

Urban development in beijing



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Since China's emergence as one of the greatest economic engines of the world, Beijing has seen a meteoric rise as one of the economic, political, social and cultural centers of the East Asian sector. Not only is Beijing the capital of China, and the seat of power of the Communist regime, it is also home to one of the largest and most dense populations on the planet. With almost 15 million residences residing in the city it is the 24th largest city in the world and fourth in density. While Beijing has always held a position of importance as the residence of Chinese emperors and past political regimes, it has taken on numerous new responsibilities and roles as part of the globalized world. The growth of this region and specifically the shift within China's furious economic growth has resulted in the escalation of urban development within Beijing. Beijing has had to become a "modern city" almost overnight, while still capturing the history and culture of China's past. Stuck between two worlds, Beijing faces a unique challenge in its urban development. The following analysis will pursue an understanding of Beijing's urban development strategies as well as the motivations behind them. Beijing has become a hub of urban infrastructure and development. Every aspect of the city has been transformed in the past decade. By 2003, Beijing's overall infrastructure has reached a total fixed investment of 26.06 billion dollars, and continues to grow at more than 15 percent per annum (CDB, 2005). The city is beginning to develop complicated networks of transportation, communication, ventilation, sewage, etc. Before a detailed analysis of the actual implementation of urban development and its problems, an understanding of the underlying reasons behind Beijing's reasons for rapid urban development must be reached. There are three key

factors that are currently fueling Beijing's rapid growth towards becoming an ultra modern urban center.

One of the primary reasons for the break neck speed of growth in Beijing has been the explosive population growth that has been occurring. Despite strong measures in place such as the “ Five Year Plan” and the “ One Child Policy”, Beijing has continued to experience strong growth due to both its urban population and underground migratory movements. Beijing grew from 13 million in 2000 to almost 15 million by 2005, growth is projected to increase to 18 million by 2010 (Beijing Review, 2005). These growth figures furthermore do not reflect accurately the current number of migrant workers living Beijing illegally. Analysts have projected the actual population of Beijing to be more than 17 million when counting all illegal and undocumented individuals living within the city (Beijing Review, 2005). Beyond local residence, there also has been a growth in immigration to Beijing as a result of its emergence as an international hub. Immigration per year has increased by over 25 percent since 2000, especially from other WTO nations (CDB, 2005). This population crunch is one of the motivating factors behind the need for urban development and infrastructural development.

Another catalyst for urban development has been the shifting economic situation within Beijing. As a result of globalization and heavy industrialization, the standard of living and general economic circumstance of Beijing residences have increased dramatically. In 2005, Beijing's nominal GDP grew to 84 billion USD, a yearly growth rate of 11. 1%, and its GDP per capita also grew by 8. 1 percent. The combination of available technology

and influx of wealth has meant that residence of Beijing are demanding higher quality of life, increases in standards and a general improvement in overall welfare of their city. The result has been both a public and private response to economic changes within Beijing by an expanding urban infrastructure as well as private investment in real estate development. At the same time, the government has realized the need to modernize the city to attract foreign direct investment (FDI), for this purpose they have begun reinventing business districts and constructing immense building projects to modernize the city (CDB, 2005). The combination of Beijing as the pride of China, its economic center, and socio-economic mobility has become one of the push catalysts for urban development. A final reason for urban development, especially in the past two years has been Beijing's impending 2008 Summer Olympics. Termed by the Chinese government as the "coming out party" of the Chinese juggernaut, the city has moved at a fervent pace to construct new additions to stadiums, upgrades and renovations as well as providing the infrastructure, residential, and tourism needs of future visitors. The projected cost of the Beijing Olympics will exceed 54 billion Yuan, or more than 6 billion USD (Beijing Review, 2005). Beijing has taken on numerous urban development projects in order to improve their city before the Olympics begin. A new subway transportation system is being built uniquely for the Olympics, and transportation channels such as road improvements, highways and numerous other changes have been enacted as a result. New building and housing projects, including the construction of stadiums, hotels, and other accommodations from both public and private investments have transformed the city. The result of the impending

Olympics is that it has led to a dramatic shift in the urban development strategy of Beijing.

Beijing's urban development infrastructure has expanded tremendously in the past two decades. Beijing is divided into circular zones separated by "rings", as the city expands more rings are built around the original center of the city, Tiananmen Square. At the inception of the People's Republic, Beijing only had two such rings, the limits of its urban sprawl extended to the 2nd Ring Road. With the expansion of business, population and economic necessity, Beijing has now extended itself beyond a fifth ring, and is currently constructing a sixth ring. In less than two decades, the scope of this city has increased by more than eight hundred percent. Much of the former countryside and rural regions have been annexed by the city and turned into urban sprawl. Former farmlands have been converted into industrial centers, electronic hubs and business districts.

Beijing has had to construct specific regions for the expansion of foreign businesses, the demands for incubation zones for Intel, IBM, Microsoft and other software and hardware giants have forced Beijing to construct a separate business sector away from its central city. The inevitable result of this expansion is that Beijing has been confronted with a myriad of problems including very poor traffic control, air pollution and the destruction of traditional and cultural landmarks. In order to confront this problem, Beijing has decided to stop infrastructural expansion in concentric rings and instead expand within circular bands outside of the city center. In order to combat the growing population and need to expand, Beijing has begun a policy of organized infrastructural improvement. It has committed over 20 billion USD

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to improving the interconnectivity of its road networks and expanding highways around the city. Beijing development officials have cited two specific goals for improving traffic, air quality and general congestions. Beijing will develop a state of the art public transportation system as well as expand its current system of roads and highways. It has also expanded the development of their 15 billion USD airport system on the outskirts of Beijing. The purpose of expanding their transportation infrastructure is to allow construction to accommodate growth to occur both vertically and horizontally (Lillian, 2007). Beijing wishes to follow an urban development much like Shanghai, Shenzhen and many other Western cities. The hope is that the city can divide itself into zones with vertical growth to limit city sprawl and increase centralization of institutional districts. For this purpose, Beijing has already begun building an incredible robust subway system. The Beijing government has invested 8 billion USD to the development of its subway infrastructure, adding ten different traffic lines crossing throughout the city (Tang, 2006). In an effort to vastly improve their public transportation, Beijing has even conceded to private investment to commission and build their transportation system.

The combination of construction, transportation expansion, and general growth has also lead to a challenging urban energy situation. Growth in population has outpaced projections on water, electricity and natural gas usage. Current water treatment plants are already working at over capacity with the anticipation of seeing almost 2.5 million more temporary residents within the city for the 2008 Olympics (Tang, 2006). Development plans to mitigate problem has been to pioneer a state of the art water treatment

facility and system on the outskirts of Beijing along the Shanxi Province. Water will be brought from over 180 kilometers away through an underground pipeline and carefully processed before going into the city (Tang, 2006). This will alleviate the pressure of current water processing centers. In addition, Beijing is currently investing in sewage transportation networks that run along the infrastructure of this system, specifically linking it to the expansion of the city sprawl. Urban development in Beijing has raised numerous problems for the Beijing municipality, its government and populace. Air quality in Beijing is ranked as one of the five worst in the world (Tang, 2006). During the summer months, the majority of residence has to wear protective masks to prevent debris and air pollution to harm their lungs. The rise in population and the lack of a strong traffic control system has meant that air pollution has increased by more than 10 percent per annum. An attempt to solve this problem through road expansion and public transportation has been only marginally successful. Beijing is expected to have to halt the majority of traffic for up to two weeks in order to clear the air pollution for the Beijing Olympics. In addition, the massive urban development plans of the city have required significant man power. This has led to an even greater influx of undocumented migrant workers.

Illegal immigration and residence within Beijing has caused a further taxing of overworked sewage and water treatment plants as well as inhumane living conditions within the area. Millions of illegal residents flow in and out of the city looking for low end labor. Since they are basically unmonitored and unnoticed, their treatment is oftentimes cruel and abusive while receiving minimal compensation. Corruption is another major concern as a result of

urban development, numerous officials have been investigated and prosecuted for receiving monetary incentive to give out lucrative government contracts, but with so much growth it is hard for the government to monitor all aspects of government. The most important and enduring problem however is the destruction of the rural countryside and culturally important regions. Beijing's growth has already consumed thousands of hectares of farmland in the surrounding areas. Destruction of historically significant sites such as the protective rim of the Great Wall has become major concerns as the city continues to expand (Lillian, 2007). Numerous monasteries, cultural centers, traditional gardens, etc. have been destroyed as a result of urban development plans. Solutions to these problems are not immediately evident. Beijing's current strategy follows the national one of "expansion first, reform later" (Lillian, 2007). As a result, pollution, environment damage, cultural deteriorates have almost all become secondary to the monumental growth of the nation's economy and industry. Beijing has attempted to take some steps to prevent the further spread of urban development problems however. Their current road projects will reduce traffic congestions and it plans to limit the number of vehicles allowed within city limits once construction of public transportation has completed construction. Beijing already claims to have reduced air pollution by 1.9 percent in the past year and will continue to pursue a policy of pollution reduction in the future.

The establishment of immigration registration centers, and increase of police monitoring of migrant labor are positive steps towards documenting all migrant workers and ensuring that they meet basic standards of living (Tang,

2006). Already, a massive part of the current living standards reform centers on providing housing for migrant laborers within the Beijing area and specifically creating a worker's code to formalize the process of hiring and caring for migrant laborers. In addition, Beijing has established a special commission to investigate and identify cultural and traditional regions, parks, buildings, etc. for special government protection and reconstruction. This project has already restored over fifty parks within the Beijing area as well as maintaining the famous Summer Palace. Restoration projects of Beijing's most famous relics such as the Forbidden City has been in effect since 2005, and will prepare Beijing for the tourism boom of the 2008 Olympics. Urban development in Beijing has at times appeared sporadic and organic in nature. The population boom combined with the increased importance of the city as an international economic, political and social center has made its development inevitable and at times chaotic. Not only has Beijing urban expansion taking place horizontally and vertically, it has encompassed every level of its development at an infrastructural level. The construction of business and economic zones and incubators along with expansion of residence areas have increased the city limits eight fold. This has been accompanied by transportation infrastructure improvements, water treatment and waste disposal systems, and the improvement of the general urban conditions of all individuals within Beijing. The problems that Beijing faces with urban development are numerous; many of them are inevitable problems of expansion. However, Beijing has taken many positive steps to cautiously approach expansion and development in order to limit mistakes and encourage healthy growth. By the 2008 Olympics, Beijing will be one of

the most modern cities in the world, by then its urban development will rival that of any western capital and become a stalwart of the East Asian region.

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