

Journal of Undergraduate Research

Volume 8, Issue 6 - July / August 2007

Making Place for Neighborhood in Beijing

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ABSTRACT

I, along with my team members, visited Beijing in the summer of 2006. Our project was to design a masterplan for Qianmen District, a dense hutong neighborhood that is being erased from the heart of Beijing. Our charge was to preserve and renovate as much hutong fabric as possible, while providing new housing with the qualities of neighborhood that the hutongs create. Our hope was to bring funding into the site with new, up-scale housing, as well as provide quality, affordable housing so that locals can remain in the area. Our design provides a green space and market hybrid swath that weaves through the site to connect separate programmatic pieces by providing an outdoor, social atmosphere, giving the residents a place to interact.

INTRODUCTION

Beijing is the capital of the People's Republic of China, and is one of the largest cities in China with a population in 2000 of 13.82 million. It is a curious conglomeration of monumental and residential architecture that works together to illustrate the beliefs and lifestyles of the people of Beijing. Beijing consists of "extraordinary monuments like the Forbidden City and the Temple of Heaven set in an intricate matrix of low-rise courtyard housing knitted together by a raveled pattern of lanes (hutong) and carved into districts by the vast imperial grid." (Davey 2000, P. 73) Beijing is considered the cultural center of China, offering a wealth of history that has created its unique character. As a city, it is always evolving, with each new era layering upon the past. Now, as the host city for the upcoming 2008 Olympics, it seems that 'change' has become 'erasure' as plans spread to completely replace the layered fabric of Beijing with a new, contemporary architecture.

History of Beijing

Beijing was completely destroyed in 1215 when the great Mongol warrior Genghis Khan invaded, razing the city, including the Imperial City. During the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368AD), Liu Bingzhong designed a new city plan that was organized on a grid. Following the Yuan Dynasty, an emperor of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1628) sought to erase all traces of 'Yuan Qi' (breath of the Yuan dynasty) and therefore destroyed most of the Mongol palaces. The one element that remained from the Yuan dynasty was the regular plan that organized the city.

It was during the Ming dynasty that Beijing, as we know it today, was formed. The Yongle emperor was

responsible for the grandiose architecture of Beijing, such as the Forbidden City (figure 1) and the Temple of Heaven (figure 2). The appearance that Beijing adopted during this time would continue to develop through the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) and would characterize it until the communist era.



Figure 1. The Forbidden City (photo by www.goldenbridge.net)



Figure 2. The Temple of Heaven (photo by www.peking.org)

The city is organized by an Imperial grid, with the north-south axis being the major artery that connects the Forbidden City and the Temple of Heaven. The Forbidden City is the center of Beijing. It was originally known as the Imperial Palace, or *Danei*, meaning 'The Great Within.' The palace architecture of the Forbidden City has the same basic plan as the *Siheyuan* houses, but many times larger, boasting a grandiose scale that ranks its importance within the city. The architecture of this time is a symbol of the power and greatness of the Chinese Imperial government. Within the Forbidden City is the Hall of Supreme Harmony. This was the symbol of Imperial Power and the place where the emperor attended to state affairs. Chinese law allowed nothing to tower above the Hall of Supreme Harmony. This was because it was where the emperor, considered the "son of Heaven," could occupy the highest position and reign over the country. (sinoHotelGuide)

Hutong and Siheyuan

Residential neighborhoods are embedded within the major grid of Beijing. They are made up of rows of

courtyard houses called Siheyuans (figure 3). Siheyuans are low building complexes made up of four quadrangle houses that surround a courtyard. The houses are one-story tile-roofed buildings that are usually one to six meters wide, but vary according to the social status of the residents. The family's rank is illustrated by the elaboration of the gate entrance to the siheyuan (figure 4).

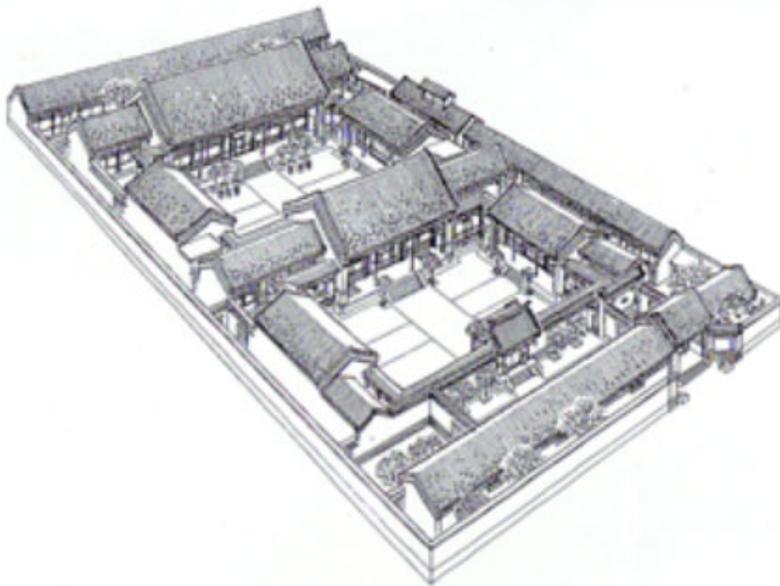


Figure 3. Drawing of a courtyard-style house in Beijing. (photo by Chinese Architecture)

The passages that form between the Siheyuan blocks are called Hutongs (figure 5). 'Hutong' originated 700 years ago from the Mongolian word 'hottog', which translates to as "water well". People settle near water, therefore 'hottog' was the term used for dwelling, which became 'hutong' after it was introduced into Beijing. 'Hutong', as it is used now, means a street, lane, or alley that is a passage between rows of siheyuan. Hutongs first appeared in the Yuan Dynasty after the original city was destroyed in the war. They continued to be developed throughout the Ming and Qing Dynasties.



Figure 4. Hutong gate building



Figure 5. Hutong alley

There is a clear hierarchical organization for Beijing's grid. There are three classifications of roads in old China: a big street (DaJie) was 36 meters wide, a small street (Lu) was 18 meters wide, and lane (Hutong) was 9 meters wide. Originally, hutongs were all approximately 9 meters wide and positioned along the east-west or north-south directions to allow for the collection of south light and to resist cold north winds. Since then, they have morphed to become less obedient to the grid, thus forming "slant hutongs", "half hutongs," or "blind hutongs." (ebeijing.gov.cn) One Hutong, Exchange Market Lane, is only 40 cm wide.

Hutongs are an essential part of Beijing culture, both as a place for family life and as a record of history. Hutongs have become the living room of Beijing: In the mornings and evenings people gather to practice traditional forms of exercise, such as T'ai Chi. Throughout the day there are elderly groups playing mahjong or Chinese chess, while children play, and others converse and cook (figure 7). It is common to be invited to a

meal with a family as you are passing by. Each neighborhood has a string of stalls and carts that sell traditional foods and goods (figure 6). There are fruit and vegetable markets, as well as dried goods, meats, and fish. The hutong way of life creates a strong sense of community within each neighborhood.



Figure 6. Market in one hutong neighborhood in Beijing



Figure 7. Men playing board games during the day out in the hutong lanes

Many of the hutongs are named based on their origin, location or history. Of the 6000 hutongs that existed in 1949, 1330 of them were named. (drben.net) Beijing's hutongs are detritus of the people who lived there, a trace of their cultural traditions, and a record of their history. They are "living fossils" (drben.net) that tell a unique story within the "encyclopedia of Beijing." (ebeijing.gov.cn)

Change

The pure matrix of hutongs that existed through the Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties from 1271 AD to 1911 reached its peak and began to decline after the fall of the Qing Dynasty, which took place between 1911 and 1948. During this time the government was unstable, with frequent civil wars and continuous foreign invasions. With the collapse of the feudal system, social status changed and hutongs lost their neat arrangement that had organized them through their history.

In 1949, the People's Republic of China was formally established. An explosive expansion of the roadways began in order to facilitate transportation in Beijing. Whole blocks were destroyed to enable the widening of boulevards. Car ownership became widespread, again changing the character of neighborhoods. The increasing presence of cars in the lanes forced them to widen even more.

In 1976, the Tangshan Earthquake, a deadly 7.8 magnitude, hit northeastern China. The earthquake left 240,000 people dead and the entire city of Tangshan leveled. Later that day, a 7.1 magnitude aftershock hit to further devastate the city. In Beijing, Siheyuan courtyards were opened as shelters for those who had lost their homes in Tangshan. This led to overcrowding of the siheyuan, and a decline in the availability and quality of light and air.

In 2001, Beijing was chosen to host the 2008 Olympic games. A seven year plan was developed to transform Beijing into an inviting city with a new image. An estimated 22 billion US dollars is being spent to improve urban transportation and build the Olympic Park, which will be filled with new sports facilities and housing for the Olympians. An estimated five million overseas visitors will be coming to Beijing during the Olympics, which makes this "urban makeover" (opendemocracy.net) very important for Beijing's International image. Following the Cultural Revolution, a great appreciation for Beijing's monumental architecture developed, and the grandiose religious and governmental structures were preserved and cherished. The small, overcrowded Hutongs that made up the city were seen as a symbol of poverty and a "source of shame" (opendemocracy.net) for Beijing and thus are being destroyed at an alarming rate. Figures provided by the Municipal Construction Committee state that 250,000 square meters of old houses with 20,000 households were scheduled for demolition in 2004. According to Peter Davey, the Beijing Municipality has set forth a masterplan that retains only three per cent of the millions of traditional low-rise dwellings (73).

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Qianmen district is southeast of Tian'anmen Square, between the Forbidden City and the Temple of Heaven (figure 8). It is a dense hutong neighborhood, approximately 1.2 by 0.8 km that is bordered by Qianmen Avenue, the main N-S axis road of Beijing. The area is currently undergoing extreme change as plans for modernization are put into process. This includes the demolition of hundreds of existing courtyard houses (figure 9).

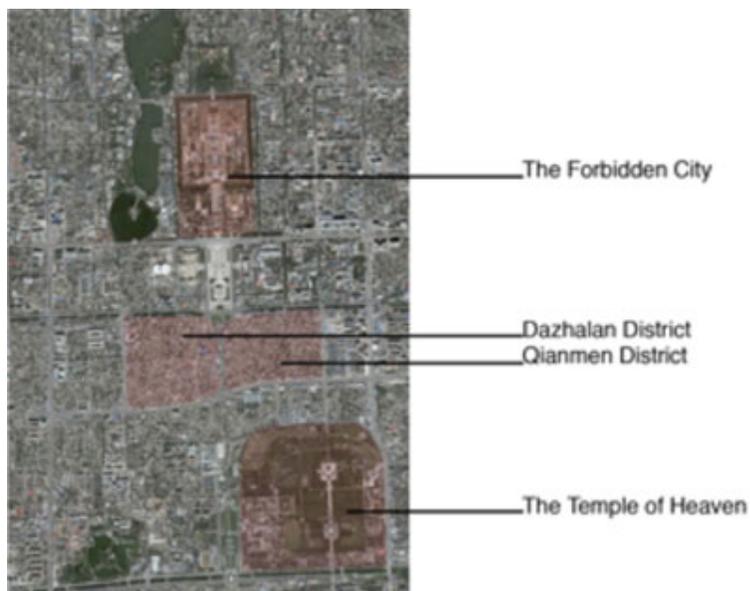


Figure 8. Aerial photograph of the center of Beijing

Dazhalan, the bordering hutong district directly west of Qianmen Avenue, has already undergone almost complete destruction and in July 2005, the Beijing Academy of Social Sciences published that Dazhalan was extremely over-crowded, with the population density at 45,000 persons per square kilometer.



Figure 9. Destruction taking place in Qianmen District, photo taken in July 2006

(photo by Karla Valdivia)



Figure 10. Resident of the destroyed hutong area, photo taken in July 2006

The destruction of the Hutong lanes and the Siheyuan courtyard houses is not only a loss of historic architecture, but more importantly an erasure of an important social fabric (figure 10). These small-scale neighborhoods are being paved over and replaced with clumsy apartment buildings. The new developments not only ignore the current scale of neighborhoods, but also pay no attention to the material language of the city. They are

foreign objects that are thrown into the delicate fabric to house the ever-growing population. It is important to renew urban areas by offering new forms of housing with modern amenities that can house the ever-growing population, but these new schemes, do not do this thoughtfully or architecturally.

We designed a comprehensive plan to combine modernization for economic development and preservation of neighborhood in redesigning the Qianmen District. When hutong neighborhoods are razed, the previous inhabitants are displaced by the up-scale housing that is built. Therefore, along with the demolition process, there is an accompanying relocation plan that moves previous residents to cheaper land outside of the city. Our proposal suggests that quality, low-income housing be provided to ensure that most of the local residents can remain in the area. The importance of the hutong district is the quality of neighborhood it creates. Our proposal aims to reconstruct the idea of neighborhood that is evident in the Qianmen District. The site proposal is an integration of living, working, and pleasure.

Living

Our proposal aims to create a socially sustainable urban development (figure 11). In order to increase the lifespan of the neighborhood, it is important to provide a variety of housing that is flexible. This allows for a dynamic and changing residential community. An important aspect in our development process is to provide housing that will allow poor urban inhabitants to remain in the renewed areas.



Figure 11. Diagrammatic map of Qianmen District showing different housing: preserved hutongs, renovated hutongs, hutong-style apartment buildings, and lofts

In June of 2006, entire lanes of Qianmen District were already leveled, and all that was left in many areas were piles of rubble. Some hutong lanes were completely intact and in good condition. It was these areas that we

mapped and chose to preserve in our proposal. Preservation and renovation of siheyuans and hutongs is important in order to maintain some of the historical texture that the urban fabric provides. Some siheyuans would be renovated with modern amenities, such as new plumbing, to enhance the quality of life and quality of the neighborhood.

According to UNESCO, "in the past three years a third of the 62km squared area that makes up the central part of the old city has now been destroyed. This has displaced close to 580,000 people." (opendemocracy) A vast majority of these people are poor and cannot afford to stay in the center of the city due to the increase of high-end housing. Our project suggests that new apartments, using the courtyard style of the siheyuan, be developed as affordable housing so that residents can remain in their neighborhoods. The apartments will keep the texture and culture of the hutong streets, but in this variation they will be stacked. This creates a vertical neighborhood that uses less land, and is therefore less expensive. We used the case study of the Ju'er Hutong (figures 12 and 13), designed by Professor Wu Liangyang his team from the Tsinghua University Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies, as a model for urban regeneration within the Hutong areas.



Figure 12. New housing for Ju'er project. Design uses traditional spatial qualities in two and three storeys. (photo by Courtly Life, 75)



Figure 13. Courtyard in Ju'er, which preserves original vegetation. (photo by Courtly Life,, 73)

This area is prime property in the center of Beijing, and it has the ability to bring in a lot of money through redevelopment. A portion of these monies can be therefore funneled into preserving and renovating the hutongs. To ensure economic stability, it is important to provide high-end housing as well: single-family siheyuans outfitted with modern kitchens and bathrooms and loft-style high-end housing will be built. The lofts will border the site, with shopping at ground level, to create dense capitalistic edges that will act as a

buffer. These 'buffers' aim to both provide an economic threshold that will provide funding for the renovation of the Hutongs, as well as protect the interior of the site, which will house the delicate fabric of the renovated Hutongs.

Working (large-scale)

Large-scale pieces create a protective edge surrounding the site to contain the neighborhood and prevent sprawl (figure 14). Currently the north edge of the site, along Qianmedong, contains governmental and civic buildings, which we chose to keep intact. The northwest corner of the site contains vital cultural pieces that were important to keep: a Peking Opera House, a dumpling restaurant, and the Quanjude Roast Duck Restaurant (opened in 1864).



Figure 14. Diagrammatic map of Qianmen District, showing large scale "buffer" pieces: governmental, civic, institutional, arts and culture, and commercial buildings

In the past, famous people, such as opera singers and writers, lived in the hutong areas, but have long since fled the impoverished neighborhoods. To remember the vibrant past we made this corner the cultural district, adding a performance hall, art galleries, and museums. Hopefully, in conjunction with the new housing, performers and supporters of the art community will be attracted back to the neighborhood.

In current plans, Qianmen Avenue is being converted from a vehicular road to a pedestrian area. It is the main axis of Beijing, and connects to The Forbidden City and Tian'anmen Square, which makes it a destination for tourists. Along this western boundary, we filled the edge with hybrid buildings that contain commercial on the street level, offices above, and high-end loft housing on the top floors. The commercial swath along this edge helps to attract people from the walking street into the neighborhood, where they can shop and inject needed capital into the area (figure 15).

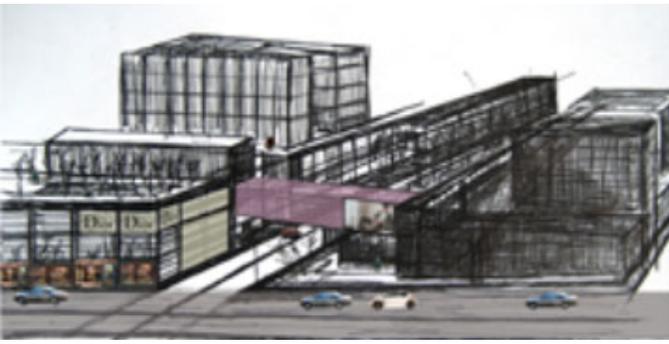


Figure 15. Sketch of commercial corner, showing high-end store facades and bridge that connects interior malls.

Leisure

The presence of markets is important to the culture of China. Markets are not only a source for jobs and income for residents, but a place for personal exchange. Markets allow for residents to commune and develop relationships with each other and the specific place. With the lack of space per person in Beijing, a trip to the market becomes a daily activity. "Grocery shopping" consists of a stop at the dry market for nuts and spices, and a series of stops through the wet market, for meat, fish, fruits and vegetables.

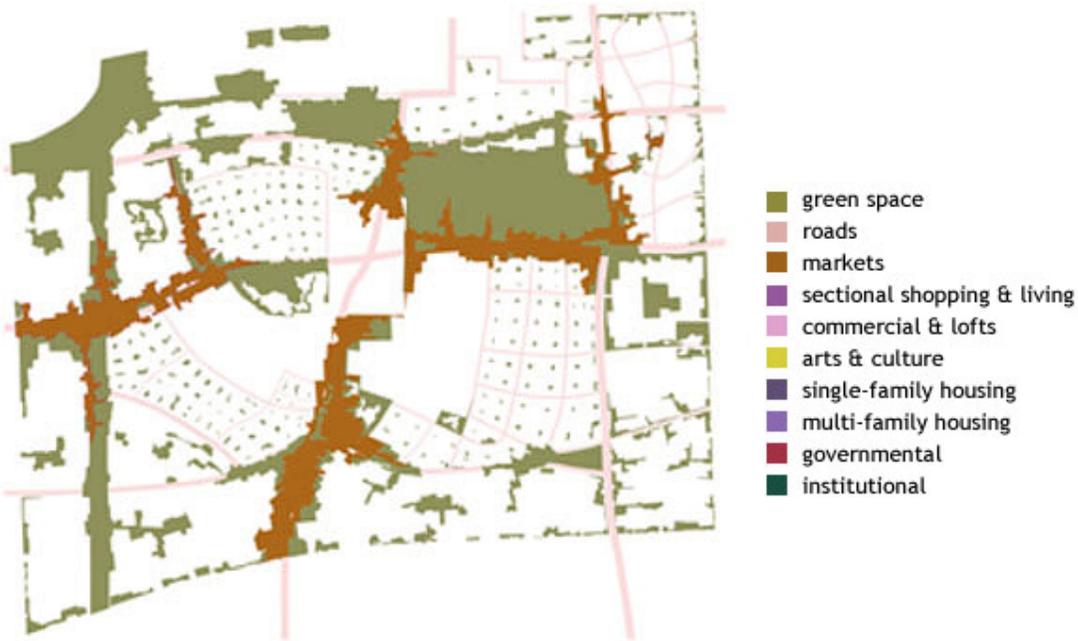


Figure 16. Diagrammatic map of Qianmen District, showing the "marketscape" that weaves through our site proposal, consisting of markets and green space.

Our proposal has a series of markets that run through the site. The markets are paired with gardens to create a hybrid "Marketscape" that acts as a suture to stitch together fragmented programmatic pieces (figure 16). The Marketscape is a public space that can be traversed by pedestrians. It is envisioned to be in constant flux during the day: in the morning functioning as a food market, while in the afternoon transitioning into a jade and craft market, followed by a night market. The garden wraps around the market, becomes the market, and at

times folds overhead to provide shade for the market (figure 16).



Figure 17. Image of Marketscape, showing how the garden wraps over the market.

LOOKING FORWARD TO THE FUTURE

Beijing is a growing city that is losing a wealth of history. It is important for new architecture to make place in a city, but it is imperative to save some of the architecture that holds history and tradition. Our proposal (figure 18) is a balanced mixture of historic architecture and contemporary design that makes the area a culturally sustainable district.



Figure 18. Aerial montage of site: model of cultural district with marketscape weaving through it.

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