



Global Property Sustainability Perspective - Tianjin Eco-city

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Tianjin Eco-city: China's blueprint for urban development in Asia



Is building a city from scratch a solution to Asia's expanding population or a costly experiment? JLL explores the Tianjin Eco-city project and asks whether planned cities are the key to supporting the region's rapid urbanisation.

Five years ago, a patch of land located 40km outside of Tianjin, China's fourth largest city, was a toxic wasteland, deserted beach and uninhabitable salt pan. Today, it's the sprawling Tianjin Eco-city: a purpose-built metropolis that will be capable of housing 350,000 people by 2020.

It's China's sustainability showpiece. In a nation that's infamous for its not so environmentally friendly approach to urbanisation, the Eco-city is part of the Chinese government's solution to moving more than 100 million country-dwellers into cities by 2020.

The project, a collaboration between Singapore and China, was launched in 2007 and is designed to showcase Singapore's planning success in one finely-tuned urban area: **"Singapore sold the concept of a city that's very dense but green and liveable"** says **Michael Hart**, Managing Director, JLL Tianjin. **"And they certainly set the bar very high."**

Tianjin Eco-city promises affordable housing, clean waterways and it's serving as a test-bed for green technology. International developers from China, Japan, Taiwan and Singapore have flocked to invest.

But with five years until completion, the project recently hit the headlines for all the wrong reasons. Bloomberg branded it a 'ghost city' and the UK's Guardian newspaper said *"the green buildings echo like gymnasiums"*, together, painting an unimpressive picture of this US\$24 billion development.

The reason, according to Hart, is not unique to this project: **"One challenge is that the overall residential property market in China has been soft, not just here, and this has had a knock-on effect on businesses because there hasn't been the expected population density."**

But he's quick to add: **"There are residents, there are schools, and it's filling up. It's already been more successful than many expected. It's living, breathing proof that they've done a decent job and it will continue to evolve."**

Urban planning in its infancy

China is in the midst of the largest urban migration in human history and, to sustain long-term economic success at a city level, China's new government has made public its intention to overhaul its 'build it and they will come' mentality.

"After 25 years of vast development and growth that prioritised speed over quality, the government has realised that it isn't sustainable" says **KK Fung**, Head of Greater China, JLL.

While China's urban planning lacks some of the sophistication seen in cities such as New York or Singapore, this also presents plenty of opportunity to perfect a model for other fast-growing and emerging economies.

"That's what makes China unique" says **Michael Klibaner**, Head of Research, Greater China, JLL. **"Few countries in history have had China's resources and capital to build infrastructure ahead of demand."**

Back to basics for real estate in China

China's ability to prepare large areas of land to develop industrial parks, business parks and CBDs at an unprecedented rate has transformed the economic fortunes of the nation and enticed investors from around the world. But, now, attention is turning to basic planning principles that are considered mainstream in other markets.

"It might be as simple as adding open space or a park to encourage people to sit outside rather than use air conditioning" says **Fung**.

As an example, an urban regeneration program to redevelop, rebrand and market Beijing's Dashilar district, which covers Tiananmen Square, was launched in 2010. JLL advised on the project and developed a range of regeneration models to support the renovation of historic areas. The overall aim was to retain the existing culture and subtly improve the quality of life for the residents.

"Simple solutions like this are also a lot more attractive for developers - it may not involve big technology but it's financially viable" he adds.

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A model for future cities?

Tianjin Eco-city, as a model for innovation in urban design, is undoubtedly impressive, and it's an idea that Singapore hopes to export to other rapidly-developing countries in need of a fast-track city.

But building something from scratch can 'kill the spirit of the city' warns Fung: ***"You may have solar power and rainwater harvesting technology, but if it doesn't attract people to live there, it doesn't matter how green it is. People want coffee shops and book stores and heritage. It's about getting balance."***

And with Tianjin Eco-city's success marred by stories of empty condos and echoing offices, questions are being raised about the 'liveability' of such cities.

"There's no doubt that these cities leapfrog established cities in terms of technology" says Klibaner. ***"However, the social side of urban environments is still an area that many governments don't understand."***

When it comes to negative press reports, Hart is optimistic about the prospect for Tianjin Eco-city and others like it: ***"Shanghai's CBD and much of Singapore didn't exist 20 years ago. People are quick to forget what it takes to make a city successful and that's the thing about real estate, it's a long lead time."***

The concept of an eco-city is not unique to China; similar projects are emerging in the Middle East with Masdar City in Abu Dhabi, and in Europe with Portugal's PlanIT Valley. But, like many things in the People's Republic, the Tianjin project is the biggest and most ambitious in the world

While it may not be perfect, it's certainly seen as a step in the right direction for urban expansion in the world's largest economy. Klibaner adds: ***"When it comes to sustainability, it's so much easier and cheaper to address these issues at design stage and, in China, with so much construction there's so much opportunity to get this right the first time."***