FROM THE DIRECTOR

Recently, I addressed a group of visiting Chinese planning officials. My brief was to provide an overview of the issues confronting Sydney as its population grows by about a million people over the next 25 years. A few minutes into my talk, though, I realized that my audience had a different appraisal of the dimensions of Sydney’s task. A growth centre in Sydney’s north-west with 70,000 dwellings? One in the south-west with 110,000 dwellings? Compared to China having to build urban accommodation for the equivalent of five new cities the size of Sydney every year for twenty years?

We’re on different spreadsheets aren’t we?

My audience was polite in accepting that Sydney has a major task ahead. Privately, I suspect they were disappointed that Sydney had little to teach them in terms of novel, effective examples of how to build a sustainable city. It is embarrassing that we aren’t leaders in showing how to build sustainable metropolises.

I’ve been to China a few times. I’ve enjoyed Shanghai on the most wondrous autumn days, with clear blue skies and soft breezes off the East China sea, dappled by my rambling walks, of peeling back the historical layers of this most fashinating of world cities. I’ve walked too the peaceful trails of the Purple Mountain near the building Nanjing, but I’ve choked on Beijing air on the worst of its burning summer days.

In each city, though, I’ve been blown away at the size and scope of the city building tasks underway. As our feature article by Tong Wu in this issue explains, China’s present day urbanisation is one of the great human ventures of human history. We should be watching with close interest.

NEW STAFF

The Urban Research Centre has made five new research project officer appointments.

Dr Olga Caracho Duarte is the Centre's new Research Project Officer. Olga was previously employed by the property design firm DEGW. Olga has a PhD in Management from the University of Western Sydney.

Jenny Li has been appointed to the managing Public Places project. Jenny is an honours graduate in Geography from the University of Sydney.

Dr Sumita Gosh has been appointed to the Urban Indications project. Sumita has recently worked at the University of Wollongong and at UTAS. Her doctoral degree in urban planning was awarded by the University of Auckland.

Dr Marc Plenichmann has been appointed to the Urban Economy and Infrastructure project. Marc was recently employed in the School of Business at the University of Western Sydney. Marc’s PhD is from the University of Sydney specialising in economic history.

Sarah James has been appointed to the Feeding Sydney project. Sarah is currently finishing her PhD with the Centre for Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney.

URBAN CONCERNS

CHINA’S URBAN TSUNAMI

By Professor Tong Wu

Our eyes were on China all last year: the Sichuan earthquake, the Olympic, the Pan-American, food contamination scandals, the first space walk by a Chinese astronaut, and so on. Each event showed the challenges faced by a modernising nation.

Yet China is experiencing a staggering transformation that will never be captured on a single news bulletin. By 2025, 60% of China’s population will live in its cities, meaning an increase of 200 million in China’s urban population. Remarkably, this surge is caused by migration, not natural population increase. China’s fertility rate, at 1.6, is amongst the lowest in the world, and China’s total population size is expected to commence falling by 2050.

Urban migration is driven by the expanding economic opportunities in its cities. An income ratio between urban and rural China of about 3.3 to 1 drives rural residents to urban centres. Millions of people from the less well-off regions of western and central China and parts of the coastal regions are moving to the coastal mega metropolitan regions leading to rapid urban growth. For example, in the last three decades Shanghai has grown from about 11.5 million to 14.35 million people while Shenzhen, a new city, has grown from just 32,000 to 7 million people.

Certainly there are barriers to urban migration especially those imposed through the household registration system which limits access to education, health care, and social services. But these have not deterred the millions who seek better opportunities for themselves and their families. While further reforms to rural land ownership and user-right regimes are under consideration by Chinese authorities, widening inequalities between urban and rural China indicate that rural-to-urban migration will accelerate over the next decade or more.

In the future, rural migrants will look beyond cities such as Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou largely because these cities have become expensive, overly congested and sprawling. Second tier cities such as Nanjing, Wuhan, Changsha, and some county level cities are now very much on the migration and development radars. One common misconception is that only the large coastal cities in China are wealthy. Many not so well-known cities are indeed quite well-off with substantial potential for further development.

By 2025, 60% of China’s population will live in its cities, meaning an increase of 200 million in China’s urban population.

China’s rapid economic growth has spawned a growing middle class that seeks better housing, transportation, education, and urban services. Experience from the last two decades indicates that demand for these will be satisfied largely through the private sector or through collaborations between public and private sectors. Opportunities to secure a share of these new urban services markets have attracted the attention of international consulting firms such as McKinsey and KPMG.

Even without taking into account the existing urban issues requiring attention, accommodating the equivalent of 10 times the population of Australia in Chinese cities within the next two decades with adequate housing, infrastructure and urban services is a monumental challenge. And even for a nation that has had an average real growth rate over 9% per annum for the last two decades these are hugely expensive investments.

The Chinese government’s US$586 billion stimulus package announced late last year in response to the global financial crisis will focus on housing, transportation and infrastructure projects directed at urban areas.

ISSUE 3

RESEARCH AND TRAINING FOR BETTER URBAN LIFE

SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION

Urban Concerns is the free newsletter of the Urban Research Centre. Each issue features commentary from our researchers and highlights the Centre’s courses, research activities and events. Urban Concerns is relevant to urban academics, practitioners, policy makers, decision makers and community groups.

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Accommodating the equivalent of 10 times the population of Australia in Chinese cities within the next two decades with adequate housing, infrastructure and urban services is a monumental challenge.

There is no better time than now to develop a better understanding of the issues and opportunities presented by China’s rapid urban development. While those focused on commercial opportunities, an increasingly urbanised population in China offers up with multiple possibilities. Consider the residential construction that will have to take place to keep pace with the demand for new housing and services. As many cities complete major public transport projects such as subway or light rail systems, more areas will become attractive to residential and associated developments.

A second area is environmental protection. Chinese officials are now acknowledging the significant environmental issues requiring long-term strategies and programs. For example, the Chinese government is paying increasing attention to the remediation of polluted rivers and inland waterways because so many communities depend on these as their source of drinking water.

A third area is heritage conservation. China has many more historic monuments than the Great Wall and the Forbidden City. Preservation and conservation of heritage sites is a significant issue. For many it is not just the protection of a single building or monument but the issues associated with the preservation of a neighborhood or city block. China still lacks the expertise of planners, designers, and those with commercial savvy to breathe new life into old buildings and historic urban precincts. Successful examples so far typically involve overseas investors.

www.uws.edu.au/urban

This brief sketch highlights a few of the key urban issues. A concrete area is the education of planners in China. There are at present about two dozen planning programs in China with about half developed in the geography tradition and the other half from the architecture tradition. With rapid urbanisation the education of planners is an urgent matter for China as it prepares for the urban tsunami.

Over the last decade, the University of Western Sydney has developed partners among the elite universities and other institutions in China involving research and teaching in areas such as computing, nursing and business. The Urban Research Centre is also developing close links with the Nanjing Urban Planning Bureau. Two of its staff are currently studying with us.

In April 2009 the Urban Research Centre, with our academic and professional colleagues in China, is organising a study tour to several cities in China to give the participants an understanding of the key urban issues, the planning system and the opportunities for urban professionals. The tour also provides opportunities to interact with academics, professionals and relevant government officials to provide deep understanding of the urban issues and opportunities confronting Chinese cities. We would be delighted if you joined us on the tour. Details can be found on our web site.

Professor Chung Yong Wu is a researcher at the Urban Research Centre specialising in urban dynamics especially in the east Asia region.

A LAND USE AUDIT OF THE SYDNEY BASIN USING REMOTE SENSING TECHNIQUES

The interaction between urban development and agricultural land on Sydney’s ‘fringe’ is a core concern of the Urban Research Centre’s Feeding Sydney project. Planning for sustainability requires an understanding of the evolution and use of Sydney’s land resources.

There are currently major gaps in land use data for the Sydney Basin. There is a lack of spatial, methodological and time consistency in land use data that could otherwise be used in the sustainable planning of our metropolis.

The Geoscience Laboratory of the Urban Research Centre is generating historical and current land use maps as a base to track and analyse changes in Sydney’s agricultural landscapes. The study is based on coherent automated satellite imagery analysis validated by ground-truth data and aerial imagery. A WebGIS server will soon make the project results available to a broad audience.

This project has been awarded one of the Research Future Grants 2009 of the College of Health and Science (UWS). Preliminary results have been presented at the National Conference of the Australian Research Council Research Network in Spatially Integrated Social Science, in Adelaide, December 2008. For more information contact Mani at m.piquero@mq.edu.au

SHORT COURSE PROGRAM 2009

The Urban Research Centre is offering a wide range of short courses in 2009.

In addition to the topics offered in 2008, in 2009 we will offer the following new short courses:

- Effective Community Consultation (Feb 16-27)
- Developing Contributions (March 5-6)
- Writing Policy Documents (June 19)
- Planning Law Update (27-28 August)

Details of the new courses in the first quarter of 2009 are listed below:

Effective Community Consultation (Feb 16-27)

Despite widespread acceptance of the need for community consultation and high levels of expenditure on it, the phenomena of superficiality, political blocs, consultation fatigue, stakeholder cynicism and unpleasant public meetings have emerged as significant challenges for the consultation practitioner. This short course will equip you with the theory and principles on which community consultation practice is based, the many barriers to good practice, practical solutions and opportunities to practice these.

Developer Contributions (March 5-6)

There has been a number of substantial changes to the developer contributions mechanisms in the EPA Act as a result of the planning reforms by the NSW Government. In addition, the NSW Government is currently reviewing all aspects of the development contribution system. This course will provide detailed information on the impact of all these changes on the

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Introduction to Climate Change (March 27)

Climate change will have an impact on everything we do. This short course aims to provide an overview of the basic science of climate change, sources of greenhouse gases and the possible impacts of climate change on our work. It will provide a guide about useful information sources and it will examine the implications of climate change for policy at all levels of Government, including planning.

A listing of all the 2009 courses is contained in the handy Urban Research Centre 2009 short course calendar available from our web site www.uws.edu.au/urban. Further information on the short course program is available from Susan Landy (s.landy@uws.edu.au) or Peter Phillips (p.phillips@uws.edu.au).

OUR NEW PHD GRADUATE

Dr Samantha Sharpe graduated in September 2008. Her PhD studies were undertaken within the Knowledge Intensive Service Activities and Innovation research program of the Urban Research Centre, under the direction of Associate Professor Cristina Martinez Fernandez.

Samantha’s PhD thesis, ‘Regional Dimensions of Innovative Activity in Outer Western Sydney’, tracks the socio-economic development of the South West sub-region of Sydney through an analysis of regional innovation activity.

South West Sydney, a major growth sub-region, includes the local government areas of Liverpool, Campbelltown, Camden and Wollondilly. This sub-region absorbed 25% of Sydney’s population growth for the 1991-2001 period. Yet this rapid population growth has not been matched by employment growth. In some sectors, such as business services, employment growth has been minimal.

Samantha’s research shows how an understanding of the ways firms engage with knowledge intensive services and innovation has the potential for enhanced employment outcomes. Samantha is now working as a post doctoral fellow at Cambridge University in the UK.