OVERCOMING CULTURE SHOCK THROUGH DESIGN

In composing this short piece about my experience in the China studio this spring, I grow ever more grateful for the opportunity, as lessons continue to be revealed.

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China is vast, exciting, frustrating and complex—like nothing else I've experienced. As a graduate student in Urban Design this studio experience was remarkable, if not pivotal for my future career. The studio was a collaboration of students from various departments such as Architecture, City and Regional Planning, Landscape Architecture and Urban Design. The design program called for a sustainable city—one that would respond to current environmental issues in China as well as the local culture of the design site.

While there were certainly bouts of chaos and confusion during the China studio my enduring memory of the experience are of the endless opportunities that it presented. My colleagues and I worked hard to implement a clear design direction and strategy by creating a structure for the class early on. Often when we couldn't get the answers or direction we needed we contacted professionals and consultants who had the experience and knowledge to steer us in the right path. In retrospect, this methodology was at times frustrating but also incredibly rewarding and rich with lessons for young designers such as myself. As part of an interdisciplinary design team composed of undergraduate and graduate students from the College of Environmental Design, I realized early on that I needed to share with the class exactly what it was urban designers do. I wanted to learn from my classmates and they were probably expecting the same from me. I remember describing the urban designer as one who works at a variety of scales, develops frameworks and basically prepares the outline so that a particular area of land can be turned over to the architect or landscape

Green space in Jiaxing offers an incredible opportunity to design for mobility, agriculture and recreation.

architect for development and specific design implementation.

I would be lying if I said that my ideas were accepted without resistance or that I didn't face language barriers. But slowly the lessons began to unfold. For me, this studio was not about disciplines or design territory, sustainability, or deliverables. Instead the China studio was a unique experience that allowed me to question some of my own definitions regarding design practice, site, and culture in a productive and meaningful way. In conclusion I can say that if China is a frontier goldmine for an entrepreneur, for a student with initiative, it was a blank slate. It was only later that I realized that this was one of most important lessons that I would learn through the China studio. FW