

July 27, 2008

ARCHITECTURE

Lost in the New Beijing: The Old Neighborhood

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BEIJING

HISTORICAL cycles that took a century to unfold in the West can be compressed into less than a decade in today's China. And that's as true of Beijing's preservation movement as it is of the nation's ferocious building boom.

The explosion of construction activity that has transformed Beijing into a modern metropolis over the past decade also turned many of its historical neighborhoods — known for their narrow alleyways, or hutongs — into rubble. As grass-roots preservationists began sounding the alarm, the aging wood frames and tile roofs of the ancient courtyard houses that give these neighborhoods their identity were being supplanted so quickly by mighty towers that it was hard to pinpoint where they once stood.

Now, as they labor to protect what remains, Chinese preservationists are facing a new, equally insidious threat: gentrification. The few ancient courtyard houses that survived destruction have become coveted status symbols for the country's growing upper class and for wealthy foreign investors. As more and more money is poured into elaborate renovations, the phenomenon is not only draining these neighborhoods of their character but also threatening to erase an entire way of life.

Meanwhile the intense focus on the fate of the hutongs has eclipsed an equally pressing preservation issue, the demolition of Socialist-style housing from the 1950s and '60s. The imminent threat is historical censorship: a vision of the past that is so thoroughly edited that it will soon have little relation to the truth.

The hutong neighborhoods date to the 13th century, when Beijing's chessboard grid was created by the Mongol founders of the Yuan dynasty. The layout of the neighborhoods, with public life spilling into the hutong alleyways and private life hidden behind brick walls in the courtyard houses, remained largely unchanged in the first decade or so after the Communist takeover in 1949. The wealthy hutong neighborhoods were mostly to the north, and the denser, poorer neighborhoods were south of the Forbidden City.

Starting in the 1960s, however, as Beijing's population soared, a housing shortage developed. Suddenly three or four extended families were often packed into a courtyard house that had once been occupied by a single family.

Starved for space, the new residents often filled the courtyards with makeshift kitchens and sheds, transforming what had been airy, light-filled spaces into a suffocating warren of rooms. Few had basic plumbing, and soon even the wealthier hutongs had deteriorated into slums.

Meanwhile, as the city expanded outward in the 1950s and '60s, the ancient stone walls that encircled old Beijing were demolished as part of a sweeping modernization. Factories and housing compounds began sprouting in the ancient center. A new ring of housing, the four- and five-story, Socialist-style apartment compounds, began to envelop the city.

The current wave of demolitions was under way by the early 1990s as free-market changes gained momentum, and real estate speculators saw potential profit in redevelopment. It accelerated after Beijing's bid to play host to the Olympics was accepted in 2001 and the city began a substantial slum-clearance program to prepare for foreign visitors.

In the Qianmen area, for example, a once poor but thriving neighborhood south of Tiananmen Square that was home to many of the city's teahouses and theaters, hutongs have been replaced by shopping malls and office blocks with ugly postmodern facades that already look dilapidated, although many are only a few years old.

Here all that remains of the past is one of the old Beijing city gates, its mountainous stone form encased in scaffolding and surrounded by ribbons of elevated freeways. The bustling commercial strip that once traced the path of the wall has been widened into an eight-lane boulevard that can be crossed only by pedestrian bridges.

The demolition of the hutong neighborhoods and the cultural memory they embodied caused an outcry among the city's intelligentsia. Advocates like Hua Xinmin and the journalist Wang Jun began organizing small protests and writing articles that eventually attracted Western attention and grew into an international cause.

Growing more sensitive to such criticism in the buildup to the Olympic Games, the government drafted a conservation plan designating 25 protected historic zones in the city center. Despite some violations the pace of the demolitions seems to have slowed significantly over the last few years.

But the hutongs' fate cannot be attributed solely to an indifferent government or ruthless developers; the demolitions also reflect the new aspirations of many Chinese. By the 1970s the most coveted housing in Beijing was not courtyard dwellings in hutong districts but gated government-built compounds, which were a sign of social status.

So ingrained is the bias against hutong living among middle-class people that Yan Weng, a forward-looking architect who once lived in the Qianmen neighborhood, told me that he had recently moved into a high-rise. "For those of us who grew up in Mao's China, the government complexes were always the ideal," he said. "And that has not changed much."

What is more, he said, the widening gap between rich and poor in the frenzied economy of the new China has brought a rise in crime and a growing sense of insecurity in Beijing. "I wouldn't feel very safe today in a community without gates," Mr. Yan said.

And among residents whose neighborhoods face demolition, the chief objections are a lack of compensation from the government or developers and having to move far from the city center to find an affordable place to live. Few see the hutong areas as treasured historical landmarks.

Meanwhile the growing historical awareness among intellectuals and the wealthy has unleashed a different set of destructive capitalist forces. The courtyard houses' sudden architectural cachet has made them coveted status symbols for people with seemingly unlimited resources. As affluent foreigners and China's new rich buy the houses, they are embarking on multimillion-dollar renovations that are robbing the neighborhoods of their souls.

When two or three generations were packed into a single house, family life spilled out into the courtyards and narrow alleyways. Streets were lined with tiny shops and food stands; elderly people sat on folding chairs playing card games as bicycles streamed by.

Today a well-off couple may live with a single well-behaved child in a courtyard home that once housed more than a dozen people. Instead of cooking outdoors or walking to the corner to use a toilet, the nuclear family installs a state-of-the-art kitchen and bathroom with sauna and spa and parks a car in a new underground garage. One Chinese magnate recently added an underground pool. Streets that once teemed with life are as silent as churchyards — and as banal as some American subdivisions.

The results are striking in places like Nanluogu Xiang, a narrow hutong neighborhood in the Dongcheng district northeast of the Forbidden City. Once a thriving neighborhood of mismatched courtyard houses and shopfronts, it was purchased by a local developer who renovated its most decrepit dwellings and rented its storefronts out to tourist shops. Today it looks eerily like a Chinese version of Prince Street in SoHo: an open-air mall dressed up in historical facades. The street is lined with T-shirt shops, coffee shops and cafes catering to tourists. Foreigners walk aimlessly up and down the street, guidebooks in hand, soaking up the phony cultural atmosphere.

Just a few steps down an alleyway, a handwritten sign on a door advertises a tour of a traditional courtyard house. Knock, and a petite old woman opens the door and leads you into the courtyard, where a middle-aged man, perhaps her son, is repairing a bicycle in a corner workshop. Then she takes you into the kitchen, where she proudly shows you some brittle old photographs of her grandfather, an army officer. An assortment of tchotchkes are arranged on a battered kitchen table.

As you leave, you can't help thinking that the old woman, who is trying gamely to tap into the wealth being generated around her, will be forced out before long when a developer sets his sights on the house.

It is a familiar pattern in American cities. The sad truth, as any architectural historian knows, is that poverty is often good for preservation; poor people lack the resources to tear down and rebuild houses every generation. Once an affluent homeowner moves into a faded landmark, the first thing he or she does is bring in an army of restorers — or bulldozers. Preservationists, who tend to have limited economic clout, strike a Faustian bargain: better to save the basic architecture and let others worry about what goes on inside. Breaking the pattern without aggressive government intervention seems almost impossible.

Meanwhile the destruction of a variety of Communist-era housing complexes from the 1950s and '60s has been well under the radar. At first glance these structures might be considered typical of Modernist housing anywhere: long, low apartment blocks arranged around a communal courtyard decorated with a scattering of trees. To avoid the cost of installing elevators, the Chinese government limited most of the structures to four or five stories. Their gray brick exteriors often combine a stripped-down Modernist aesthetic with a

few traditional details like a pitched roof with curved overhanging eaves.

Yet these apartment buildings reflect a fascinating mix of traditional Chinese social patterns and Communist ideas about communal living. In those days all urban workers were assigned to work units that provided housing. Often the housing block offered social services like clinics and organized communal food purchases.

As with the courtyard houses, there was a rich hierarchy of public and private zones. The central garden served the same function as the courtyard, at much larger scale. Inside, most private rooms were no larger than a smallish bedroom, so that tenants would be encouraged to mix with others in the communal kitchens.

Over the years plenty of tenants rebelled against the communal arrangements. Many set up tables and hot plates just outside their private rooms, giving the corridors some of the messy feel of the crowded old hutongs. The importance of these structures, then, has more to do with their social texture than with their formal value as architecture. Built at the edges of the historical city, they imbue the old neighborhoods with a richness and texture that have become powerful counterpoints to the dull, pretty uniformity of the gentrified neighborhoods.

“The largest ones are really micro-cities,” said Yung Ho Chang, a Beijing architect who recently became the dean of the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#)’s architecture school. “People who live there have their own schools, restaurants and supermarkets. But you often don’t know they are there. They are behind these big walls.”

What typically occurs, Mr. Chang said, is that the old four- and five-story buildings are demolished to make way for flashier high-rises. “The basic configuration remains the same,” he said. “Because they are so hidden, we don’t even know what has been demolished.”

In a saner world, of course, the powers that be would have the patience to appraise this history layer by layer, street by street, building by building, one voice at a time, before plowing forward. Short of that, some thoughtful architects have sought to invent new ways of thinking about preservation. The Dutch architect [Rem Koolhaas](#), who seems to be everywhere in China these days, has argued that designating specific buildings as landmarks creates a distorted version of history. Rather he has proposed carving out a protected wedge through the city in which all of the city’s historical layers, from hutongs on through the Communist-style projects, would be permanently preserved. The result would be a sort of living museum, a place fixed in time even as tumultuous changes unfold around it.

His suggestion seems more like a provocation than a serious prescription. Yet it is clear that the Chinese government needs to take a deep breath and ponder what it is sacrificing from the nation’s recent and ancient past. It could develop a sweeping strategy that could serve as a model not only for Beijing, but also for the rest of the world.

Time, it seems, is the one thing Beijing hasn’t got.

