“Purposeful travel accelerates learning, sparks innovation, and provides opportunities for collaboration”

International experiences surround us with “new” information. Since 2001, city and regional planners in Northern California have organized international planning tours for American Planning Association (APA) members and guests. The six tours include Cuba (2003), China (2007), India (2009), Brazil (2012), Eastern Europe (2014), and Southeast Asia (2017). These APA tours focus on visiting countries substantially different than the United States and meeting with a cross section of professional and academic planning-related contacts along with elected officials.

Each Sunday between 6 am and 11 am, Jakarta closes off much of its main thoroughfares to cars, so people can gather, walk and ride bikes safely. Jakarta, Indonesia was part of the most APA international Planning Tour to Southeast Asia. “ Ciclovia”, a similar periodic car-free day event pioneered in Bogota, Columbia, has now spread around the world.

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As an outgrowth of successful tours, APA California Northern Section’s volunteers initiated an international collaboration program in 2012, building upon prior international contacts. Our initial pilot collaboration was in São Paulo, Brazil – a dynamic mega city with a population of 12 million and 21 million in metro area, the largest in South America. Thanks to the help of Brazilian planner Bruno Borges, we entered our first international agreement, conducting a regional planning and governance workshop over Skype for SP Urbanisms, a São Paulo government agency. We also completed a tool kit for others interested in establishing their own purposeful travel programs.

Although Ouro Preto’s well-preserved historic center is a tourist attraction and UNESCO World Heritage Site, the São Cristóvão neighborhood faces challenges including insufficient jobs, unregulated building on geologically unstable hillsides, and a lack of secure land tenure, inadequate sanitation and utilities. The City of Ouro Preto is now leveraging volunteer resources from the São Cristóvão Residents Association, the Federal University of Ouro Preto, APA California Northern Section, and San José State University. APA volunteer’s role focus on training, meeting facilitation and capacity building, drawing upon the lead up methodology developed by Eliot Allen, an Oregon based sustainability expert, that call for building consensus, greater trust and more transparent communication. Two series of community workshops have been held with a third scheduled for January 2019. Implementation calls for more tourism job opportunities, revolving loan funds, a revitalized community courtyard and improved infrastructure.

Promising planning practices gleaned from one area may be carefully adapted to meet local needs elsewhere. Bus Rapid Transit, pioneered in Curitiba, Brazil, is prime example of an innovative practice now widely adopted around the world.

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