

The growth of a thoughtful city

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ABSTRACT

Even second- and third-tier provincial cities like Huangshi and Luan - the Worcesters and Springfields of China - boast brand-new airports that put dowdy, dingy Logan to shame; massively transformative highway projects that make the Big Dig look like overpriced cosmetic surgery; bullet train service that makes Amtrak's Acela look like a musket ball fired underwater; and forests of new high-rises, going up 20 and 30 at a time, that make even the most hotly debated development in Boston seem modest by comparison.

FULL TEXT

WHEN I return to Boston from traveling in China, I feel as if I'm coming back to a country estate, peaceful and green, where change happens in measured and carefully considered ways. It's probably not the first image that comes to mind when you think of this city, but a little time in China could well alter your view.

I was in China again this summer, and the impression of dynamic forward movement there is stronger than ever. Cities are growing so fast and by such heroically scaled leaps and bounds that even savvy longtime residents can get disoriented. A government employee whose business takes him all over Anhui province told me, "If you work in the office for a couple of months, when you go out in the cities everything's different. I went to pick up my wife at the train station in my own home town, and I couldn't find it."

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The cost of that growth is equally apparent. As a recent study commissioned by the Chinese government points out, all those construction projects add clouds of grit to the pollution pouring out of all the new cars on all those new roads and out of the coal-burning plants that provide power to the growing cities. The air's bad, the water's worse, and cityscapes are harsh studies in shades of gray.

When I get back from China I no longer take it for granted that I can walk with my kids down our street past trees, yards, and lawns to a park with a playground in it. Other newly appreciated daily pleasures: you can take a deep breath and not cough; you can drink tap water; you can swim without undue worry in various bodies of water around the region. If the Charles River, which most locals still regard as toxic, flowed through Wuhan or Chengdu, it would draw swimmers in packs - from kids (in the rare moments when they weren't in school) to the ubiquitous hardy senior citizens who would perform slow tai chi movements and slap their limbs to promote circulation before plunging in.

Some of the dramatic contrasts between Boston and Chinese cities can be chalked up to differences in wealth and function. Boston's a relatively rich post-industrial metropolis, a service and research center with its factory era mostly in its past; the cities of China are industrial centers, still relatively poor even as they fill the world's orders for manufactured goods while absorbing an epic folk migration from rural hinterlands.

But some of the difference also has to do with civic culture, another aspect of life here for which I gain fresh appreciation each time I return from China. Michael Rawson, a historian at Brooklyn College and author of the new book "Eden on the Charles: The Making of Boston," put it this way: "It's always hard to say that there's a particular culture in one city that's had continuity over centuries, but it's more possible to say it of Boston. It's a place where the search for environmental permanence was born, at least for America, versus just tearing things down. Boston led the charge in developing an appreciation of historical land and historical buildings."

"Eden on the Charles" traces the rise in the 19th century of a set of related impulses: to control the destruction of land and buildings in the course of business as usual, to create a viable relationship between the city and nature, to determine whether amenities such as clean water are a privilege or a right. It's not a story of tree-hugging idealism. Rather, it's one of political and cultural contest, with nature in play in struggles between Brahmins and immigrants, Boston and surrounding communities, private profit-makers and defenders of the public interest.

The result, Rawson explained to me, is that in 19th-century Boston there developed a lasting new civic priority: "to manage inevitable change and to balance it with what's already here." It became an important value that passed from elite culture into general circulation, marking a major change in American urbanism. "Up until then," said Rawson, "urban Americans had expected to live in a state of endless environmental change."

Rawson's book helped me understand why Boston seems old and well-preserved in comparison to Chinese cities that are much older, some of them well over 1,000 years older, but feel as if they were built with slipshod haste within living memory. If Boston sometimes feels pokey when compared to them, it also feels more humane. That's not just because American society in general is more affluent. Boston's quality of comparatively slow, thoughtful continuity with its own past also has roots in a distinctive civic culture. That culture can be contentious and frustrating, and it doesn't always produce the right result (the example of Government Center leaps to mind), but we should appreciate it as a crucial element of a livable city.

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