - not on the poor, but the on the middle class being squeezed by the housing shortage. Between 1956 and 1962, 110 of these complexes were built in Paris; in sharp contrast to New York City's experience, many of these buildings were constructed in the fast-growing suburbs, rather than the expensive central city.

Unlike the U.S., which hasn't built a federally-funded public housing project since 1974, France did not discontinue its program



*Public housing constructed in the first half of the 20th century in Paris' 13th arrondissement. Photo courtesy of Wikipedia Commons.*

after disappointing early results. Thirty-eight percent of the nation's public housing stock has been constructed since 1974, units which generally have rents up to 60 percent below market rate. Just as in the US, the location of public housing is an issue fraught with tension – even in Paris, the birthplace of France's egalitarian revolution.

Increased efforts in recent years to create mixed income Parisian neighborhoods have met with community opposition as public housing has pushed beyond the city's outlying areas – just three peripheral arrondissements (Parisian administrative districts roughly analogous to neighborhoods) contain 70 percent of Paris' public housing stock – and into the central city's expensive – and tourist-filled - 7th, 8th, and 16th arrondissements.

The 2005 riots in Paris and its suburbs have re-focused public attention onto the plight of the city's poor, causing some to re-evaluate the sterile, rudimentary construction that has been the public-housing standard for decades. The city has in recent years begun to construct innovative new mixed-use complexes that seek to imbue public housing with a form and function more akin to that found in the private market. Though undeniably a positive development, this renewed

focus has unfortunately revived the perverse spectre of demolition of existing units.

The need is no less dire here in New York. NYCHA (NYC's public housing authority) manages an aging and outmoded housing stock – one whose newest building was constructed 37 years ago. The currently fashionable method of addressing low-income housing needs in NYC is to incentivize private developers to include them in otherwise market-rate developments. Although this has the benefit of dispersing low-income units throughout the city's communities, it is effective only in times of new housing construction, and then only for those developments that choose to take advantage of it.

Despite problems with the Parisian model – chief among them the continued destruction and scattered relocation of existing units and residents – it is clear that the concepts of *égalité* and *fraternité* still resonate with the Parisian political structure to an extent sadly unmatched by its counterpart in New York City.

*Ben Hagen is a first year student in the Master of Urban Planning program. He is a regular contributor to Wagner Today and his research has appeared in the American Planning Association's The New Planner publication.*

# The Next Two Billion

## A Discussion with Dr. Angel Shlomo

By Maria del Carmen Garcia Maldonado, MUP '13

*Dr. Angel Shlomo teaches the History and Theory of Urban Planning course at NYU Wagner and a similar course at the Woodrow Wilson School of International and Public Affairs at Princeton University. Professor Shlomo was the principal investigator and co-author of The Dynamics of Global Urban Expansion and the author of Housing Policy Matters: A Global Analysis. He continues to focus on housing policy and urban planning in the developing world and has advised the World Bank, the United Nations, and the Inter-American Development Bank on housing and urban development policy. He is currently working on a book titled Planet of Cities.*



The Wagner Planner sat down with Professor Shlomo to talk about the global role of urban planners. The following is a paraphrased summary of that conversation.

### **What is your advice for planners seeking to enter the international field?**

Planners who intend to enter the international field need to be wary of applying American ideas about planning in other countries.

The United States is an outlier, with a society based on the Rule of Law. It has an immense amount of land, half of its population lives in suburbs, and its economy favors individualistic capitalism. Additionally, it is one of the top energy consumers per capita, with some of the highest carbon dioxide emissions per capita in the world.

In contrast, developing countries have starkly different characteristics and the issues are fundamentally different. Rule of Law is constantly jeopardized by the abundance of weak laws, government corruption, and the weak regulatory agencies. Cities are experiencing rapid unregulated urban growth, and low or no economic growth. Urban centers have much higher densities, low energy consumption, and low carbon emissions. Planners must be cautious of exporting strategies and techniques developed in the context of U.S. planning as they transition to work on an international scale.

### **In your opinion, what is the main global issue challenging our generation of planners?**

Cities are growing and expanding. In the next forty years, the urban population growth is projected to be 2.56 billion people. Are we ready for this growth? One third of the land should be put to public use, and that one third must be the planner's focus: streets must be

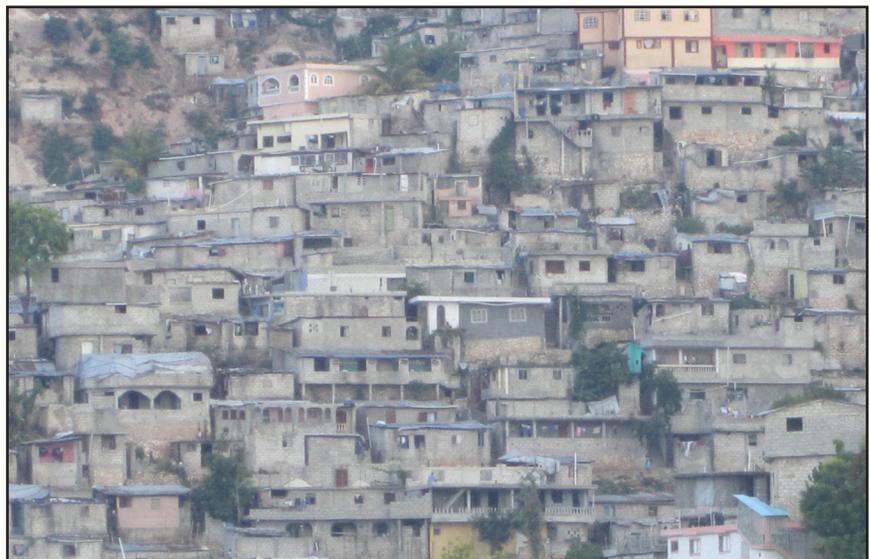
laid out and open areas must be planned.

Developing countries are expected to experience 15 times the amount of population growth of industrialized countries, or roughly 2.4 billion people. For example, Sub-Saharan Africa, home of many of the poorer countries in the world, will experience a large part of the expected world's population growth under an environment where government expenditure per-capita is low, where there is less rule of law and more corruption, and where there are too few planners and not enough human capital.

Bangkok and São Paulo are examples of the problems that can arise when rapid urban growth happens under unplanned and ineffectively regulated

land policies. Bangkok is currently suffering an extreme transportation crisis, and São Paulo, a city of 20 million people, has very few public open spaces.

So how do we prepare for this 2.4 billion? We must approach planning with strategies for anticipated growth, and for the expansion of cities. We need to be on the ground, thinking decades ahead, and acquiring land for public use now, rather than later. We also must create systems to protect public land, and work with community groups and non-for profits to aggressively defend of open spaces in the face of corruption and political interests. We need to work against small-mindedness if we are to be prepared to accept the challenges of the future.



*Slum housing in Haiti. Photo courtesy of Aaron Meyerson.*

# The Making of Placemaking

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Prof. Irazábal acknowledges the dichotomy between the design of a space and its actual uses, saying, “There is always a tension between the formal and informal in urban spaces. The former is defined by regulation that seeks to create order in a space and ensure that incompatible uses do not occur together. The latter is a network of culturally- or historically-defined uses that construct the dynamic aspect of a place.”

We can readily observe this in existing places; you don’t have to be a native of New York City to discern the difference between having a drink at a bar near the Bedford stop on the L and having one off the 77th Street stop on the 6. But as planners, how do we create a sense of place when building a new place?

“Planning has not become place-focused yet,” says Mr. Kent. “The design community controls the placemaking aspect of city planning.” He elaborated on this point in a recent interview in *The Atlantic*: “Sometimes urban design is about community, but all too often it is just about design with the

word ‘urban’ attached for credibility. Placemaking, on the other hand, requires the community members to be at the center of planning. Urban designers who respect community wisdom can be enormous assets if they are willing to leave behind their egos and help communities achieve their goals.”

Fair enough, but who really is the ‘community’? Is the community necessarily the people who live directly around the site being planned, or can it be broader than that? Prof. Irazábal gave an example from Latin America: “Many places can have significance for stakeholders beyond those who live or work in close proximity to that space. For example, recently Mexico City’s plans to make some structural changes to the Mexican capital’s main plaza, or Zócalo met with strong and vociferous opposition not just from citizens of Mexico City, but from all of Mexico, and even internationally. To the extent that the Zócalo is a space of national, and increasingly international, importance, there are a great many stakeholders who have an interest in the physi-

cal and cultural embodiments of that space.”

And let’s not forget the economic significance of a space. Closer to home, the ongoing Atlantic Yards development in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, is pitting owners of residential brownstones against a coalition of organizations claiming to represent the job-hungry blue-collar workers and low-income residents.

Much like presenters craft their presentations with a specific audience in mind, planners must design interventions with a particular community in mind. We must partner with stakeholders and measure their needs. We must then use that information to measure poverty lines, budget lines, and political lines in the sand. After all, a street that’s seven paces wide for one person may be ten paces wide for another.

*Christian González-Rivera is a second year student in the Master of Urban Planning program. He currently serves on the aboard of the Alliance of Latin@ and Latin American Students.*

## Wagnerds at the 2011 APA Conference



Wagner planners Aaron Meyerson, Tai Cooper, Kimisha Sellers, Adam Eckstein, Carlyn Maksymuk, and Lisa Roberts meet and mingle with Boston area alums at the APA 2011 Conference in Boston. Photo courtesy of Carlyn Maksymuk.

# Meanwhile, Outside of the Classroom...



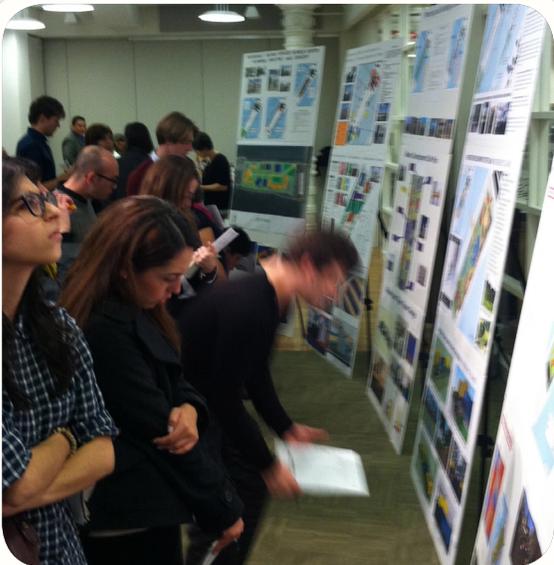
First year planning students Erik George and Alan Lightfeldt sport their 'staches at the annual UPSA 'Stache Bash.

Photo courtesy of Erik George.



First year planning students take a moment to celebrate the completion of Project 2 for the Introduction to Urban Design class. Top row (l to r): Alexandra Derran, and Ronnie Hutchinson. Bottom row (l to r): Lyndsey Scofield, Dani Rosen, Alda Chan, and Thea Garon.

Photo courtesy of Matthew Tschabold.



Students, faculty, and guests provide peer review for the team design proposals in the Introduction to Urban Design class, which challenged students to design a new university campus on Roosevelt Island.

Photo courtesy of Alan Lightfeldt.



Wagner students and faculty in Shanghai, China in summer 2011.

Photo courtesy of Sam Filler.

## Buzz Words by Aaron Meyerson





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