THE PROPOSED FY 2007 BUDGET: WHAT IT MEANS FOR THE HOUSING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT INDUSTRY
NAHRO IN CHINA

A Delegate's Journal

BY LISA BAKER

In September of 2005, I was fortunate enough to be part of NAHRO's delegation to China. This was arranged through NAHRO's International Committee as part of its ongoing work with other countries on housing and community development issues. We were on a mission to find out about similarities and differences between issues in the U.S. and in China and to find the places where we might work together and learn from each other. NAHRO has been actively engaged with other countries on joint issues, most notably with Great Britain and Canada, but also recently with Israel. (See the Sept./Oct. 2005 issue of the Journal of Housing and Community Development for coverage of the Israel trip).

Given China's emerging place in the world economy, the size of its population and land mass, as well as its ever more intense use of the world's resources as it moves towards modernization, it is a natural choice for NAHRO to learn about how it provides housing and community development programs for its citizens. We can, as well, share information on construction technologies that may perhaps help with global resource sharing.

It's estimated that China currently uses about 40% of the world's cement and concrete, and 54% of steel used in construction and other commodities. These all have price and availability implications for the work we do in our own communities. This is especially true in New Orleans and other communities hit by hurricanes Katrina and Rita as they attempt to rebuild. But even non-disaster-related construction is impacted by global availability of materials. In one California-based project in which I am involved, a 32-unit project for low-income families, price increases have forced a change from green sustainable materials to less costly ones; they have also increased the funding gap after the initial deal was already completed, but before construction could begin.

The Trip

September 9 and 10, 2005

On the Tokyo leg of the flight, while browsing a copy of the Nikkei Weekly, I find an article about pollution in the Chinese western provinces brought about by rapid industrialization without safeguards. The article states that the local government response is to
issue respirators to the population, but not to impose emissions restric-
tions. This makes me wonder: how does China view the community development
notion of green development and sustainability? What are the checks and balances between development and environmental protection?

After 26 hours I finally arrive in Beijing. The air outside looks like pictures of Los Angeles in 1968.

It's brown and thick, and you can already smell it seeping into the airplane cabin. The climate is hot, humid and muggy. There are a lot of people out and about, even at 9:30 p.m. Beijing appears to be an interesting mix of new and old, high-rise and low-rise buildings and narrow passageways. The streets and sidewalks are very clean, with very little litter—certainly a lot less than in California or other urban parts of the U.S. The downtown, with its wide boulevards and street lighting, reminds me a little of Mexico City.

September 12, 2005

This morning we visited an area known as the Hutongs, an area near the river behind the Forbidden City which is being preserved and restored because of tourism. This original housing for government workers from the Forbidden City, which is now used as regular housing. Renting a unit in this area is as expensive as other parts of central Beijing, but the homes don't have personal bathrooms. Instead, there are communal baths for each block.

Beijing and most of the cities have ring roads, similar to the Beltway in Washington, D.C. Living inside the first ring is very expensive—units are small and public transportation is very good. Out past the third ring, units are larger and less expensive, but there is limited transportation.

Today we had lunch in a government-owned housing unit. In traditional Chinese construction, units are organized around quadrangle courtyards. The one we visited had seven families of 3 to 4 persons each, or approximately 21-28 people living around a courtyard. Unlike other units in Beijing, it is low-rise, cooler and has more trees.

One of the first things that struck me was how small the area was by U.S. standards and how little personal space is required to maintain a comfortable lifestyle. Chinese housing officials handed out an interesting statistic: the average person needs 24.8 square meters of space in China, 40 square meters in Europe and 60 square meters in the United States. Of course this is not the case that, in China, the figures will rise to an average of 35 square meters within the next ten years.

The unit we visited was approximately 645 square feet (60 square meters) with two bedrooms and a living room. The kitchen is in a separate building on the right side of the house. The arrangement around the central courtyard makes the living space seem larger and adds privacy and a sense of security. In the United States, people are more inclined to group houses together. In China, the courtyard is central and the houses are like a circle around it.

September 13, 2005

Today's bus tour of Beijing emphasized its history. We visited Tianmen Square and the Forbidden City, which was the governmental head-
quarters for China under the last dynasty before the Revolution. The City's cultural sites are thronged with tourists, both local and foreign. Most of the areas that are popular with foreign tourists sport signs in both English and Chinese. Though the volume of tourists and entrance fees make these sites a tourist attraction from an economic development perspective, most of them are currently stand-alone, and don't seem to use the area as a nucleus for commercial development. There are some small vendors, but no large shopping, eating, or hotel complexes nearby. The type of master planning that takes place in many of our U.S. cities just seems to be getting started in China.

There are similarities as well, though. One person remarked that the Chinese dream is a house and a car—goals that don't seem so different from those of U.S. residents. Despite differences in government and economy, China has many of the same housing issues as the U.S., including homelessness and findings the balance between growing the economy and having affordable options available for households. In addition, there is the sheer number of persons and a very real difference in opportunity and housing in the country as opposed to in the cities.

We share information with them regarding how subsidies and assis-
tance are structured in the United States and about NARHO's mission. While our hosts are cautious, we agree that we are able to learn much from the other and that there is interest in having a Chinese delegation come to the United States and be hosted by NARHO.

Finally, it is time to go to the banquet. In China, banquets have a very important function and a protocol all their own. We do our best to understand the customs; no major rules are broken and everyone learns a little bit more. As a result, two of us are invited to attend a round of unannounced meetings in Hangzhou, where the rest of us go on to Xian.
through a very clean and tidy countryside. Villages appear to be well laid out and the families are engaged in agriculture. The fields, which belong to small family farms instead of large agribusiness projects, are tidy and productive. As we drive through the country, I am struck by how much this part of China looks like some of the farms in Northern California.

The Great Wall was originally several walls built by different kings. Once China's first emperor conquered all the kingdoms and unified China in 2,000 B.C., he spent the next decade consolidating the walls into a single one. It meanders like a large sleepy serpent along the hills and mountains, with guard towers posted along the way. This particular area outside of Beijing boasts the best preserved section of the wall. Here, I caught the first glimpse of a shopping and entertainment nexus next to a cultural monument. It is also the home of the Great Wall Starbucks, which we drive past on our way to the bus parking lot.

The wall itself is wide enough to march an army across. Today it is thronged with an army of tourists and small vendors. I get my second look at the globalization phenomenon about half way along the wall, when I stop to help two elderly women who are trying to load film into their camera. Suddenly it dawns on me that I am an American in China, standing on the Great Wall, speaking Spanish and helping two women from Argentina load film into their Japanese camera. We all laugh and I continue on my way.

The Chinese government operates a variety of government factories as a way of promoting the arts, providing jobs and trading goods for foreign currency. These factories store a variety of goods in a courtyard; this particular one has a kitchen vegetable garden in the center. There are rooms for sleeping that are used by creases during the harvest season and are rented out at other times. Lunch is very good; the food is simple, very fresh and with a lot of vegetables. The wife presents a plate of preserved eggs as a special treat. I eat one to show respect, but it is pretty hard to get my mouth to accept an egg whose white is now translucent brown, while the yolk is green. I think about Dr. Seuss's Green Eggs and Ham, close my eyes and bite. It's not bad.

September 15, 2005

We woke at 5:00 a.m. for a 5:40 a.m. flight to Xi'an to view housing and commercial developments. We head out to the airport only to find our flight is delayed until 10:00 a.m.

Xi'an has been a main center in China since prehistoric times. You can track its rise from stone age, through bronze age to the iron age. Currently famous to tourists as the home of the Terracotta Warriors, it is a strangely industrial town, home to many high tech and manufacturing jobs, as well as to the country's space program. It was the original capital of China until its move to Beijing. After Beijing became the capital, Xi'an was still the main military base of the country. It is now a business and technology center.

Xi'an has eight rivers and the area itself was one of the original irrigation empires in prehistoric times. During the Tang dynasty, it is said that the area was able to support over one million people. Today, it is a city of approximately seven million.

September 18, 2005

Today we have the opportunity to look at the economic opportunities brought about by Xi'an's cultural resources, especially the discovery of the Terracotta Warriors. The government has built a museum complex that covers access to the warriors, who are still buried in situ, and additional museums for artifacts.

The museums are built in the Tang style, which was a golden age for China, known for its peace and prosperity. The warriors were an army built for China's first emperor, the same one who unified the country and the Great Wall; they are guards of what is supposed to be his tomb. Every soldier has a different face and expression. The preservation efforts and obvious care that is taken with the site is inspiring.

The museum and gardens are big, modern, clean and very nice. However, although there are shops within the museum complex, there doesn't seem to be a large shopping entertainment venue or nexus that uses the museum for additional economic advantage.

September 19, 2005

Off to the airport and on to Chengdu, capital of Szechuan province, for meetings with officials and official tours.
The meeting was very informative. They provided a PowerPoint presentation regarding Chengdu, which is one of the top 15 largest cities in China. It has been the capital of Sichuan for about 2,300 years, and is notable as the "hometown" of the giant panda. According to officials, housing is the region's main economic driver—Chengdu ranks fifth in the country in housing investment. However, they are also looking to diversify and broaden the city's opportunities. In the last year officials opened a computer production base in the city. They are active in the Sister City program—Phoenix, Ariz. is their sister city—and are also interested in historic preservation and in working to rebuild the old portion of the city.

Despite their progress, the officials cited four areas in which they believe that the city needs to improve. These include: adjusting production of some industries, relocating some industries, adjusting occupation of the land and making good use of limited land available. These issues are felt in the real context of housing infrastructure and environment. Because it is an old city, Chengdu has a large amount of aged and dangerous housing in areas that lack infrastructure and amenities. Increased car ownership and use has led to a great amount of gridlock. Finally, there is the heavy population load, which results in residential areas right next to heavy industry. Most industry has not been regulated for environmental constraints, and this has led to pollution that impacts the general population.

In 2002, the city decided to rebuild four million square meters of housing. This includes the issues of relocation, affordable housing for persons of limited means and historic preservation. By 2005, officials say, they had achieved much of the construction.

Another project was the relocation of the river east of the city, which had become very polluted. It was a location of housing for the very poor and for industry and industrial run-off. The government partnered with a French multinational firm to clean the river and surrounding area. Households were relocated and many industries were required to move and to control discharge. The result over the last ten years has been the declaration of the river, creating of a large open space park area and new housing.

After the meeting, we visited the historic district undergoing renovation and the reclaimed waterfront. Everywhere, we see the Chinese characteristic for demolition on the walls. The majority of the units in the area are now vacant. New housing is being constructed in the old style, by hand, using traditional techniques. At one location, we were able to see the staging area where logs are shaped into joints and roof and beam components. There seems to be a notion that historic preservation consists of rebuilding in the same style, but not necessarily in saving the original components.

The park at the waterfront is an example of a large-scale reclamations project. Everything has a newness about it. The trees are not yet mature, but you can see how they will grow in the new housing sits on the edge of the open space. Like most of the country's housing stock, it is dense high-rise concrete and steel construction. So far, the majority of the housing does not look occupied. We ask questions regarding the relocation and replacement housing for the low-income families that used to live there, but are unable to find out where they live now or if they will have the opportunity to occupy the replacement housing.

September 18, 2005

Sunday, September 18 was a major Chinese holiday: Family Unification Day or the Autumn Festival. It is also, apparently, an auspicious time to be married. A wedding was taking place in the main section of the restaurant in which we had lunch. Though we were off to one side, the bride and groom were determined to share their happiness with everyone and made their way to our table. We tried to look very official and slip them a toast on behalf of NAHRO.

We then took a bus tour of the city's commercial and residential buildings. Both seem comprised mainly of concrete and steel high-rise construction. People were very open to showing us their projects, even those under construction. Whenever we wanted to have a closer look, management was happy to explain their project and quick to give us promotional materials. In one case, the head architect took time to speak with us and describe the project.

One of the interesting things we learned was the difference between a finished, occupancy-ready unit in China versus the U.S. In China, a unit ready for occupancy will not have wall finishes, floor coverings, kitchen and bath appliances, heating/air conditioning or cabinets. This is all considered finish work, to be completed by the homeowner. In China, there is a whole industry devoted to finishing a unit for occupancy—from toilet installation to window treatments and everything in between.

September 19, 2005

Another early morning as we headed back to Beijing. Since we'd gone through about half the country, the flight was fairly long. But we did arrive in time to visit a special commercial improvement area, tour a traditional garden and witness a Chinese tea ceremony.

September 20, 2005

This was our one free day. After all these days of eating local and traditional foods, we finally relented and, breakfasted at the largest McDonald's in Beijing. It tastes exactly like McDonald's in the U.S. After that, we shop at an outdoor street that has been converted to a pedestrian mall.

The notion that things are changing almost daily in China is keenly felt here. And it's not just the signs for the new Outback Steakhouse coming soon. Nor is it the stacks of Chicken Soup for the soul that fill the shelves of the local non-chain bookstore. It is the energy of the place. Perhaps this is what tourists to America must have felt like when they arrived in New York City at the beginning of the twentieth century. This sense that everything can be new, can be reinvented—the feeling of an entire population on the move.

September 21, 2005

Time to return home. On the way to the airport and during the long flight ahead of me, I think about what I have learned.

China is both very old and very new. It faces many of the same housing challenges, especially the preservation of affordability, the burgeoning needs of those who are aging in place, the pull-pull between old and new land uses, the rising resource constraints in both materials and energy, the need for sustainability and the social change that comes with development. It faces these issues on a tremendous scale due to the sheer numbers of people within the country.

There is a lot here that we in NAHRO can learn. There is a lot that housing and community development professionals in China can learn from us. I hope that the relationship continues to grow and looks forward to seeing how we each work for the mutual benefit of our communities and of the people we serve.

NOTE: No NAHRO funds were used to defray the costs of this trip.

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