

Olympics: Beijing builds feverishly for more than just Games

Christopher Clarey



Minoru Iwasaki/Reuters Construction workers are still busy at 2008 Olympic sites in Beijing, including the main stadium, the Bird's Nest.

Somehow, out of the dust and the din and the gray of the Olympic Green, there appears a red carpet.

The Beijing Games are still more than 400 days and a few hours away, as the countdown clock in Tiananmen Square keeps reminding locals and visitors alike.

But a few kilometers north, between the fourth and fifth ring roads, the Games already have a full-fledged VIP zone. And that red carpet leads underneath dangling lanterns, through glass doors and into a realm of deeply feigned permanence, with dark granite floors, formal Chinese chairs and silk pillows. There is also piped-in music, heavy on the strings, that would be a fitting soundtrack for a young, handsome couple dressed in flowing white and loping in slow-motion unison through a gauzy landscape toward some ineffable happiness.

Which is exactly the point.

This outpost of studied calm amid the construction zone that is northern Beijing is actually the showplace and sales office for "Dream World 2008," the name of the residential complex that the Olympic village will become after the last medal is awarded and the last tattooed athlete - they all seem to have tattoos these days - has enjoyed his last free meal and massage. The five rings and the circus that accompany them are not quite close enough to touch, even if security will let you past the gates, but Beijingers are already thinking ahead.

To spend time touring the sites and sounds of the Olympic venues earlier this month was to come face to skyscraper with the reality that the Olympics are just one of many projects in motion here.

What is more amazing than the concrete latticework of the National Stadium or the glowing, membranous cube that will be National Aquatics Center is the fact that the Chinese have enough yellow hard hats to go around.

This is not Athens or Sydney, where the big-ticket items were all Olympics-related during the buildup to the Games. Something more earth-shattering is under way here.

As your patient taxi driver pieces together your hand signals and your phrase-book Mandarin to get you to the next basketball or volleyball arena, you are constantly driving past another attention-demanding new apartment building bearing telephone numbers, writ enormous on its top floors, to give prospective clients stuck in traffic the chance to try to dial up a new life from their new cell phones.

"The Olympics are changing Beijing, but Beijing was already changing fast; the Games just add another layer," said Wang Chao Yong, a Chinese venture capitalist based in Beijing.

For the moment, it is a dusty layer, one that can sometimes make it hard to see the lack of forest for the lack of trees.

A few things did become clearer after a brief visit to this city of great expectations and great exhortations that will dominate global chatter a year from August.

First, the Chinese organizers may well be on schedule, as confirmed by the International Olympic Committee watchdogs who have been more like lapdogs in this case after the relief of getting through Athens relatively unscathed.

The mild surprise, after all the buildup about China's manic productivity, is that the Chinese do not appear to have too much time to spare.

Sixteen months out, it takes some searching to find an arena or stadium that looks finished. The Olympic zones are still squarely in the process of becoming. Though most of the skeletons are in place, most of them are still short on flesh and covered by green scaffolding, which is about as close to green as most of Beijing gets.

Second, what is in place looks well conceived. The signature buildings are bold. Even without a retractable roof, the National Stadium, nicknamed the Bird's Nest, does for workaday northern Beijing what Frank Gehry's Guggenheim did for Bilbao's gritty riverscape.

Many of the smaller venues have also been intelligently placed on university campuses, often in the midst of existing athletics complexes. Those should get plenty of use after 2008 in this still under-served city of 15 million: a refreshing development after the white elephants of Athens and Sydney's Homebush Bay.

Third, they really had better seed the clouds, shut down the factories and keep the cars parked in 2008, because even on a cool, mildly breezy day in April, you can develop a smoker's hack in a few hours on the polluted town. Just imagine what a still, steamy day in August might do to a marathoner's breathing patterns.

Fourth, it must be terrific to be Liu Xiang's agent, because the face of the Chinese track star, one Olympic gold medal and a world record already in pocket, is everywhere: backing products, presumably licensed, in everything from running shoes to a traditional red Chinese jacket. If you think Cathy Freeman felt pressure in Sydney running 400 meters for Australia and aboriginals, imagine the boulder on Liu's back as he hurdles for 110 meters in the Bird's Nest.

That stadium, simultaneously massive and light with its capacity of over 90,000 and its basket weave of an exterior, still had a few cranes hovering protectively about on the day of my visit.

Very nearby, there were major earthworks under way around the living cube of the Aquatics Center with its luminous, undulating exterior that resembles a series of massive soap bubbles that have just begun to be blown.

A short drive or long trudge to the north, Beijing's newest lung, the Olympic Green looks, for now, more like a strip miner's delight with stretches of upturned earth and a few freshly planted trees, leaves missing for now, sticking out of the dirt with thousands more trees lined up against the fences ready for their turn.

Green it is not, at least not yet. But anybody who doubts modern China's ability to get a big job done need only pay a visit to Shanghai and look across from the Bund at the futuristic architects' playground that used to be low-lying fields.

Or one could simply march down the red carpet, under the lanterns and through the glass doors to gawk at the huge scale model of Dreamworld 2008, with framed photos of China's gold medalists from Athens (Liu again) gazing contentedly down at you and your designer clothing from the solid walls.

The Olympics are coming soon, but they will be going soon, too, and the progress and the projects aren't about to stop with the closing ceremony.

Disponível em: <<http://www.iht.com>>. Acesso em 27/4/2007.