

A World View of Brownfields

By Richard G. Opper

I recently had the opportunity to meet up with Paul Nathanail, a friend I seldom see. He was in San Diego, my hometown, with a group of students who are following a unique part-time vocational master's program in contaminated land management at the University of Nottingham in Great Britain. They joined me for a tour around the Petco Park baseball project in downtown San Diego, after which we stopped for a Bushmills at the Marriott Gaslamp Quarter's Altitude Skybar and a cool beer at the Kansas City Barbeque.

It was on this excursion that Paul talked about his international involvement with brownfields.

Paul is a brownfield triple agent. Professor, researcher and consultant (not to mention raconteur of international brownfield experiences), he has taken his background in engineering geology into the field of brownfield regeneration, and it is taking him around the world.

He and colleague Kate Millar, working with fellow CABERNET (Concerted Action on Brownfield and Economic Regeneration Network) directors and U.S.-German bilateralists Detlef Grimski and Uwe Ferber, have actively helped organize CABERNET's series of Urban Land Management conferences in Europe. In Belfast in 2005 and Stuttgart last year, representatives of many countries throughout and beyond the EU gathered to share ideas and inspiration about the possibilities for transforming blighted communities.

As a result, Paul understands the way different countries have approached brownfield redevelopment issues. This is, after all, an issue that confronts cultures and governments throughout the industrialized and developing world.

We discussed his recent experiences in China, where a particular city has been anointed as the seat for

research, development and study of remedial approaches to contaminated land. That city is Ningbo, a coastal metropolis and home to the world's third-largest deep water port. The economic and cultural pressures that drive the ambitious and entrepreneurial Chinese to the coast are obvious. Anticipating a charming town with remnants of Portuguese presence, Paul found instead an industrialized behemoth of 6 million people.

The Ningbo Environmental Protection Bureau is at the forefront of developing China's protocols for land monitoring, assessment and remediation. Historically, the government would site a factory at the edge of a city or in an industrialized zone, but some of these areas are being engulfed by enlarged urban centers. In some instances, the factories may become obsolete and eventually abandoned. The incessant pressure of population growth, particularly at the coastal urban centers, requires more land for the wide range of residence-types and land uses needed to support this new urban population.

With the demand for new housing and awareness of the legacy of the previous generation's factories, China's interest in remedial technology is soaring. Technology is also being used on issues that could impact the upcoming Olympic Games.

Some miles northeast of Ningbo and immediately to the west of Beijing is the district of Mendhougou. An area the size of the county of Nottinghamshire in England, this district was the source of much of the aggregate and cement used to build the new Beijing over the past two decades. Despoliation caused by extractive industries—in the form of abandoned quarries and borrow pits—are the source of great dust clouds that contribute to poor air quality in Beijing. Efforts to improve air quality are coupled with plans to

create eco-parks to protect wildlife and provide a weekend escape for 24-plus million Beijingers. This is brown field reclamation on a scale somewhat larger than the typical shopping center.

While not obvious when working on projects in our own urban neighborhoods, brownfield redevelopment clearly reflects the global nature of our economic communities. Through Paul, I am often led to conclude that some of the most advanced work—both in technical terms and local policy and vision—is being done overseas. It is our hope to organize contributors who will regularly report on these international developments and promote a new way to think globally and act locally.

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