


architectural methods of investigation will prove irrelevant in the context of the development of Chinese cities, causing architects to lose time and energy on increasingly worthless research topics and design tasks. What is needed in China is an attitude based on assimilation and remoteness. With a dedication to mobility – and with the zeal, pragmatism, and naivety reserved for migrants, bohemians, and entrepreneurs – today is the time to totally redefine urbanity and urban places. We claim ourselves to be the citizens of the one million cities, but also outsiders to them; we are temporarily travellers caught into waves of non-stop urbanisation. We live in a world without insiders, one with too much information. A world with seemingly only two options; draw or drown.

While moving around in China, one understands that an effective Chinese model of urban development has yet to crystallise. Indeed, there might not be a guaranteed outcome, and it is hard to imagine everything going right, but that doesn't obscure the emergence of a new urban order over, under, inside, and above existing cities. In this new urban order, architectural and urban research and analysis are based on seemingly irrational decisions, arbitrariness, intuition, and coincidences coalescing critically. It is supported, once the opportunity arises, by a method intensifying the urban experience, by tagging, reading, writing, renaming, roaming, classifying, picturing, and making sense of the city through different forms of mobile field research, by train, cab, foot, from on top windshields, rooftops, and bicycles. And it is measured by speed and politics; China is the country where

Paul Virilio could be seen as a vernacular philosopher. 

#### NOTES

(1) MovingCities is an independent research organisation led by Bert de Muynck and Mónica Carrizo and dedicated to understanding the role that architecture and urbanism play in shaping the contemporary city. <http://movingcities.org>

## Space and Public Realm: Transforming Beijing

Jinxi Chen

This essay is based on fieldwork in the existing historical districts of Beijing in 2003 and 2004 by the author and twenty other colleagues from Tsinghua University. We researched for two months into an area of over 13 hectares in Dashila District, one of the oldest, busiest and most famous business streets in Beijing. We thoroughly visited each place in the area, and recorded many aspects of the physical property, including land use, the form of the open space, its street life, the building styles, the building heights, and the functions. Besides, our team acquired information from local authorities, such as land property, demographic composition, and population density. By putting all these materials together, we noticed that the richness and randomness of social life in the Hutongs<sup>(1)</sup> showed a contradiction to the highly organized holistic urban structure of Beijing, which might

also be seen as the reason. As newly built fabric has designed fancy parks and open spaces, to find out how people use them, I took the university campus and its surrounding space as the focus of investigation. In 2009, I researched 120 campuses in Beijing. Not surprisingly, most social life remained either inside the modern courtyard of a campus or a residential unit, or is distributed in small-scale disordered streets. Here again, the question can be raised that, why the increasing "Western form" or seemingly Western public spaces haven't contributed to public life? Let us take a look at the public realm of Old Beijing city.

### *The Empirical Capital*

Most commentaries on Beijing place too much emphasis on the central part of the grid, and neglect the everyday social spaces (David Bray, 2005). The urban theorist Zhu Wenyi concluded that the basic spatial unit of a courtyard<sup>(2)</sup> can be explained as a boundary prototype. From that point of view, regular public courtyards, as well as the Forbidden City, and the Beijing Inner-city, - all surrounded by walls - can be seen as homogeneous courtyards rationally built one out of another. Consequently, the wall and the moat of the Forbidden City, the Beijing old city wall (demolished in the 1950s), and even the Great Wall became the concentric boundaries that formed Beijing urban structure, until today. The Forbidden City was placed in the centre, geographically and politically. Thus, the structure is seen as the representation of reinforcing social order through the control of the physical environment (Li Xiao Dong, 2007). The hierarchic structure was institutionalised through planning by referring to an ideal spatial schema

of cosmos that is described in Kaogongji<sup>(3)</sup>. While the imperial capital plan placed much emphasis on order, social life was not respected in the first place, and public space was hardly encouraged then. Most Hutongs were designed as longitudinal and latitudinal lines, which constituted the symbolic grids, rather than streets where people would meet and talk. It was reflected by the straight and solid facade of Hutong, which was usually a monotone gray wall with unreachable windows that separated private courtyard from the public street. But it is always too judging to say that Old Beijing doesn't have any public space. As I pointed out at the beginning, people who lived in Hutongs have created vivid urban life there. Even daily meeting and talking occur at random spaces where there is a tree, an abandoned sofa, or around public toilets, it somehow nurtured the top-down controlled environment with bottom-up social activities, and reinterpreted Hutong to local public space. When population and social activities accumulate in certain areas, public life will also prosper. Qianmen District would be an important case to look into.

#### **Exceptional Qianmen District**

Qianmen District, an area south of the central Tian'an Men Square in Beijing, was the busiest commercial centre of Old Beijing. The historic fabric of this district encouraged social life by urban development. There was a distinguished wall around Inner-City that differentiated the space of inside and outside. Qianmen District was located outside the Inner-city, and was a place less monitored. It first developed during the imperial exam period. A lot of candidates who had passed the local and provincial qualification

came from all over the country to Beijing, to prepare for the supreme final examination; they needed a place to settle down. At that time, the very few winners would meet the Emperor in person in Forbidden City, and will be rewarded with a position of government official. The dream of going bottom-up was satisfied through the step by step move geographically from outside to the centre. Young people hoping to succeed in the examination gathered at the borders of the Inner-city in Qianmen Area. A lot of Colleague Meeting Houses were built to host them. Normally, those from the same areas would be accommodated in the same house. Stationery businesses such as bookstores, painting and calligraphy galleries prospered; opera house and restaurants were opened, even prostitution became popular then, all of which made it a social centre. Later on, more immigrants moved to Beijing and settled down there, Qianmen area developed quickly as the population accumulated, and became one of the three commercial centres of the city. A lot of courtyards were used for commercial service opening to the public. The facades of many Hutongs were open to the streets. As one of the earliest Beijing commercial districts, the area remains as a unique place of interest today. In our fieldwork in the western part of the area in 2004 and 2005, it was still the most concentrated place of Beijing old brand shops as well as the antique market. In spite of well-restored antique shops, many historical courtyards such as Colleague Meeting Houses, which had lost their modern functions, were facing demolition or needed urgent repairs. That unpleasant physical environment hasn't been affecting the vivid urban life at all; despite that, Hutongs and courtyards

are still full of social activities that are not enjoyed by the newly built and well-designed squares.

#### **Structure Consistency**

The ambiguous relationship between Hutong and local urban life is different from the West. On the one hand, there is the bottom-up force controlling the space that didn't encourage public life. On the other hand, there is the very real life compromise through 800 years that reinterpreted the historic fabric into public usage. And because of that, the transplantation of Western urban model hasn't been a success in public space usage. As a piece of evidence, the structure and unit of Beijing urban space had maintained consistency till today. After Mao and Communist established People's Republic of China in 1949, there was a turning point of the rearrangement of Beijing urban system. It started with a serious argument over the position of the buildings of the Central Government. Chinese scholar Liang Sicheng<sup>(4)</sup> proposed a plan that placed the administrative institute to the west of the Inner-city because a "new system" would leave the old city as a holistic historical place. Soviet scholars insisted on placing it in the middle of the existing old imperial city. The Soviet opinion was taken, and the concentric structure of Beijing remained. Nevertheless, it has been reinforced as the urban area expanded. To alleviate traffic congestion, the old Inner-city wall was torn down in 1950s, replaced partly by the 2nd Ring road. Consecutively, the 3rd Ring, 4th Ring, 5th Ring and even the 6th Ring were completed in 1994, 2001, 2003 and 2009. With large-scale expansions connected by wide expressways, the built area of Beijing reached 1180 km<sup>2</sup>

in 2004, and its population exceeded 16 million in 2009. Beijing's urban identity seemed to be very different from the historical structure. However, the changes were done only on the scale level or in certain spots, although western cities were set as models, the system itself has actually never been replaced.

### **Beijing Modern Courtyard**

The courtyard as urban unit has never disappeared either, it was only transformed. After PRC was founded in 1949, lots of institutes needed to be located in capital Beijing. The four main institutes were the administration division, the state-owned company, the military and the university. Some took the existing large courtyards, while others built places that inherited the ideal form of courtyard, the so-called "Da Yuan" (large institute courtyard). A typical "Da Yuan" also had characteristics of a rectangular shape, an explicit wall and certain limited entrances. Its open space was as nice as the peaceful traditional yard, only larger and more systematic. A "Da Yuan" courtyard usually contains several small courtyards, each with relatively independent functions such as working, living or logistics, together forming a small society that serves only to the institute that occupied the place. Those who were irrelevant to the institute would need a permission to get in, while those who worked for the institute would live, shop and entertain inside. It is very difficult to say whether the institute courtyard is public or private; it is more like an autonomous commune. However, the big transition of "Planned Economy" to "Market Economy" in the 1980s forced certain institutes like state-owned companies to change. As the institute's land became a precious

resource, it was soon compromised by the market. Walls broke down; courtyards were cut and partially became real estate development sites. People moved "upwards" from one-floor-courtyards to six-storied residential units in the 1980s and to high-rise residential condominiums in recent years. Yet, every newly developed or replaced unit tends to build up a new wall to separate itself from the surrounding environment; thus, new courtyards in different functions have been kept on building boundaries, such as office buildings, residential units and even open spaces like the Olympic Park. The whole process can be concluded as courtyard metabolism, and most social life still takes place inside walls.

### **Current Problems of Public Space**


As the urban structure and unit remained, the Western modeled space hasn't melted into Beijing's fabric. Most current parks, open spaces, and streets are only seemingly like Western public spaces, but the realm and usage are totally different.

Take streets for example, most newly built roads seem to be nice. They have paved sidewalks with beautiful trees. But as soon as you start using them, you realize the inconveniences. Most roads are too wide. People have to rush to cross the street while nervously watching the passing vehicles. As the road gets wider, vehicles drive faster; crossing the street becomes even more dangerous. For pedestrian's safety, or sometimes for the efficiency of mobile traffic, the road is provided with a barrier in the middle that prevents people from crossing the street. Pedestrians are forced to climb a bridge or use an underground path to get to the other side. All these measures make the streets less pedestrian friendly, even a

nightmare for lonely elders. As a result, small shops and mobile snack stands could not survive on the street, and street life diminished. Parks and squares have similar problems. Tian'an Men Square's scale has been far beyond human; it is national scale. Most of the large parks in Beijing are not free to the public. For example, the Temple of Heaven Park asks for 10 Yuan for regular entrance. Besides, accessibility hasn't been satisfactory. Just like the traditional urban unit – a courtyard characterized by a boundary, parks are surrounded by a closed fence. Take the new 275-hectare Beijing Olympic Forestry Park as an example, despite the huge size, it only has four exits. Gatekeepers guard every visitor for a security check. Bicycles are not allowed, which means that people will only visit the areas around the entrance, or they have to walk for hours through the park in order to reach the next exit. The seemingly Western public place doesn't speak for space quality advancement, nevertheless, under the circumstance of controlled structure and unit consistency; it could neither contribute to public life without positively connecting to the existing system. From that point of view, a small virtue will do much better on public realm than massive construction.

### **A Small Virtue Will Do**

When looking into Beijing's transforming public space, it is extremely important to pay attention to its urban structure and unit. Over all, Beijing's urban development can be divided into three stages. The first stage started when the city was planned as an ideal capital 800 years ago. It determined the city's concentric structure as well as the courtyard unit. The second stage began in the middle of

the 1950s when the Central Government was settled. It reinforced the concentric urban structure of Beijing and courtyard transformed. The third stage started in 1980, when breathtaking constructions took place and new courtyards started to substitute the old ones. Despite all these changes, Beijing's urban structure and the unit remain visible until today. That explains why the increase of well-designed public spaces hasn't contributed much to public life as it should have. It is not a problem of lacking good designs and beautiful renderings, but the problem of public usage and realm. Whenever a street, park, or square in Beijing is built, it has to be fitted in the accustomed boundary. Public life was not encouraged, whereas social activities stayed inside the courtyards. To improve that, architects and government officials should not only design open spaces, but also melt them with the original system. A connection between sidewalks, street corner, and small parks would be more efficient than building new wide open spaces. Just as the lessons we learned from Hutongs, where the vivid urban life took place, and the prosperity of social activity in Qianmen District, public life has found its own way to prosper by reinterpreting the existing system. For example, planting a tree in the corner of a Hutong would be much more effective than replacing an entire Hutong with a fancy park. 

#### NOTES

(1) Editor's Note: Hutong is the traditional street of historic fabric. People call historic area as "Hutong area".

(2) A traditional courtyard as referred to in this essay is a rectangle unit with one-story houses placed on all four sides. The central yard was left vacant for family activities. Rich families often owned several courtyards, and a royal residence was composed of courtyard sequences with spatial axis. The isolated private peace in the yard was

considered to be an ideal harmony relationship between human and nature, which was described by some local people as "still an outdoor space although you passed the front door".

(3) An important book on which all Chinese great historical capitals were built, from Chang'an of the Western Han Dynasty to the last imperial capital Beijing.

(4) Editor's Note: Liang Sicheng (1901-1972) is known as the father of modern architecture in China. He studied at the University of Pennsylvania and in Columbia. As a pioneer in history investigation, he promoted the conservation and restoration of the architectural heritage of his country. He wrote the Illustrated History of Chinese Architecture.

## Rural-Urban versus Urban-Rural

Xu Yixing, Xue Shanshan

### Beijing Rural Central Business District (CBD) versus Urban Hutong<sup>(1)</sup> (bystreet) Village

Beijing, as the capital for six dynasties, is developing and enlarging its CBD.

The whole CBD area is cut into plots to distribute to developers, but some are still waiting for their owners. A lots of towers have grown while several plots are kept as almost original status or demolished emptiness. This mixture makes the CBD seem not like a CBD, but like many towers planted as trees floating on a wasteland. OMA's TVCC building was burned just before its opening. Every time I pass by the site, this burned building reminds me of a straw-roof house at the seaside.

Residents of Beijing's hutongs enjoy their daily lives. Once they enter their

neighborhood, they can forget about the bustle of the city immediately, because they live in a village - an urban village. This is the utopia for Beijing people, the real Beijing urban life. But demolition is going on rapidly and has created a lot of empty and deserted spaces that are used as different functions, for example, parking for tourism tricycles. People who lived at these renovated areas had to move, or, could also come back, but, pay for their new house at much higher price. These "villages" are eaten by commercial development, so this "countryside" environment has diminished, and then courtyard houses in "villages" are increasingly more expensive. Only rich people can buy houses in hutongs nowadays. Original residents often move outside the city to have bigger living spaces at lower prices. In this way, the memory and history of the city is being washed away. This city does not belong to itself anymore.

### Shanghai Rural Buildings EXPO versus Urban Linong (lane)

Shanghai was a county town before colonization in the beginning of the 20th century. Today, towers have grown like chopsticks in Pudong, the new development area of Shanghai. Different from Beijing's CBD, Pudong is all newly built. Although these towers are already very dense, the background is still blank. They are like UFOs from outer space, shiny and slippery, metal and glass, different shapes, no tradition, no reason. This is not city at all, but a farm for skyscrapers. The Shanghai World EXPO 2010 is currently open and the city is more like a big market for bizarre buildings. The expo's slogan is "Better City, Better Life". Is it true?