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Beijing's Olympic-sized traffic problem

Alex Pasternack

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Beijing is investing in public transportation before the Games, but experts are more worried about the transit crisis they will face after the Olympic torch has left town. Alex Pasternack asks how China's capital can beat the sprawl.

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lead to new congestion,

At an afternoon press conference during the [International Olympic Committee's](#) visit last summer, Hein Verbruggen, the Dutch chairman of the committee, described the city's Olympic [preparations](#) as "stunning." Another official said he had never, in two decades, seen such an organized plan for the Games. Even as a thick haze covered the city, Jiang Xiaoyu, the vice president of the city's Olympic committee, explained to journalists that pollution would be brought under control, reassurances that were backed by the sanguine visiting officials. Then someone asked about the [traffic](#).

The glow on Mr. Jiang's face seemed to fade. Mr. Verbruggen skipped a beat before making a carefully worded assessment. "I can imagine it should be a problem for the people who have to plan for the traffic system. It's an uphill battle for them." He explained: "The traffic is rather busy."

For a city that often looks more like a giant car park than a bustling metropolis, "busy" was not only an understatement, but also lacked a certain accuracy - "idle" might have been a better word. Even as Beijing scrambles to pave new roads to sustain a growing automotive yen - 1,000 new cars hit the streets daily - congestion continues to grow. And for the millions of commuters who rely on a highly-burdened subway and bus system, just getting to work can mean a daily struggle against cars, crowds and carcinogens. When Beijing [slipped](#) 10 notches to number 14 in a recent quality of life ranking of Chinese cities, bad transportation beat pollution as the biggest complaint. In July, a report by the World Bank slammed Beijing and similar cities for a "piecemeal and ad-hoc" transit planning that was not only wrecking the city's quality of life but also clogging its economy.

Even upper-level officials - their black sedans not immune to the slow chaos of Beijing's streets - have abandoned typical understatement. Once the threat of SARS faded in 2004, Beijing mayor [Wang Qishan](#) shifted his sights to a much more difficult target: "The contradiction between real estate development and traffic regulations is the biggest problem now facing Beijing," he said.

Cervero warns, without smart growth the city could slow to a crawl too."

Before the Olympics adds a million visitors to an already exploding urban population, Beijing is expected to spend somewhere between 200-250 billion yuan on transportation improvements - about 17 times its budget for sporting venues. Along with thousands of kilometres of new roads and three new subway lines, planners have [promised](#) that special car lanes and vehicle bans around venues will help tame the traffic. But experts are more worried about the transit crisis Beijing could face long after the Olympic torch has left town.

"The Olympics are just temporary," says Yang Xinmiao, a professor at the Institute of Transportation Engineering at Tsinghua University. "If we want to win the battle it's very easy," he says, referring to the government's plans for road expansions, rapid bus transit (BRT) lines and technologies that impose a tax for driving on certain roads, or redirect lanes based on traffic needs. "If we want to win that war, it's going to take a long time."

Experts agree that the deeper problem for a mega-city like Beijing has more to do with where precisely those new roads go - or why they exist at all. Instead of adding a [subway line](#) that connects a residential area on the edge of the city to a business district in the center, Yang says the city ought to explore plans that narrow the distance between workplace and home, perhaps eliminating the need for a commute altogether. "We need to learn how to make the city more compact," says Yang, who stresses that Beijing's planning bureaus need to focus less on building and more on training and collaboration. "This is not the business of just transit engineers, but urban planners."

A more balanced approach to transportation planning would aim to reduce car use and emphasise bus routes, underground lines and foot transit. Robert Cervero, the chair of UC Berkley's city and regional planning department, yearns for such an approach almost as much as he misses the Beijing of the 1980s. "People walked and biked everywhere because the distances were reasonable, and it made the city very vibrant," he recalls. Then, cars were a rare sight, and many residents took the bus or walked to their nearby work developments. When he returned to the capital in the late '90s, Cervero found a city centre jammed with large government buildings and three business districts; many residents had been displaced to "super block" developments outside the [Third Ring Road](#).

"It was like [Houston](#) [Texas] – a growing succession of ring roads with suburbs outside," he says. Subsequently, building new roads to increase access between the edges and the center has had a counterintuitive effect. "Wherever you expand roads, development expands to take advantage of the new capacity: people buy more cars and quickly you're back to congestion," Cervero says. "In a city like Beijing, you simply can't build roads fast enough."

Not to mention that adding roads or even subway lines threatens to eat up land that could be used for housing or business, or simply for walking or cycling. "With such construction, you may be expanding but you're not winning any livable space," says Neville Mars, who runs a Beijing-based urban planning lab called the [Dynamic City Foundation](#). He detests Beijing's wide roads, with their underground passageways and pedestrian flyovers ("Beijing has more than any other city!"). "Infrasprawl" – the term Mars uses to describe the kind of construction that causes more problems than it solves – "makes the city inaccessible. Even the local subway stop becomes hard to reach."

For pedestrians in a city of gargantuan roads and surging numbers of cars, inaccessibility isn't just physical – it may affect the government's plans for a "harmonious society." "Cars are important, but they can also be a great source of disconnect in a community," says Cervero. Higher car or fuel taxes and restrictions on car ownership remain politically risky, while decade-old policies meant to encourage the growth of road construction and the auto industry continue to prioritise the car above public transit. "This is how local officials get promoted to higher ranks," says Yan Song, an urban planning professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who has consulted for the Beijing government. "It's not a conspiracy theory, it's reality." Song and Yang say the government must ensure its planners are better trained. "They draw really good pictures," she says, "but [the idea] that public transit is to some extent for those who are probably less powerful, that's often not discussed in planning."

To increase accessibility and reduce traffic, planners agree that public transportation needs to be the centre of future development in the city, not the other way around. Developing business and residential areas around bus and subway stations would not only reduce the need for cars but would disperse the city's activity out from the traditional city center to a constellation of different centers. Song suggests a "finger" network, like that of [Copenhagen](#), in which development grows along major transit lines. "Transit-oriented development increases public transportation rider-ship and creates more livable, cohesive communities that encourage more people to walk," says Jin Fan, the director of the China Sustainable Transportation Center.

Last year, the municipal government announced it would focus on developing three such transportation-centered "towns" to the east, in Shunyi, Tongzhou, Yizhuang, which will be connected to the rest of the city by subway and rapid bus lines. Meanwhile, the

city's planning institute is examining future transit-centric developments. Still, shifting gears from a car-centred city, in which public transportation only supports a third of the city's total transportation load, to one dominated by public transportation will not be easy. New lines and more buses are not enough, says Song; a system of [cleaner buses](#) and subway cars with better air-conditioning systems and reduced wait times will entice more people to give up driving. "The affluent should ride BRT buses with everyone else," adds Jin.

But serious public transit upgrades, some argue, will require heavy investments from the private sector, or even a complete privatisation of the transit system, such as that of Hong Kong or Tokyo – models that Beijing will not follow anytime soon. "We're still under a socialist system," Song says, "but in many cases, Chinese cities are already using the private model to build roads." Zhou Yixin, who studies transportation at the Chinese Academy of Sciences notes that, in general, agrees that a spirit of official change is afoot. "A few years ago they were building more ring roads and expressways. But they've begun to reconsider and think about using more public transport, not only for the Olympic Games but for developing the whole city."

Professor Yang is not so impressed. "I think the problem will only get worse in the coming

years." Though he is working to generate more collaboration between government and academia, the planners he consults "don't have the power to influence the decision makers, who do not think the way we think," he says.

These days later, when he returns to the Beijing he once admired, Professor Cervero says he feels like he gets the brush-off from the official planners he's come to consult. "They kind of politely nod their head and thank me, but they just continue to pave concrete and pave roads." Just as new roads can lead to new congestion, Cervero warns, without smart growth the city could slow to a crawl too. The city's best-laid plans will need to be followed by its best-laid subway lines, bus routes and urban development. "Whatever transportation techniques you develop during fast periods of growth will determine transit patterns for the next 50 years," he says. "Is it too late? I wouldn't say yes. But my sense is that [there will need to be an abrupt] change of course to a vision where the city grows, and uses public transit to get there."

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