


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⁽¹⁾ (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?

Even though tower buildings are arriving like monsters, once you jump into the old Linong lanes of downtown Shanghai, you will be submerged in life's details. Restaurants, shops, people, bikes, fish, chicken, dogs, cats, vegetable, meat, wine, smoke, noise, music and talking, all mix together. Wandering through these streets is a trip full of surprises. It is like a countryside market, though people talk about events happening in the city. Residents in Linongs preserve their old fashions and life style, because Shanghai used to be the most fashionable city in Asia in the 1930s. Now Shanghai is trying to take this chair back with the image of modernity and fashion again. Most of these Linongs are facing demolition and people who live there have to move away. This old fashion will also vanish with the changing city. Only some tourism areas will be kept as specimens of history. Besides the city temple in the Linongs, a big mountain stone sticks out from the Yu gardens (Yúyuán) in downtown Shanghai. With this, Yúyuán, one of the finest examples of Chinese gardens, shows a rural signal to the street. People know that this is a place where they can go for breakfast, listen to singers and drink tea. The space is rural, but the life is very urban.

Guangzhou

Rural Big City versus Urban Big House

As one of the first 'open' cities in China, Guangzhou developed into a huge city or city group since the 1980's. In Guangzhou, we can see highway buildings, with highways over three floors. Skyscrapers besides the highways give people a sense of fear. Some huge buildings are built at the end of the street, enclosing the sky in the dead end of the street. Scale reveals a rude kind of violence in the city. In

some places, old run-down buildings are waiting for their final trial, but people living inside continue to build additional structures freely for their life and for relocation compensation. The violence together with the freedom make this big city seem so rural. While the city is too big to see its edges, it is connected with other cities as one metropolitan interlocking region. In Peal River Delta, cities are one big urban area, but on the other side you can read it as one big rural area.

Because of the hot and humid climate, the Cantonese created a residential form named Big House. Most of the spaces in Big House are open to let wind pass. The interior environment is comfortable even if the outside is sunny and burning. People drink tea in shadows and this spatial bigness makes public sense. The relaxing status is rural but the lifestyle is urban. Decorations on the houses are so extreme, colorful, and kitschy, and tell stories about classic Chinese culture. With the cultural involvement, these decorations became monuments for the faraway cultural roots in middle China, where the ancient people descended. The memory about the dreamy motherland is being strengthened again and again in people's mind, the rural home.

Shenzhen

Rural City from Village versus Urban Village in City

Shenzhen has grown from a small fishing village opposite of Hong Kong in a huge city in only thirty years. It has been completely planned from scratch, keeping a long green belt through the entire city. People can enjoy tropical countryside landscapes beside their offices. On the roofs of dense crowded buildings, homeless people built their own villages in the

air. People are walking their dogs on roof gardens. The city that was once a village has now a village on top.

With the development of the city, many villages have been enclosed inside the city. They are still villages, should be called countryside villages in the administrative sense, but are in fact cities. Each of the original family got a plot for their new house, but they dug the potential commercial value completely. They have built buildings as high as possible on their own lands and then rent the places to people from outside the city. Buildings are built so close that neighbors on two sides can literally shake hands. In the community center of the village, traditional icons like the ancestral hall, the most important memorial space for traditional Chinese people, are carefully kept. Buddha and other holy figures from different religions are invited to protect their holy land. The social structure is the same as before. People in the village administer themselves. Normally the most powerful and largest family is in charge of everything. With this, Shenzhen has the most urban image and has kept the most rural spirit at the same time.

Jinan

The Urban Fountains versus the Rural Swimmers

Jinan has been well known for its fountains for over 1000 years. Water from the fountains comes together into the Daming Lake, a leisure park for Jinan people. Fountains organized the old city into neighborhoods and gave the city an urban structure. Water also makes another kind of lake. When the construction of a big building stopped, the basement without first floor gathered water to form a lake. This construction was of course

for urban reasons, but the resulting space, a playground with flat green grass, is like a Quake game scene, so rural.

In the old fountain neighborhood, small flat houses with an old man sitting alone are a reminder of farmlands faraway in northern China. You start wondering if this is still a city. After going through a lot of complicated alleys, a wonderful view opens up. People changing clothes, smoking, and talking to each other, while others are swimming in the water. It is a tradition for Jinan people to swim outside because they have so much water, but here, they can swim freely in all the seasons. It has become a paradise for swimmers. After swimming, people can even enjoy food and alcohol to warm their bodies, and have fun with their friends. Wangfu Chizi spring is a very typical phenomenon. Local culture controls the space and local people use the urban spaces in a rural way. Urban becomes rural, even though the space could be not very urban from the beginning.

Hangzhou

The Urban Lake versus the Rural City

Hangzhou is a city in nature because Xihu, the West Lake, is the urban center of the city. It is big enough to be the trunk of the city, but not enough to be the core. For citizens, the lake and the services around it are a popular place for walking, dating, picnicking, and drinking tea. For tourists, the lake is the icon of Hangzhou. From the middle of the lake, you see the city with lots of buildings and towers in the east, and mountains in the west. At the beginning of urbanization, people were shocked by the towers appearing beside the lake. They argued that those towers destroyed the view. Now, no one is concerned about this any more. They

realized that this has already come true, and the result of an urban image lake is also not so unsightly.

West Lake is also the medium between city and nature. People can always go to the lake to fall into a rural atmosphere and go into the mountains to enjoy nature. So living in Hangzhou is like living in the middle of city and nature, switching between the urban and rural. In the south lakeside, old residential areas were transformed into bars, teahouses, and restaurants along Nanshan Road. Here there used to be normal people's houses mixed with villas for high-income class, like a village. But now it is a city hotspot with rural qualities for the young and the fashionable and for tourists. Landscapes of the lake were well done, like a garden. You are in the city but you are in rural landscape without any urban view.

Ningbo

The Rural Real versus the Urban Fake

With the convergence of three rivers, Ningbo has been an important harbour city for 1200 years. Old and new factories are standing together with new office buildings along the river. Ships are still bustling in the river. Beside the river, an historical assembly hall lies under a twin-tower building. The two buildings are built so close that people cannot see the white old house at first sight. The funnier thing is the open green land for showing this house, although this house is just like shoes of the big building. The assembly hall seems unreal because the towers look so real. A demolition area could not be empty, but with lush trees and grass, like a garden. It should have been antiquated for many years. Local people could use it as a backyard garden, very rural. It seems unreal with wilderness surrounded by

buildings, but it is very real as the center of the neighborhood.

But on the other side of this garden a newly built traditional style "old" street extends in the city. These fake old streets exist everywhere in China, similar to western style buildings. The different architectural styles make the city appear rural, whether the style is modern or traditional, western or eastern, because they are all, in a way, fake. Somehow, the building covered with billboards in the suburbs seems more urban because it doesn't have style, only information. It is a fake facade, but at functional level it is a real facade. The real takes a more urban feeling.

Quanzhou

The Rural Religions versus the Urban Stones

Many Gods came to Quanzhou. Buddha, Lao Tzu, Jesus, Matsu, Allah, Confucius, Guanyong among others all live in this city. It was the most important harbour city in south China more than 1000 years ago. Different cultures mingled here and created a very special city culture. One person in Quanzhou can believe in more than five religions, but all these religions are living in the same city very peacefully. This mixture is the main feature of Quanzhou. The old houses are mixed with new buildings; a Taoist temple is mixed with new modern buildings, a Huangdi small temple with residential houses, a mosque mixed with commercial markets, pagodas and bell towers with new tower buildings in the skyline, a Matsu temple with shops and restaurants. The mixture of religions makes rural cultural landscape like a forest, with many kinds of plants and animals.

The same as the city, the construction tradition of Quanzhou uses mixed

materials, named Brick-out and Stone-in. People use stone and wood to build the framework structure, and use leftover stones and bricks to build walls. Stones have kept the city history for a long time till now. This mixture has made the city seem changing and unstable, and rural. At the same time this mix also made the city into a sustainable, dynamic, and urban one.

Yangzhou

The Rural Traditional Style versus the Urban Green Style

Yangzhou is a city with a long tradition. On the street, a Tang Dynasty (more than 1000 years ago) pavilion occupies a small square. People treat it as a bird in a cage. But the old 100-years old houses are less fortunate as they will be demolished to make room for new buildings. In the big wave of developments, Yangzhou kept its size and characteristics very carefully because the government controls architectural style very strictly. Building in the old city must be in the traditional style. A modern building has to have a Chinese style roof, or a copy of a traditional image combined with a modern image. The city is made according to a rural traditional image.

But ivy plants do not care if a wall is traditional or not, they climb and climb, until the whole house is green, a totally green traditional house. A green style is an urban style because it can avoid the traditional or modern question, and can also be a connection between different styles. So high quality green style means no style, can give people comfort, and provide a relaxed urban quality of life.

Shaoxing


The Rural Western Style versus the Urban River Net

A bank building in Shaoxing can look like a court building in Rome. After the opening of the country in the 1980s, Chinese people realized again that there is a kind of architectural style that is so beautiful, the western style. Different ridiculous signs, icons, shapes, and elements came to the street to make a kind of New-Colonialism style. This style is full of Chinese cities and even now it is still very popular. People want to show urban identity via western style, but in Shaoxing this exoticism has no context, and gives this city a rural face like strangers coming to a small town. In the real countryside, along the expressway, peasant's houses are built as modern tower villas or castles. It is neither Western style nor Chinese style. The buildings salute the city with urban poses, and forget that they are hybrids of this time.

Because Shaoxing is a small old city, the urbanization process is slow. Tower buildings are standing coldly next to pieces of empty land. The city was set up on rivers and boats and the basic skeleton of the old city, the rivers, is still there. Traditional culture is still in its heydays. The river and the black-white houses on both sides carry on time, while the people are still using the rivers. The river net keeps the city in a spatial structure that is hard to erase. Only if the river net exists in the city, Shaoxing can stay Shaoxing.

Urban in Rural and Rural in Urban

Modernization is the biggest target of China, and urbanization seems for many Chinese the only way to reach modernization. But China has a long tradition of making natural cities, the so-called Mountain-

Water City. In this urban concept human beings and nature are one, while the entire way of living is in balance with the geography, the climate, and the resources of the location. In fact, ancient Chinese cities always know how to combine a rural aspect in an urban situation and an urban aspect in a rural situation. Urban and rural should therefore be treated as a pair of contradictions in a harmonious integration. In the case of 'urban in rural', people living in the countryside should not gather in dense apartment buildings, but instead enjoy a rural life in peace with nature. Internet and high-speed public transportation will offer them the necessary urban tools. For 'rural in urban' situations in cities with already many dense spaces, high quality public rural landscapes should be implemented, both on a spatial level and at a spiritual level. A rural environment in the city doesn't need to be a big piece of green, but could be in leftover spaces, a garden, a yard, or even a balcony. When China's new cities are planned with both urban-rural and rural-urban qualities, architecture becomes not an aesthetic object but an extension of the human being. By keeping a balance between the two faces, China's traditional cultural values can continue to exist in its future cities. 

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