

Lessons from Working in China

Contributed by Norberto F. Nardi, AIA, and Oscar E. Leidenfrost, AIA

Revised November 2006

The AIA collects and disseminates Best Practices as a service to AIA members without endorsement or recommendation. Appropriate use of the information provided is the responsibility of the reader.

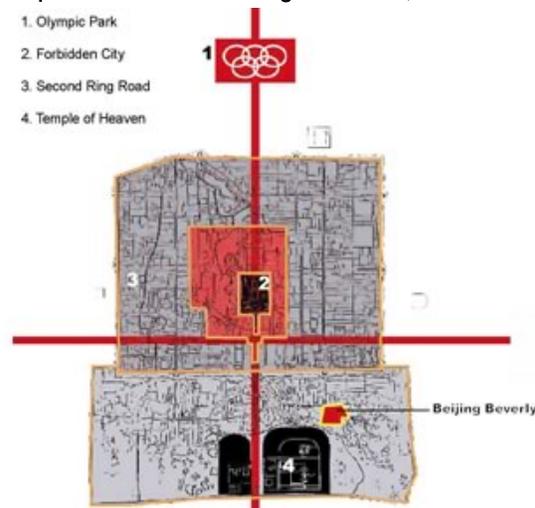
SUMMARY

Nardi and Leidenfrost relay lessons they have learned while building in Beijing. They note local building scale, cultural history, and the introduction of the car as design influences.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

China's economy currently leads the world in growth. As the city government of Beijing approaches the 2008 Olympics, the young professionals who drive rapid regional development want a world-class city with all the amenities of a cosmopolitan center. Part of that plan is a 110-acre redevelopment of the city center adjacent to the Temple of Heaven, near Tiananmen Square.

The complete transformation of this historic area is not without its detractors. While some decry the destruction of the *hutong*—the narrow-allyed traditional neighborhoods with little in the way of modern infrastructure—most residents seem to welcome the concept of renewal. In partial recognition of the thousands of people being displaced from the old neighborhoods, the



government is requiring 3,500 units of affordable housing to be mixed within this new home to 32,000 mostly well-to-do urban professionals and their country club, three schools, neighborhood parks,

police department, utility stations, public and private transportation facilities, civic support spaces, and restored Buddhist temple.

Called Beijing Beverly, the project has been the project of a lifetime for Leidenfrost/Horowitz & Associates Inc (LHA) of Glendale, Calif. (executive architect), and Nardi Associates of Ontario, Calif. (design architect). Working in conjunction with a Beijing architecture firm, our joint project team has a daunting goal: completion of construction by January 2007 so that the facilities will be established and fully functioning in time for the 2008 Summer Olympics, an event that should secure Beijing's place on the world stage.

A QUESTION OF SCALE

The old Beijing has a very human scale, yet the new Beijing is unreasonably big. Its extent is too big, its roadways are too big, many buildings are out of scale, and congested traffic makes basic activities such as shopping quite difficult. The Beijing Beverly master plan addresses these issues. With Beijing in general facing the same tide of developmental change, the architects and their client, New World China Land Limited, strive for a plan of layers that will be a model for bringing Beijing into a new world that still turns its face to the old.

To return the sense of community to Beijing (which could be lost if unbridled high-rise, mega-project development continued apace in the city), the LHA/Nardi team organized the development into four villages, each with its own community park, indoor/outdoor recreational facilities, and landmark tower. Each "village" contains several neighborhood courtyards with lush vegetation and sunlight for tranquil outdoor interaction among neighbors such as morning walks or afternoon mah-jongg games. To overcome the city's cold winter weather, the plan calls for the main thoroughfare to have a sculptured tensile canopy umbrella punctuated with tinted, fritted glass.

As part of the city's plan—short-term for the Olympics and long-term as a business center—

75 percent of the newly built space will be residential, including a timeshare development and a five-star “apart-hotel” for business travelers on extended stay. For more traditional living space, the project offers one-, two-, three-, and four-bedroom units; loft and live-work spaces for young professionals; and extended-family configurations so that younger and older generations of a family can live together and still enjoy some privacy.

A DECADE OF GREAT CHANGE

One of the more common questions about this project is why the Chinese government and developers (who lease the land from the government with the stipulation that they develop it) would turn to U.S. architects to develop a detailed master plan for a part of their capital city that is as dear to them as Lower Manhattan is to us (except the Beijing site is five times larger). You can find the answer in the ambition of the young Chinese officials. In a city going back 1,000 years, we have seen a remarkable change in only the past 10.

When we first started work in China a decade ago, the population was remarkable in its dependence on the bicycle. The few cars would cut a swath through this sea of cycles, which would magically open in front of the car and close behind in a continuous, even beautiful ballet. The concept of working with foreign architects was met with skepticism. Building codes were scanty if not absent altogether. Speculative development was a concept yet to take hold. But take hold it has. Right now, developers, government officials, and Chinese architects are eager to work with and learn from their American and European counterparts.

The Chinese building code is evolving daily, sometimes changing even faster than those changes being recorded in the written code. As this process continues to accelerate, we see a great advancement in sophistication at all levels of construction.

WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY STILL OPEN

There clearly are clear opportunities for work in China, although no one should go there expecting to get rich from the experience. In the past, for instance, even getting paid could be something of a challenge. You might receive half of the originally agreed compensation, for whatever reason the client gives you. You don't have much leverage. Although the Chinese are getting more sophisticated with contracts as with every other aspect of modern construction practices, the possibility remains that the client will change a contract mid-project, based

solely on where the client wants the project to go. Happily, we have an excellent working relationship with our client for this project.

The China of today has a number of projects such as this one in which an entire city within a city is built whole. For example, in our last trip there, we visited a four-year private school for 4,000 students that the investor built complete, including dwellings for students and faculty. You don't find that kind of project often in the United States. Given the level and speed of advancement in building-project design and technology among Chinese clients and architects, this window of opportunity is likely to be open only for another decade, at most.

LESSONS LEARNED

The car is here to stay. Among the interesting lessons, especially for a couple of Californians, is how the Chinese want to handle the automobile in this urban setting. Everything is going underground. We have 9,000 cars and 3,000 bicycles that will be parked below grade. Because of centralized control of property, the government can make these kinds of decisions, which would be impossible to get developers to accept here. From a livability standpoint, putting all the parking underground creates a much nicer streetscape.

Learn the wherefore of traditional Chinese design concepts. Although the Chinese want American know-how in large-scale construction, they also want traditional elements they could market to Chinese consumers. Working there for 10 years has given us enough knowledge of traditional Chinese design concepts that we are comfortable pushing the envelope a little. At the same time, certain elements are not negotiable, such as south-facing houses and cross-ventilation. Blending the traditional with some of the more Western ideas has been an interesting learning process, such as likening this development to Beverly Hills, complete with a main shopping corridor (although we did stop short of calling it Rodeo Drive). Another outside-the-box concept—covering the main shopping street to protect it from the harsh winter weather—is something the Beijing government may or may not accept.

Pay attention to detail. Interestingly, we get more pressure from the Taiwanese marketers for this project to stick to traditional Chinese design than from the Beijing government or developers. While it makes good business sense to stick with the south-north orientation and other *feng shui* precepts the Chinese consumer demands, some seem less tenable. For instance, one programmatic

requirement we have is for a garden space of about 150 square feet between each living unit's front door and the living space itself. The marketers for the venture-capital investors, Bei Sheng International of Taipei, Taiwan, tell us this transitional room will help fill units even though, to us, it looks like wasted space. But it's hard to argue against their sophisticated research. When you think about it, it's a wonderful feature, so we are trying to work it into the conceptual design for the buildings, which we are doing as part of the master-plan work. As this example illustrates, our clients want a good deal



more detail for this master plan than a typical American client would.

Understand the importance of gateways. The overall organization of the master plan is based on Pa-Qua, which favors eight entries to the site, thereby respecting traditional urban patterns and reflecting the nearby historic sites. The LHA/Nardi team planned for gateways and entry plazas that provide pedestrian orientation and access, with visual connections to the town center from all directions.

Be open to change. An interesting phenomenon among the young people within the city bureaucracy is that they seem fairly open to the concept of change. They also enjoy talking about fairly new concepts such as sustainable architecture. When you look at the building scale of the newer parts of Beijing, you see the north-south orientation, but you don't see the human scale of the older parts of the city. The buildings are mostly just big, blank boxes. So people are interested in our master plan, which sets the scale and configuration of individual buildings. The young people of the city like it and are pushing for it.

Beverly Beijing is a project by Leidenfrost/Horowitz & Associates Inc. in association with Nardi Associates LLP. For more information, visit the [Nardi Associates Web site](http://www.nardi-associates.com) at www.nardi-associates.com.

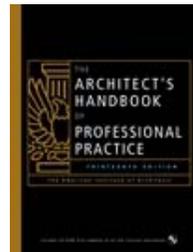
More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 10.05.03 Contract Provisions to Minimize Risks of International Projects
- 10.05.02 Managing International Teams
- 10.05.01 International Practice Checklist

For More Information on This Topic

See also "Practicing in a Global Market," by Roger B. Williams, FAIA, JIA, and C. Richard Meyer, FAIA, *The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice*, 13th edition, Chapter 6, page 100.



See also the 14th edition of the *Handbook*, which can be ordered from the AIA Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by email at bookstore@aia.org.



Feedback

The AIA welcomes member feedback on Best Practice articles. To provide feedback on this article, please contact bestpractices@aia.org

Keywords

- Practice
- Project management
- Project communications
- International communications