Beijing: the lost city?
The Old City of Beijing has been transformed in the last decade. Once considered “the single greatest work of man on the face of the earth,” the city has been disfigured by a building and demolition frenzy during the past two decades. Its traditional narrow lanes (hutongs) and courtyard houses (siheyuan) have been rapidly replaced with highways and skyscrapers. The traditional principles that governed Beijing’s design for over 500 centuries have been obliterated: the city was traditionally marked by its low-rise grey-roofed courtyard houses, which formed the backdrop for the gloriously colored temples and palaces.

The roots of this transformation lie in the communist take-over of China in 1949. At that time, the historic city fabric was perceived as an expression of the old, feudal order that had to be vanquished. Many important monuments – including the walls which surrounded the city like a necklace – were destroyed. There was even a proposal to demolish the Forbidden City, the most famous Chinese architectural complex as home of the emperors for several centuries, and entirely redevelop the city’s antiquated lanes and courtyard houses.

Ultimately, the Chinese government proceeded with less extreme plans. Most of the important monuments were preserved, not least because their symbolic value could be appropriated for propaganda purposes, as with the Forbidden City. The radical redevelopment of the hutongs and siheyuan were also spared demolition, principally because the government could not afford to fund the construction costs of putting up new buildings. Until the 1980s, almost all new construction took place in the suburbs, the logical location for the industrial complexes that would help Beijing – and other cities – become a center of communist “production” rather than capitalist “consumption”, as Mao had ordered. The few radical changes in the center of the Old City, such as the expansion of Tiananmen Square and the widening of the Chang’An Avenue – the main boulevard that bisects the city – took place for political reasons, to give the city a square and road fit for the huge parades organized by the regime.

However, while radical urban development did not occur in the Old City, living conditions there deteriorated dramatically
in the years after 1949, particularly during the Cultural Revolution and the years after the Tangshan earthquake of 1976. The city government responded to housing shortages then by packing the courtyard houses with new residents, who damaged the houses’ structure by building additions in the courtyards. A space originally designed for one family came to be occupied by as many as ten or more. A new term was devised for these spaces – the dazayuan, meaning cluttered courtyard house. The Old City acquired a slum-like appearance, which obscured its architectural value and strengthened the arguments of those advocating its demolition. Ironically, however, it was during the capitalist-oriented “reform” era rather than the Maoist period that the Old City came to be irrevocably destroyed. The process of urban transformation began after Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping began a series of mar-
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Market-oriented reforms in the 1970s. These began to affect urban policies by the end of the 1980s, as power was decentralized to local governments, who had the incentive to develop land for profit as they were able to sell land-use rights. The result of these policies came to resemble the US urban renewal policies of the 1950s and ’60s; valuable land in the center of the city was appropriated for development, with the residents being relocated to distant suburbs. Since the 1980s, at least half of Old Beijing has been redeveloped in this way, provoking Wall Street Journal journalist Ian Johnson to comment that “Unless things change quickly, the unrivalled urban heritage of Beijing will be completely obliterated, with only fragments preserved for tourists.”

Economic potential vs architectural patrimony. The international response to the redevelopment of Old Beijing has been one of near universal condemnation. Amongst the Chinese, however, the reaction has been more complex. Many defend the redevelopment and, indeed, the skyscrapers and highways were – at least initially – a source of great national pride for a nation previously perceived as technologically backward.
Some government officials and developers have even claimed that the concern over the disappearing architectural heritage is principally the concern of a foreign elite, who ignore the vast improvement in living conditions that the redevelopment of the Old City has allowed. For some Western visitors, in fact, it is unsettling to find that the modern Chinese live in high-rises much like those in their own cities, rather than quaint and picturesque courtyard houses. They are denied the touristic experience of viewing an “exotic” lifestyle, remote and very different from their own. But given the dilapidated and overcrowded conditions of the dazayuan, it seems nauseous for Westerners to complain about what is, on the surface, a side-effect of the effort to improve living conditions for the Chinese.

Further, many officials argue that China is simply not able to preserve its architectural patrimony as a developing country. Only by exploiting the value of inner-city land can China realize its economic potential. By contrast, extensive preservation of the Old City would essentially hinder economic development. In nearly every developed city in the world – from Baron Haussman’s Paris to New York - the process of
urban development involved the destruction of a historic low-density urban core and its replacement with taller buildings. Why shouldn’t Beijing do the same?

A more careful analysis of the situation, however, shows that some of these arguments, apparently convincing, are not well-grounded. First, it is not true that concern over the destruction of Beijing’s architectural heritage interests only a local or foreign elite. There is evidence that all levels of Chinese society demonstrate concern over the current pattern of urban development. Recently, a group of 125 primary school students wrote to Mayor Liu Qi to ask: “If a city does not have its culture and history, what makes it different from all other cities?” They subsequently noted that “Our hutongs and courtyard houses are unique in the world, while the skyscrapers that we are building are commonplace.”

Many newspapers articles have documented the increasing engagement of the populace in efforts to prevent what remains of Old Beijing from being erased forever.

Second, the notion that preservation and economic development are two conflicting and mutually exclusive goals is false. The Old City actually represents just 10% of the land area of Beijing, leaving an enormous area for unrestrained economic development. In fact, the failure to preserve may actually be damaging economic development. During the 1980s, the government of Singapore conducted a study to find out why the city was not as attractive a destination for tourists as it could be. The conclusion of the study was that because Singapore was perceived to lack a historic core, many potential visitors were discouraged from coming. The study prompted the government to initiate a remarkably successful (if belated) program to preserve what was left of their architectural heritage. Some experts argue that this case-study demonstrates that if Beijing were able to successfully preserve what remains of its Old City, the investment would be repaid in the revenue brought from tourists, even aside from the cultural and social benefits of preservation. Preservation only obstructs economic development in the short term and from a narrow perspective: a balanced, far-sighted economic plan for a historic city must consider preservation.

Similarly, the notion that China as a “developing country” cannot afford preservation is also unconvincing. What the government can and cannot afford is, of course, a question of priorities. It is noteworthy that the government can “afford” a space program and other grandiose projects. If the Chinese government felt that the prestige of their nation rested on successful preservation, they would certainly carry it out. Even if its own resources were limited, the government could spearhead a drive to raise the money from elsewhere, or put in place the legal framework to encourage property owners to restore their homes themselves without the continual threat of demolition. Arguably, however, it is not the physical task of preserving the architecture that is most challenging to resolve, but the social problem of dealing with the residents living in the dazayuan. All agree that their living conditions must be improved. Yet the
government’s current approach of relocating them all not only entails destroying the architectural heritage, but destroying vibrant, healthy communities. This has arguably been one of the most unfortunate aspects of recent development. However, improving the living conditions while preserving the community and the original urban texture is no easy task: the dense resident populations of the dazayuan cannot be accommodated in situ with modern standards in single story buildings. The choice, therefore, seems to be between two imperfect solutions: to preserve the architectural fabric whilst relocating most of the community, or to preserve the community in situ, but to destroy the architectural fabric by redeveloping the courtyard houses as high-rises to increase living space.

Possible solutions. An urban intervention often referred to – the so-called Ju’er Hutong designed by professor Wu Liangyong in the early nineties – opted for the second choice: constructing medium-rise buildings with a traditionally inspired architectural design that nevertheless allowed much higher population densities. However, while interesting from a design point of view, this approach could not be proposed on a wide scale, as it would involve the total destruction of the existing historical urban texture.

The most obvious answer to this dilemma is to try and achieve both the ideal social and architectural objectives to the greatest degree possible. Relocate the minimum number of residents necessary to reach acceptable living conditions in the hutongs, but give them new housing in close proximity to their existing homes, so as to allow for the preservation of the original community. This was the premise of a proposal recently suggested by a team competing for an urban design scheme for the area of Dashilan, to be redeveloped prior to the Olympics in 2008. Similar proposals have been made for other Beijing neighborhoods and they seem to be a good compromise for solving the problems that the government is purportedly attempting to address.

The pattern of redevelopment today seems to be the worst of both worlds: relocating all residents and replacing the urban fabric with modern development. Even in the limited areas of Beijing where the government has set out to protect the existing architecture and urban fabric (the so-called twenty-five preservation zones) the current remit for preservation permits wholesale demolition and redevelopment with “suitable” historic-style new buildings. Why does a serious effort to preserve either the urban fabric or communities seem to be totally unviable in the current political and economic climate?

The reasons behind degradation. The answer to this question lies in the structure of the political, legal and economic system in China. There is currently no clearcut framework for property ownership that would allow residents to feel secure
in investing in their own properties. Houses that residents restore could easily get demolished. The threat of demolition hangs over almost all of the residential historic buildings in the Old City. As a consequence, these buildings continue to deteriorate, strengthening the government’s case that they are “dangerous” slums which need to be destroyed. Further, even in the conservation areas, the process of preserving an area is expected to break even financially or turn a profit. This is impossible to achieve without redevelopment. The idea of preservation as a cultural investment is not widespread in China.

Most importantly, under the current CCP system, officials at all levels of Chinese government need to demonstrate their competence to their superiors, who control their political careers. This entails showing that they can achieve economic growth – or at least, the appearance of economic growth, which is most effectively accomplished by quickly redeveloping an area. In the current Chinese political matrix, cultural or social achievements have little or no value, and projects dealing with preservation and refurbishment of the existing fabric would be slower and ultimately less visible and less impressive than new development.

Further, there is enormous political value in the new developments. The largest projects in Beijing to date – the reconstruction of Ping’an avenue and the development of the Oriental Plaza near Tiananmen Square – were both completed in time for 1999 ceremonies celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic. Similarly scaled projects are underway for completion by the 2008 Olympics. Finally, the new construction taking place is often not just in the political self-interest of officials and developers who push for it, but in their financial self-interest as well. Developers with close ties to the local government and local banks are successful in getting loans and redevelopment funds to build new developments. These developments are not always financially viable in their own right, but nonetheless succeed in enriching those involved. This “new economy of kickbacks” makes people rich not because they have developed a property and sold the units, but because they are good at spending the bank’s money. Many newspaper articles have drawn attention to this corruption and its role in fueling urban development. Occasionally, the most egregious instances of corruption come to light – such as the scandal involving former Mayor Chen Xitong, who was sentenced to a sixteen-year jail term for accepting kickbacks relating to the construction of Oriental Plaza – but in general the government currently seems unwilling to make the necessary reforms to render the process transparent and the principle participants accountable.

The search for rational solutions. In conclusion, the urban changes in Beijing, as in other cities, are not necessarily a rational or reasoned solution to the complex physical, political and economic dilemmas faced by the Chinese. Rather, they re-
spond above all to the political logic of the ruling class, irrespective of the broad
damage to the Chinese people as a whole. Beijing’s new high-rise buildings and wide
avenues have been built at an enormous cultural and social cost, and, in this sense,
represent a superficially impressive but deeply flawed achievement. They are an ur-
ban equivalent of the Three Gorges Dam, which also incurred enormous cultural and
social damage and which was ultimately unnecessary.
An astronaut who recently returned from space commented that the Great Wall is not
visible after all, but the Three Gorges Dam is. Chinese culture is increasingly repre-
sented not by its rapidly disappearing heritage, but by the artifacts constructed by the
current political regime to prove itself in the eyes of others.

2 Conversation with Carlo Ratti, 7 ottobre 2003.
4 Wu Liangyong, *Rehabilitating the Old City of Beijing: a project in the Ju’er Hutong neighborhood*, UBC