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Olympics Imperil Historic Beijing Neighborhood

By [JIM YARDLEY](#)

BEIJING — A short walk from Tiananmen Square and the Great Hall of the People, a historic neighborhood named Qianmen is an eerie picture of destruction. Ancient homes lie in rubble. Scavengers squat in alleyways and wait to ransack vacated buildings.

The reason for the devastation is the 2008 Olympic Games, which have turned much of the city into a noisy, disjointed construction zone. New subway lines and new roads are under construction, even an entire new downtown. On the city's northern rim, at least 25,000 laborers are building the Olympic stadiums and village.

And yet amid such grandiose projects, it is modest Qianmen, once the domain of Qing Dynasty opera singers and classical scholars, that is prompting an uneasy question. Will the Olympics, which organizers promised would enhance the city's "cultural heritage," instead help finish off what remains of old Beijing?

Many streets and hundreds of courtyard houses have been demolished, but the neighborhood is not yet entirely gone. Scholars, preservationists and residents are trying to save what is left and have generated enough publicity to turn the situation into a political controversy. For now, though, demolition crews are still slowly moving forward.

"Does this look like a scene from quaint Beijing or more like a war zone?" asked Pan Jinyu, 64, a local resident, as he stood on a narrow street pockmarked by flattened houses. Not far away, a red and white propaganda banner fluttered over a razed building: "Build a New Beijing and Welcome the Olympics."

For an Olympic host, the task of building stadiums and sprucing up the city often involves messy land disputes.

Before the 1996 Games, Atlanta knocked down a public housing complex beside its Olympic village. Qianmen is not a site for an Olympic venue but is a piece of the continuing citywide construction boom and slum clearance that have accelerated to prepare for the Games.

For the past decade many of the city's old "hutong" neighborhoods, the ancient, densely populated enclaves of narrow, winding streets and crumbling courtyard houses, have been steadily demolished and replaced by office towers and high-rise apartments.

Affordable housing has become such a serious problem that many people from old Beijing have been forced to the city's outskirts because they can no longer afford to live in their old neighborhoods.

Qianmen was one of the last intact hutongs, home to teachers, shop owners, migrant workers and other working-class people. But with its central location, the neighborhood's land is enormously valuable. And because it has fallen into disrepair, many residents believe that

officials do not want the neighborhood to be an eyesore at the center of the city during the Olympics.

"They are moving forward with this quickly because of the Olympics," Mr. Pan said. "This neighborhood is the face of Beijing to the world. They don't want foreigners to see this scarred old face."

Little is known about the specific plans for the project or who will benefit from it. Communist Party officials and private developers often work in tandem, and so many deals are tinged with corruption that top leaders have led a campaign against illegal land seizures and evictions.

A Beijing vice mayor, Liu Zhihua, was recently removed from his post and accused of corruption. Mr. Liu's portfolio included construction of the Olympic venues and final authority for citywide demolitions.

Jin Yan, a deputy director in the construction office of the Beijing Olympic Committee, said that Qianmen was not an official Olympic project and that it fell outside his purview. Yet he agreed that the Olympics were driving the broader construction now engulfing the city.

In Qianmen, the main street, Qianmen Avenue, is being converted into a pedestrian thoroughfare with restaurants and shops. But officials have been deliberately vague about their plans for the residential areas, despite persistent rumors that the neighborhood will be redeveloped with million-dollar courtyard homes.

Officials have refused to discuss the plans or to detail which blocks may be demolished. Residents usually find out only when leaflets are posted on the outer walls of their houses, warning that a timeline has been set for certain lanes to be torn down.

One municipal Web site is filled with postings from anxious residents asking, "Are you going to knock down my house?"

On the east side of the neighborhood, part of Chongwen District, many houses are already gone. Wide paths of demolition, as if carved by tornadoes, mark where new roads are planned.

"At nighttime this becomes the most dangerous place in Beijing," said one resident, Zheng Zhongping. "The rats are so hungry, they are chasing people. All the food they used to eat is gone. People board up their homes, but thieves still break in."

One recent afternoon, scavengers pedaled carts along the narrow streets, carrying cardboard and scrap wood. Many are farmers from poor provinces who follow demolition projects to make a living. "The demolition is good for business, because there is lots of trash," one man said.

Another man walked by and pointed to government signs promising that some parts of the neighborhood would be saved. "These signs are useless," he said angrily. "They are going to tear it down. It will all be gone."

Yet another man, dressed in a long leather coat, chimed in, spitting out his words. "All their talk is hot air," he said. "This is just theft. I can't even buy a tent with the money they are giving us."

Those who have stayed in the Chongwen side are mostly holdouts angry about the compensation. Feng Shuqin, 76, and her husband, Zheng Zhanlin, 75, lived in their traditional

courtyard house for 50 years. His father owned the property before the Communists took control in 1949, and the family still has the deed.

The house could be a timeline of recent Chinese history. In 1958, facing a housing shortage, the government ordered private houses opened up, and eight other families moved in. In 1966, during the Cultural Revolution, Red Guards demanded the family's deed and took all of the rent. In 1984, the government returned the deed but still kept the rent. Finally, this year the government ordered them to move and offered them the equivalent of \$175,000. The family believes that the land is worth \$1.4 million.

The Zhengs and other residents note that the compensation standard is set at 2001 levels. But in five years, property values have doubled or tripled in some areas of Beijing. After months of holding out, the Zhengs finally moved out in June because their neighbors had left and government-hired demolition companies were harassing them.

"They are pushing all the old Beijingers outside the Fifth Ring Road," said Feng Shuqin, the wife, referring to one of the roads circling the city.

Preservationists and scholars are still trying to save Qianmen from complete destruction. The neighborhood flourished during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), when it was filled with opera halls and boarding houses where scholars from outlying provinces would prepare for the national civil service examination.

Earlier this year, a group of prominent scholars filed a petition with the National People's Congress, or national legislature, warning that demolishing Qianmen would be more devastating to the cultural heritage of Beijing than the destruction of the ancient city wall by Mao. Scholars also note that Qianmen is supposed to be protected; it is one of 25 neighborhoods designated by the city for historic preservation.

Xie Chensheng, 85, a nationally known preservationist who signed the petition, said demolition was so rampant that in August 2004 he and other scholars wrote a letter to President [Hu Jintao](#) and Prime Minister [Wen Jiabao](#) warning about the destruction of the ancient city.

He said Mr. Hu wrote a note in the margins of the letter that was later distributed to lower officials. Mr. Xie quoted the note as saying: "Take care to protect the old city and protect our cultural heritage. Everyone involved should give their support."

The high-level intervention seemed to work. Mr. Xie says no new projects have since been approved, and city planners unveiled a new comprehensive plan in 2005 that included an emphasis on historic preservation.

But Mr. Xie said the Qianmen project proceeded because it had already been approved. Local officials told residents that the redevelopment was necessary because the old homes were unsafe, a point later refuted by an academic study.

Mike Meyer, an American who lives in the neighborhood and is writing a book about it, said other international cities, like Vienna, managed to preserve their ancient neighborhoods. He said that Qianmen could also be restored, block by block, but that officials were instead methodically mowing it down.

"They are doing it in stages," he said. "It's progressing like a wave cresting." He said the gradual approach had left many residents elsewhere in the city unaware of the scope of the demolition. Comparing it to New York, he added, "It's like one morning you woke up and Chelsea was gone."

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