

Inner Mongolia Aspires to Lead the World

On March 17-22, 2012, twenty seven international experts will make history when they convene in E'erguna, Inner Mongolia, the birth place of Genghis Khan, to advise government officials on the development of a low carbon ecocity that is slated to become a world paradigm. The historic event has been organized by Chinese American architect/urban planner James Jao, president of J.A.O. Design International, with Nicolas You, Chairman of the Steering Committee of the World Urban Campaign of UN Habitat. The experts' working session presents the unique opportunity to define standards and guidelines for future ecocities the world over.

As China is shaped like a rooster, E'erguna is located far north in the fleshy red comb at the top of the rooster's head, quite near the Russian border. During the winter the four-season area sustains frigid temperatures of -40 degrees Celsius. In the thaw months, it annually attracts a million hikers, naturalists and *pleine air* painters who come to enjoy the rich water and wildlife, including packs of free-roaming Mongolian horses, some 500 species of migratory birds, a birch forest that is nearly a quarter the size of Manhattan, and the core of the largest wetlands in all of Asia, 1,200 square kilometers (463 square miles), about the size of Los Angeles. The city center itself includes 30,000 residents in 7.5 square miles, the entire municipality encompassing 80,000 people in a land mass larger than Great Britain.

Environmental pressures, economic development and unprecedented urbanization have posed serious problems for Chinese cities in recent years, and have given rise to a wide range of eco-friendly building programs. Each new campaign attracts eager media attention, yet realization too often falls short as projects are reduced, postponed, or canceled in the face of too great size and ambition, unmet expectations, shifting interests, unclear objectives, and perennially, shortage of funds. By contrast, E'erguna's small size makes it

manageable as a low carbon case study. But what really sets it apart is a constellation of critical conditions that likely do not exist anywhere else in the world. First, and perhaps most importantly, the project has full funding. Second, the initiative is not driven by explosive population growth or pollution but by enlightened conservation. Third, provincial leaders have past experience with urban planning and therefore a better understanding of what actually is involved. And fourth, E'erguna's sustainable development has the unanimous backing of its residents as well as of the local and national government.

To document the preliminary stages of this historic undertaking, I visited E'erguna with Messrs. Jao, You, and Cecil Steward, president of the Joslyn Castle Institute for Sustainable Communities. Days of site visits and intensive meetings made clear the scope of the program that will be analyzed and refined in the upcoming Experts' Meeting. What also became clear was the depth of E'erguna's commitment to the conservation of its precious natural resources and to the city's will to become not just a successful ecocity but an acknowledged leader in sustainability, a working model from which others can learn.

In witness to the city's preparedness, an anonymous survey was sent to a sampling of 3,000 citizens. All but two surveys were returned and all, without exception, enthusiastically embraced E'erguna's greening. In an age when a 50-50 split is about as much support as an urban planner can optimistically hope for, 100% consensus is a very distant dream. A robust grassroots movement has mobilized both young and old, and generated an exhaustive effort to keep residents informed and involved. Programs include everything from elementary school lessons to adult education and speaker circuits, to site visits with farmers for sharing best practices, protection of the wetlands against damage by illegal poachers of medicinal herbs, community events, exhibitions, essay contests, and public awareness posters. In this remote part of the world where everyone is connected by 4G telecommunications, a dedicated web site and blog have been created, receiving to date some 8,000 suggestions for moving forward

Mr. Jiang Baodong, E'erguna's mayor, has issued an open letter to citizens as a road map to the future, while newspapers, radio, and television daily explore, step by step, upcoming changes in a way that everyone can understand: What is low carbon living? Why do we want it? How is it achieved? Meanwhile, a 10,000-signature petition is being circulated in support of E'erguna's membership in the "100 Cities" of the World Urban Campaign. "Walk into the World Forum" is a stirring environmental anthem composed and performed by local talent specifically to celebrate the UN initiative. Local photographers and filmmakers have produced a companion video to share E'erguna's diverse and breathtakingly beautiful natural resources.

What's so remarkable about all of this is not just the range of activities and depth of community involvement, but the fact that the whole notion of participatory planning is new in China. Hardly less significant is the commitment to transparent process.

Officials have restructured government agencies for optimal project oversight and have welcomed guidance from experts like Cecil Steward, whose pioneering book, "Sustainometrics: Measuring Sustainability" offers a deft formula for balancing human and environmental needs. Rather than hide the difficult challenges ahead, government officials have pledged open discussion of what does and does not work, successes and setbacks to be equally instructive as E'erguna transforms itself into a laboratory for sustainable development. E'erguna is determined to become an environmental leader, not only in China but throughout the world. There is much to learn from so willing a teacher.

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