

Daniel Brook, *Welcome to the O.C.*, published in *GOOD*, May/June 2008

A guard wearing a one-size-too-big military uniform salutes my driver through the gate at the grand entrance to Orange County. Suddenly we're transported from China to, well, somewhere else. Where, exactly, is hard to say. It would be strange enough if Orange County, this gated community near the Beijing airport, were the straight-up replica of Southern California it claims to be. But it is stranger than that. The development, 45 minutes up the freeway from Beijing's better-known Forbidden City, has the appearance of a Disney theme park where someone mixed up all the different sections—a smidgen of Epcot's faux Paris intermingled with Main Street U.S.A.'s Americana.

At Orange County, California-style ranch houses sit alongside English Tudors and a French-style formal garden complete with stately fountains (turned off for the winter). The street signs of weathered wood held together with rusty spikes conjure the Old West of Durango while the community clubhouse, called the Rive Gauche Town Center, has a mansard roof typical of a French country estate. The totem poles inside recall the Pacific Northwest and the fireplace mantelpiece is carved in the shape of English-language books, including *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and the erroneously titled *Moby-Dock*. So far from the West, the distinctions between France and America, let alone Colorado and California, get lost. (The Chinese would surely have a similar laugh at our expense for the popularity of "pan-Asian" restaurants Stateside.)

I requested a Sunday tour, hoping that people would be enjoying the one-day Chinese weekend in their yards. But here in Orange County, China, just days after Christmas, it is not exactly rollerblading weather. The fake lake is frozen solid. A brave, bundled-up grandmother

takes a baby carriage out for stroll. But for most, weekend fresh air is what you get when you walk from your home to your SUV.

Though distinctly lacking in warm California sun, Orange County's promotional brochures tout it as "flown over fresh to Beijing," and even "pure American." And there is at least some truth in advertising. The project, whose 143-unit first phase opened in 2001 at a ceremony including American diplomats and McDonald's cheeseburgers, was designed by a trio of design firms from California's Orange County, headed by Bassenian Lagoni Architects, a leading designer of McMansions that has been dubbed one of the most influential architects you've never heard of by *The Wall Street Journal*.

The idea for building a piece of the California Dream on the Wenyu River was born in the real California in the late 1990s. A Chinese developer named Zhang Bo was tooling around Orange County when he got that "if you build it, they will come" feeling—real estate-developer's intuition. He and a friend decided to go into business together and their company, SinoCEA—a fifty-fifty joint venture with China's one-party state—got to work. Peasants were shipped in from the Chinese hinterlands to build modern homes with the medieval construction techniques of the country's manual-labor force. And though construction is now complete, during my visit, a crew is at work, renovating the clubhouse pool. Pushing wheelbarrows and wielding pickaxes in this Disneyfied landscape, they conjured up nothing so much as the Seven Dwarves.

But just as Disney's feel-good films have their curmudgeonly critics, so too does Orange County. Bassenian Lagoni's marketing director actually tried to prevent me from seeing the development at all, offering a litany of excuses that culminated in a claim of a "gag order" by a client. (Said client later arranged my tour.) But the

architect's media-shyness is not surprising given the sneering coverage the development has received; Even the hometown paper, *The Orange County Register*, criticized the development for "[replicating] Orange County's class distinctions." Hardly hometown boosterism. In fact, an entire cottage industry has sprung up in academia to tar the development with the latest post-modern jargon. A graduate student at the University of California, Irvine, accuses the development of aiming to "simulate a simulacra"—copy a copy—while a German urban-studies professor dubs Orange County, China, the "genius loci of suburbia in the age of global capitalism."

Other critics, with far bigger megaphones, see the development as emblematic of China's burgeoning car culture and its wholehearted embrace of environmentally destructive growth. The journalist Ted Conover tsk-tsked in *The New York Times* that while China rushes to build "new gated communities, new themed enclaves, all for the car-owning class, [what is] conspicuously missing [is] a corresponding investment in mass transit, in public spaces, and public access." As China industrializes, many fear that the country is making the same environmental mistakes the United States made a century ago, worrying that the planet cannot sustain such an onslaught from its most populous nation.

When the original suburbs of Southern California were designed after World War II, they aimed to combine the feel of suburbs like Levittown, on Long Island, with a style befitting the milder climate. The solution took inspiration from the building traditions of the Mediterranean and—voilà!—California's stucco-and-red-tile-roof ranch house was born. Expressways, shopping malls, and country clubs—and the

consumer lifestyle that went with them—were part and parcel of this new “little boxes on the hillside” layout.

Combining Long Island with Tuscany was strange enough, but airlifting the whole thing to the cold climes of Beijing defies even the tenuous internal logic of the original plan. Groping to make sense of the senseless, one Western academic chalked up Orange County, China, to a traditional Chinese culture that places little emphasis on originality and no stigma on copying. If you can get a bootleg box set of the *The O.C.* on the streets of Beijing, why shouldn't you be able to live in a bootleg copy of the O.C., too?

Southern California's leading export is images of itself, so it's no surprise that the “California lifestyle” has become a typical aspiration for China's growing class of dollar-millionaires. When I heard that houses in Orange County go for somewhere between \$250,000 and \$2 million, I imagined residents who had seen so many Hollywood movies that they were willing to shell out serious yuan to live in one—a kind of intentional *Truman Show*. Once here, however, I discover that many of the residents, unlike their poorer countrymen, have firsthand knowledge of the real California. Indeed, bringing the style of a major city of the Chinese diaspora—like Los Angeles—back to China underlies much of the suburban style development surrounding Beijing. Just down the road from Orange County is Vancouver Forest, a gated community planted with evergreen trees and teeming with ethnic Chinese—just like the real Vancouver, albeit lacking in the dramatic British Columbia topography, just as Orange County is lacking in Southern California weather.

Ma Junhai, an Orange County resident who showed me around his home, was for many years part of that Chinese diaspora. A gracious, semiretired gentleman in a blue cardigan, he has the kindly look of a

Chinese Mr. Rogers. Fluent in French, English, and Mandarin, he fit in perfectly with the hodgepodge architecture. And despite being an Orange County homeowner, he's more of a Northern California kind of guy. After doing graduate work at Stanford, Ma worked as a communications executive for Sun Microsystems, first in Silicon Valley and then in Beijing. Living in the San Francisco suburbs in the 1990s, he developed a taste for what the Chinese call villas—single-family houses. When he returned to China, he settled first in an apartment in downtown Beijing but in 2004, he sought the suburban virtues that the city lacks:

"Beautiful fresh air. Good neighbors. And very quiet," he says. That year he bought his second home—a weekend villa in Orange County.

Ma's house resembles that of a prosperous Chinese immigrant in California, with a rice cooker and wok in the kitchen alongside a box of Betty Crocker blueberry muffin mix. The plots in this Orange County are smaller than their counterparts in the California one—a natural result of the government's one-child policy. And besides the master bedroom and a single child's room, Orange County homes include bedrooms for elderly parents and a tiny room, about the size of a walk-in closet, for a maid.

Off his back patio, Ma has planted bamboo. Necessary for good feng shui, it will bring "happiness and good luck," he says. The fountain in the patio, which doesn't dribble water in colder months, is in the Tuscan style. But despite the Western design, Ma assures me it will serve its auspicious purpose of bringing prosperity. The running water is "like cash flow," he says.

Tokens of Ma's wealth and jetsetter status dot his home. In the basement, he points out souvenirs he's picked up on his travels and a framed picture of himself with Sun Microsystems chairman and cofounder Scott McNealy. Upstairs, in his son's room, he gestures at a sheepskin

rug on the floor. "That's from Northern Chile," he offers, turning it over to reveal a label that reads "AAA Export Quality, Southeast Australia." "Oh, right," he says. "I got that one in Australia."

For China's new rich, the lifestyle they often aspire to—a villa, a lawn, and a car—has an impact far beyond China itself. "Cars are associated with higher social status and achievement—and freedom," explains Hongyan He Oliver, a research fellow at Harvard's Energy Technology Innovation Policy research group. In a society where people have little capacity to define themselves in more meaningful ways— forbidden from voicing dissident political opinions, barred from choosing a religion apart from the five officially sanctioned ones, prohibited from even deciding how many children to have—consumer choice takes on inordinate meaning. But should China's poorer billion people actually take this to the Southern California extreme, we're all in trouble. The greenhouse gas from the car exhaust alone could push the planet to the brink, to say nothing of the waste from use-it-once-and-throw-it-away consumption and the energy used to heat and cool hundreds of millions of single-family homes in the too-hot-and-too-cold climate of much of the country. If Orange County is to be typical of development in the new China, it would seem that the world's most populous country is hurtling toward a dystopian future—and taking the rest of the planet with it.

Though power plants and factories are still the main source of Chinese environmental destruction, car exhaust is now the main contributor to smog in Beijing. And despite regulations like heavy registration fees and a cap on new registrations per year in Shanghai, China adds 14,000 new cars a day.

Still, it appears that the hysterical tone of so much of the coverage—"China Crisis!" "Threat to the Global Environment!" "Choking on Growth!"—is a case of the pot calling the kettle black. One can't imagine, for example, a Shanghai-style cap on new car registrations being approved by the Los Angeles City Council anytime soon. Moreover, Americans like to assume that as countries develop, their masses automatically yearn for cars and lawns. But Parisians live in apartments; when Dutch people make it big, they buy a souped-up bike; Japan's business executives zip off to meetings by carbon-sensitive bullet train, not an emission-spewing Learjet. Which way China will develop is still an open question. On the one hand, car ownership has become a major status symbol. On the other, as of now, Harvard's Oliver notes, "the most commonly seen residential development is several-story-high buildings on newly urbanized land," which are invariably served by a bus route if not a subway line. In short, it's a far cry from Southern California.

Contemporary urban planning for China's major cities can be described as an "and the kitchen sink" strategy. From an environmental perspective, China is essentially doing all the wrong things and all the right things at the same time. The cities are growing so rapidly that the authorities are giving it everything they've got, planning for sprawl and smart growth simultaneously. For example, the Chinese government is building a highway system to rival America's, but it is also building a subway system in Shanghai that will be bigger than New York's. China opens a new coal-fired power plant every week, but is also investing heavily in alternative energies like solar power. Beijing even has sustainable building requirements for new construction, though whether they are enforced is doubtful. But ultimately, urban density and good planning are the main reasons why

the average resident of compact Tokyo uses as much energy in a week as the average resident of sprawling Houston uses in a day.

To Sidney Wong, a city planning professor who teaches at Morgan State University, in Baltimore, and the University of Pennsylvania, this strategy of building everything at once makes sense. "For national economic development, building an interstate system is a must," he says, adding that it won't be the environmental catastrophe some fear "as long as they upgrade and strengthen the rail system." The central government, he says, should provide better incentives for cities to build subway systems which he believes many cities would build if assured by the powers that be in Beijing that they can afford them.

To the extent that car culture is growing in China—Beijing went from 1.6 million to 2.6 million cars in just five years—it is as much a function of the stick as the carrot. Pedestrians and bikers grossly outnumber drivers, and in many Chinese cities, it's like a Critical Mass bike rally every day. But as more people shift from bikes to cars, the math is changing. And rather than making its cities more bike- and pedestrian-friendly, China is going in the opposite direction. Beijing is now encircled, like Houston, by several beltways of elevated highways and Shanghai has, unfathomably, removed bike lanes from its major streets at the very time many cities in the West, realizing that sprawl is unsustainable, are adding them. Ironically, Orange County, with its meandering sidewalks and speed bumps, is the most pedestrian-friendly neighborhood in the area.

The road leading to Orange County, lined with car dealerships and gas stations, signals of the burgeoning Chinese car culture. Still, for all his love of the O.C., Ma Junhai plans to keep an apartment downtown. His business interests are there and so are many of his

friends; the notion of commuting for two hours on the freeway each day—utterly mundane in Southern California—would be considered slightly insane here.

So even though Orange County, China, is billed in one brochure as “100 percent American,” it is not 100 percent sprawl, as its California counterpart is. With small plots, one-car garages, and sidewalks throughout, the development is significantly denser. Still, it’s the kind of place where you can’t get the proverbial quart of milk—or bag of tea?—without taking the car out for a spin.

Ironically, Beijing’s wealthy are buying cars and fleeing to suburbs like Orange County to escape the ever-worsening traffic downtown. In a way, the developments that have begun to encircle major cities fit into what the author and activist Naomi Klein calls “suburban Green Zones,” viewing Baghdad’s fortified island of functionality as a model of hellish 21st-century urban development. Klein’s description of “armored suburbs ... patrolled by private militias” would certainly apply to Orange County, where the security forces march en masse through the streets of the development. At Rose and Ginkgo, a new Beijing development also designed by Southern California architects, the guard at the Mediterranean-style main gate wears a jet-black version of a People’s Liberation Army uniform, a Soviet-inspired ensemble topped by a Russian fur hat. But his ID tag reads “Longhu,” the name of the development company, creating a perfect gulag-archipelago-meets-consumer-capitalism symbol of the new China.

It’s not entirely clear who exactly poses such a threat to these gated communities that so much security is needed. Maybe it is pure paranoia, but it is the paranoia that comes from being conspicuously so much wealthier than one’s fellow Beijingers. From an environmental

perspective, perhaps the fact that Orange County is so atypical of Chinese urban development is its saving grace.

China's new prosperity and the lifestyle it allows is what brought Ma Junhai back home. But if anything, he is living a more environmentally sensitive life with a smaller carbon footprint here in China than he was in California as a Silicon Valley commuter. Rather than scold the Chinese, Americans would do better to rethink and redesign our own sprawling cities. If the Chinese are set on emulating us, we might as well give them something worth emulating.

In Orange County, when I ask a resident, Tong Xiaobo, about the appeal of the development, he explains that the American lifestyle represents health and freedom. What about it, exactly, is healthy, I ask. In America, after all, we associate suburban sprawl with the sedentary lifestyle that has led to our national obesity epidemic. The healthy aspect of the design that stood out, Tong explains, was having a bathroom next to the bedroom. Traditional Chinese homes have only one bathroom, shared by all the residents. Orange County's homes boast lavish bathrooms adjoining the master bedroom complete with his-and-hers sinks and a Jacuzzi. Tong extolled the additional bathroom as "an innovation in construction and design [that] represents modern health." He then lit up a cigarette. Having explained what he meant by "health," I pressed him to explain what he meant by "freedom." He simply ignored the question.