

NAVIGATING THE WATERS OF COLLABORATION



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To a planner, China is opportunity. Over a billion people and growing; rising skyscrapers and a soaring GDP; poverty, pollution and potential. The issues are rich, but the place is even richer.

During the spring 2007 semester, I traveled to Jiaxing, China with a group of students, faculty and professionals for an interdisciplinary design studio. We were fortunate to be able to collaborate with students and professors at Tongji University, located nearby in Shanghai. The Tongji group guided us during the trip and throughout the studio.

I studied China as an undergraduate student and while visiting the country again, I was reminded of why I was initially so intrigued. This is a country whose history, politics and social

structures have changed radically over the past several decades. Jiaxing exemplifies this dynamic.

Jiaxing boasts a mix of cultural and historic amenities as well as modern industry and technology. Water defines the landscape; it is, at times, beautiful, but it is also polluted and often strewn with debris. Nearly empty eight-lane roads portend the growth to come. But, today, it is difficult to differentiate Jiaxing from the many other mid-size industrial cities in China. Our group needed to enhance the existing assets in Jiaxing to bring out its unique identity and ensure its competitiveness in the region. The central government's proposed high-speed rail station offered an incredible opportunity to make this happen.



After returning to Berkeley, it was time to get to work. But, as planners, urban designers, architects and landscape architects, we did not always speak the same language. We spent several weeks sketching, arguing and jumping in and out of scales. Out of the chaos emerged some great ideas about water, open space, transportation, energy, architecture and urban design. Our recommendations encompassed all scales, from architectural materials and façade details to a transit plan and renewable energy resources, reflecting the range of disciplines represented among the students in our studio.

The Tongji students helped us to understand the traditions, policies and culture that define and affect archi-

itecture and development in the region. Collaborating with our colleagues at Tongji was one of the highlights for me. With a year of college-level Mandarin muddled in the back reaches of my brain, I got a chance to practice speaking and drew laughter for my errant tones. But even better was the chance to share opinions on what planning means in our respective countries. As one Tongji student admitted, China plans and develops without always considering the repercussions or offering mitigations. I countered that in the United States, legislation and politics often necessitate intense scrutiny and lengthy processes that can prevent projects from moving forward. We both wondered about the middle ground.

I still see opportunity in China in terms of its tremendous growth. But I also see the possibility for China to become a leader in sustainable development, something we can all learn from. ^{FW}