

The ISOCARP YPP Workshop in Wuhan, China, October 2011

As the plane descended into Wuhan, I realized how little I knew about the Young Planning Professionals Workshop. It was my first ISOCARP Congress; first time in China; and first international planning workshop. It was also very late, and very dark. Upon entering the terminal, I was greeted by a pair of helpful volunteers, two of the hundreds of local university students who would eagerly assist us, with any task, at seemingly any hour, during the course of our stay. The warmth they exuded immediately put me at ease, a feeling that continued throughout the YPP and my time in Wuhan.

The following morning, my roommate and I rose to meet our colleagues for the workshop. There were twenty five of us in total, from sixteen countries on four continents. Our coordinators gathered the group together and introduced us to our project, the area surrounding the recently completed Wuhan Railway Station.

Urban development is occurring at an incredible rate in China, often at a scale that is difficult to comprehend elsewhere. Coupled with the fact that Wuhan is developing as a central hub in the high-speed rail network connecting Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, along with a number of other sub-centres; it was evident that our project was at the heart of urban development in China.

We had a brief tour of the project site, something that could have been extended to foster a better understanding of the location among the YPPs, and after a visit to some notable places spread across what was evidently an enormous city; we put our ideas about the project to paper. We then identified five key aspects of the project; vision, infrastructure & mobility, environment & sustainability, social & economic and local scale, and created teams to focus on each.

What followed was a lively discussion involving people with a diversity of backgrounds, both personal and professional. And it didn't stop until our presentation during the opening day of the 47th ISOCARP Congress. The dynamism of the conversations taking place partly resulted from bringing together a varied group of individuals and giving them a very limited timeframe to complete an engaging project. But it was also an outcome of having smart, creative and most importantly, inspired people who were able to communicate their ideas, embrace conflict and celebrate success to deliver a vision of a liveable community in a growing city.

For a number of us, the project served as an introduction to planning and development in a Chinese context. The planning situation in China differs considerably from those with which I am most familiar, Canada and Sweden, and there was a steep learning curve, but with the help of colleagues both Chinese and international, who had experience in China, we quickly caught up. At the same time, everyone was able to contribute their own knowledge to develop a plan that consolidated ideas from around the world.

Inspiration was derived from a range of local sources as well. One team interviewed Wuhan residents on local buses to get a better picture of how they viewed the new rail station and its surroundings. In doing so, the team was better able recognize the perceived strengths and challenges that existed and tailor the new area to the needs of the people living and working in Wuhan. On another occasion, our taxi driver turned out to live in an urban village within the project site; his home was slated for demolition and he was to be relocated to a new apartment in the completed area. As we crossed the Yangchung Lake, China's largest urban lake and the southern point of our project area, he offered valuable insight into life in the area, his feelings about moving and his thoughts on the future. Such personal conversations helped us to foster a better understanding of what the project meant to the people who would be living with it and served as motivation to develop a plan that they would be satisfied with.

Late nights were followed by early mornings. It was impressive to see how well the group sustained such a demanding pace. Our coordinators and YPP vice president supported us in a range of capacities, from helpful suggestions in conceptualizing our project ideas, to more practical aspects, like late night snacks and coffee. The discussion evolved into plans for the project area; our work punctuated by delicious but time-consuming dinners with the planning departments at a number of universities in Wuhan. While there were nights where it was difficult to leave the studio, these meals offered the YPPs the opportunity to reflect on the day's work and to exchange ideas with local planning students.

After four fast-paced days, it was time to present. With only hours to spare, we fleshed out our final ideas, reviewed the project and subsequently presented it. As we wrapped up our presentation at the Wuhan Qintai Grand Theatre in song, it was difficult not to feel a sense of satisfaction with our project outcome, those who supported us and everyone who took part in the YPP workshop. I look forward to seeing if any of the YPP ideas are incorporated into Wuhan's development plan for the area.

The workshop was the result of a great deal of work by a number of dedicated people. Thank you to all of the local volunteers; all of the institutions in Wuhan that assisted us; our coordinators, Wai Keen Ng and Bert Smolders; the ISOCARP YPP VP, Zeynep Enlil; the Programme Manager, Gaby Kurth and all of my YPP colleagues.

by Mitchell Reardon
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