



BEIJING Looks Back

Old and new compete for the city's soul as dust settles from Olympic construction.

by **ETI BONN-MULLER**

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AS THE SUN rises on a bitter November morning in Beijing, it momentarily casts a rosy glow on Tiananmen Square, the bleak plaza in the heart of the Chinese capital. Tourists are up early, snapping photos of each other in front of a two-story sign that displays a digital countdown to the August 8 opening of this summer's Olympics. A stony-faced guard wearing a thick green overcoat with gold and red trim stares straight ahead, his breath rising in the cold air. It is a new day in China—in more ways than one.

On the eve of the upcoming Games, I have come to see how this continuously evolving capital is balancing its rapid pace of real-estate development with historic preservation, a dilemma many modernizing cities face. For more than five decades, development has taken overwhelming precedence in China, a phenomenon that started in the 1950s when Mao



Extensive work is underway to stabilize the exteriors of the Forbidden City, the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) imperial palace in Beijing. The project is expected to be completed in 2020 to coincide with the 600th anniversary of its construction.

Zedong began demolishing countless ancient sites in Beijing and throughout the country to make way for much-needed transportation infrastructure. For instance, Xizhimen, one of about a dozen colossal Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) stone gates that once protected the old city, was torn down in 1969 to make way for a new subway station. “It was such a shame because that gate and its walls were in the best condition,” says Li Zhiyan, a specialist in Chinese porcelain and ancient kiln sites, who was a researcher at the Forbidden City Palace Museum at the time. “Today when Beijing residents pass the site, they always stop, look, sigh, and wonder *why* they had to tear down that gate.”

Another blow to the city’s architectural past came with a building boom that began in the mid-1990s and accelerated with the 2001 announcement that Beijing would host the 2008 Summer Olympics. Profoundly affected by the new construction were the *hutongs*—“alleyways” flanked by courtyard houses—that are Beijing’s oldest residential neighborhoods, a vital part of city planning since the founding of

the capital during the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368). In 1949, some 3,000 hutongs stood in Beijing; today, only about 1,100 survive, the rest destroyed to make way for high-rise apartments on the city’s most prime real estate. “It’s really hard for Beijing residents to endure the recent changes,” says Bo Songnian, professor of Chinese history and folk art at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. “Many old streets have completely lost their original look.” Today, the pace of construction in the center of the city has slowed somewhat, perhaps because so much of it has already been built up.

The lull is good news for the Beijing Cultural Heritage Protection Center (CHP), a grass-roots organization whose current principal interest is preserving the hutongs before they disappear. In 2002, the government declared 25 old areas in the center of the capital “protected,” meaning that no new high-rise apartments could be built there. Each area contains between 20 and 30 hutongs. Yu Meng, project manager of the CHP, calls the action “a milestone.” The number of protected areas—one of which I will visit—has since risen to 33.



Paint peels from a 10-foot wooden door near the north entrance to the Forbidden City, a common problem at the imperial complex where exterior surfaces are exposed to direct sunlight and city pollution.

IN TAKING STOCK OF its cultural heritage and the future of its storied past, China for the first time is reaching out to the world, inviting foreign scholars to implement strategies for conserving its most famous historic landmarks. In the past, China has been criticized for over-restoring sites such as the Forbidden City (the iconic Ming Dynasty imperial palace built between 1406 and 1420) with thick coats of glossy red paint that make it look like it was built yesterday. Today, there is an openness to suggestions from abroad. “The Chinese want to be part of the world community now,” says Henry Tzu Ng, executive vice president of the World Monuments Fund (WMF) in New York.

Since 2004, the WMF has been working in close partnership with the Forbidden City Palace Museum to restore the late-eighteenth-century interiors of the Qianlong Garden, an imperial retirement complex in the northeast district of the Forbidden City. The sumptuous rooms feature painted murals executed in trompe l’oeil, a European technique known for its realistic details. Facing complicated conservation challenges—such as how to restore Western-style painted murals, something with which Chinese conservators were completely unfamiliar—the Palace Museum turned to the WMF for help. “The project helped engage the Chinese community with the international community in the conserva-

tion of these types of imperial interiors,” explains Ng. The Qianlong Garden project is expected to be completed by 2016, and will eventually dovetail into the more extensive renovation work that is already underway on other parts of the Forbidden City—an ambitious attempt to stabilize the building exteriors, including painted surfaces and tiled roofs, which the Palace Museum intends to complete by 2020 to coincide with the Forbidden City’s 600th anniversary.

Another foreign scholar who has been inspiring a change in China’s approach to the preservation of ancient sites is Neville Agnew of the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) in Los Angeles. He has been instrumental in the GCI’s efforts to work in collaborative agreement with China’s State Administration of Cultural Heritage to create a set of national guidelines called the *Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China*, which outline a philosophy and methodology for the preservation and management of archaeological and architectural sites. The *Principles* provide practical guidance for decision-makers in how they approach difficult issues in today’s rapidly developing China. He also leads conservation efforts at two World Heritage Sites. One, the Mogao Grottoes, located on the Silk Road in northwestern China, is made up of 492 caves decorated with Buddhist wall paintings and sculptures that date from the fourth to the fourteenth century. Here, the GCI is developing a model methodology with the Dunhuang Academy (the organization responsible for Mogao) for conserving the wall paintings to international standards. The other site, the Chengde Summer Resort, 115 miles north of Beijing, was the mountain retreat of Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) emperors. At this one, the GCI is partnering with the Chengde Cultural Heritage Bureau to determine the best methods for the conservation, restoration, visitor management, and the future use of the site. “Over the years I’ve met people in China whom I respect and admire for their dedication and determination,” says Agnew. “And the

This Palace Museum calligrapher works in the style of Emperor Qianlong, who retired in 1795 after a 60-year reign. He re-creates signs that once hung in the northwest district of the Forbidden City, which is being rebuilt. The original buildings were destroyed in a 1923 fire set by a naughty eunuch covering evidence of jewelry theft from then-ruler Pu Yi, the last emperor of China.





more I learn about the country's fascinating history, the more its cultural heritage becomes compelling to me. To work with our Chinese colleagues is a great privilege."

FOREIGN INSTITUTIONS SUCH AS the WMF and the Getty aren't the only ones getting involved with preserving China's past. Beijing residents are also increasingly aware of the importance of their cultural heritage. Mr. and Mrs. Luo, for example, live in a *siheyuan*, or courtyard house, which lies along a typical hutong that dates to the Qing Dynasty. I have come to see what life in their neighborhood, which was recently designated a government-protected area, is really like.

I expect to walk down a quaint little street with houses featuring the exquisite details for which Chinese architecture is so revered, including geometric wooden latticework and cascading gray tiled roofs that end in gentle upward curves. Maybe even a dangling red paper lantern or two. But in this hutong, I first encounter a young woman in a groggy morning haze wearing flannel pajamas and flip-flops, who almost bumps into me on her way to the latrine. In most hutongs, there is no running water—the sewage systems in some are rumored to date to the Ming Dynasty—so residents share modest common bathrooms, which they must walk down the alleyway to use. Many hutong residents are elderly, but the neighborhoods' central locations are becoming attractive to young people who want to live closer to Beijing's trendy bars and nightclubs.

Hutongs are famous for being narrow. Although some alleyways have been widened and paved to accommodate cars, this one has retained its original flavor. It is about five feet wide, just enough space for a single cyclist to swerve safely around a pedestrian. The seamlessly connected brick facades of single-story houses line the sides (the 20-inch-thick walls behind the bricks are made of mud and small rocks), and one hutong blends unnoticeably into the next.

These terracotta tiles, stored in the Forbidden City, will be used to restore the roofs of the imperial palace. They will be placed underneath more familiar yellow-glazed ones. The palace's roofs have always been hard to maintain because plants root in the mud that anchors the tiles. Sending eunuchs out to remove the weeds was an important annual event for the emperor.

Every 20 paces or so, there is an entryway to a *siheyuan*, which is usually marked by a closed, brightly painted wooden door with a decorative metal knob or a knocker in the shape of an animal's head, set nearly flush with the facade. Occasionally, a resident leaves a door open, revealing a scene inside that looks like a painting framed by the door jamb: a small interior courtyard with a laundry line and every inch of outdoor space packed with bicycles, plastic toys, brooms, gardening tools, and sometimes even leafy green vegetables stacked in chicken-wire cages, left outside to stay cool during winter. Beyond each courtyard, a second door leads to the living area. Experts note that this design is a beautiful way of arranging space. "There's a real flow between indoors and outdoors," says Nancy Berliner, curator of Chinese art at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, who lived in a courtyard house while she was a graduate student in Beijing in the 1980s. "When you're outside in the courtyard, the rooms are all around you. You don't have a sense of any high buildings in the area."

The Luos welcome me with smiles and handshakes, graciously offering up the best seat at a tiny table in their dining-living-entertaining area. They stand politely. The 70-square-foot room is one of six that make up their entire living space (they share the other half of their home with relatives, which is common). It also accommodates a small TV neatly covered with a square tablecloth, and a slim display case housing colorful porcelain. Since there is generally no central heating in *siheyuan*, until recently residents have had to burn honeycomb-shaped coal briquettes in cylindrical metal con-



traptions, one of which warms this cozy room. But in an effort to reduce air pollution, the government is now encouraging residents to use electric space heaters that attach to the walls. Mrs. Luo pours me a clear glass of piping-hot jasmine tea and the loose green leaves sink to the bottom as the water cools.

Though their surroundings are humble, the people who live here are proud, and hutongs' history and traditions endear them to their residents. What makes the hutong lifestyle so special for the Luos is the connection it provides to their family's past. Luo's grandfather bought this siheyuan in 1940; Luo was later born in the house, and has since raised his own son there. "I have that traditional Chinese way of thinking," he says, "one cannot leave his birthplace." These neighborhoods are also important sources of information to scholars who want to understand how people have lived in Beijing for hundreds of years.

There are many traditions associated with old hutong life, such as neighbors sharing persimmons and Chinese dates that grow in their courtyards. Hutong residents are also known to "walk" their birds in bamboo cages, hanging them from tree branches while they play mah-jongg or visit with friends. Some who live here even say that bicycles are so popular in Beijing today because they are the best way of getting around the narrow alleyways.

While the majority of siheyuan are modest, there are exceptions. High-level government officials and wealthy individuals live in spacious, impeccably maintained single-family courtyard houses that surround the Forbidden City. These hutongs are protected to keep the palace from being overwhelmed by

Archaeology professor Li Boqian gazes at a display of pots and other artifacts in Beijing University's archaeology museum, which houses a selection of finds from university-led digs throughout China. He headed excavations at one of them, a Bronze Age site in Shanxi Province, where these objects were unearthed from tombs of high-ranking individuals. His team is now studying other finds from the site.

Hutongs, or narrow alleyways flanked by courtyard houses, have been a vital part of city planning in Beijing since the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368). A building boom that began in the mid-1990s has replaced nearly 2,000 of these traditional, old-style neighborhoods with high-rise apartments, which many feel is a great blow to the city's architectural and cultural history.

tall buildings, and they are some of Beijing's most historically important neighborhoods, as court officials and relatives of the emperor once lived there. Again, they have become chic, expensive places for people to live. Today, a typical courtyard house in this area runs in the millions of dollars.

Since October 2007, the Beijing Cultural Heritage Protection Center (CHP) has been documenting life in the city's hutongs by photographing the architecture and recording the memories of residents such as the Luos—because while 600 hutongs currently fall within protected areas, the remaining 500 are in jeopardy. It is surprisingly easy to force residents from their homes, since even though they may own the actual house, the government owns all the land. Residents simply receive written notification that they have to move,



The Luo family stands in the courtyard that leads to the front door of their house, along a Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) hutong.

The yard used to be more spacious, but has undergone renovations after damaging rainy seasons. The government has started providing financial assistance for such repairs.

as well as the price that they will be compensated, which can depend on whom they know. And even though a siheyuan in a “protected” hutong can still be torn down with prior permission from the government, which many residents do for practical reasons such as stabilizing their homes after a bad rainy season, at least the policy prevents modern high-rise apartments from taking their place.

The 120 volunteers involved in CHP’s project, known as Friends of Old Beijing, believe that hutong neighborhoods are worth preserving not only because of their connection to each family’s history, but also to the city’s. “These neighborhoods carry a very important part of history that can not be found in archives or in books,” says Matthew Hu Xinyu, managing director of the CHP. “Once you go into a community and talk to the people, you can understand the history not only of a building, but of a group of people. And that’s a very important part of our culture.”

CHP plans to submit a report to the Beijing municipal government this June, detailing the stories and photographs they have collected. The submission will coincide with China’s third annual National Cultural Heritage Day. They hope to continue raising both the government’s and the public’s awareness of the importance of hutongs to the city’s past, and possibly save others from being torn down. With only four full-time employees, CHP has its work cut out for it, but at least the group has the opportunity to provide future generations with a tangible record of the city’s architectural and cultural history.

WHY ARE MORE AND more Beijingers concerned with preserving their cultural heritage? One reason may be that the country is in a better economic position today than it was 50 or even 15 years ago—and people finally have the luxury to look back. “We are happy to see a modern Beijing,” says Li Zhiyan. “But now that people here are having better material lives, and there is a sense of more stability, they are beginning to feel nostalgia for the past.” Bo Songnian agrees. “Beijingers have great feelings and attachments to ancient cultural sites,” he says. “They feel a great sorrow when they see an old site being destroyed.”

Education may play a significant role, too. “Everyone now thinks it’s very important to protect our heritage,” says Li Yin, a conservator at the Palace Museum. He has already seen changes at the Forbidden City. “In the past, people liked to sign their names on a wall when they visited; but now, the general public is very annoyed when they see anyone doing it,” he says. “And from the government’s point of view, the concern is not just about protection, but how to promote historical education, cultivate love for our country, and work on the business side of it to develop tourism.”



This new spirit seems to have inspired China to make notable progress with its salvage excavations, of which there are about 2,000 every year throughout the country—the number reflecting the intensity of new construction projects in China. “Planned excavations are very rare,” explains Li Boqian, a preeminent archaeologist and professor at Beijing University, which has been the main institution for training Chinese archaeologists for some 60 years. “Generally speaking, we do not like to plan to excavate. We try to protect sites by not touching them.” In the past, numerous deadline-conscious builders ploughed straight through archaeological finds to speed their work. But today, there are strict regulations in place stating that construction be halted immediately if artifacts are found at a site, and there are stiff fines and penalties for looting.

It is also significant that Chinese universities are starting to take a broader approach to subjects such as archaeology. For example, the Chinese have traditionally mainly been exposed to Chinese archaeology. Willow Hai Chang, director of the China Institute Gallery in New York, studied the subject at Nanjing University in the late 1970s. As a student she learned how archaeology had developed abroad as a field, but she was not introduced in an in-depth way to other countries’ archaeological sites or artifacts. “At the time, it seemed too much for us to study the *Chinese* part!” she recalls with a laugh. In 2007, Beijing University’s first “Foreign Archaeology” branch was established to cover sites in Japan, and the university today is inviting archaeology professors from all over the world to talk to students about excavations in places such as Rome and Egypt—curricula for which is currently in development. “And today, we have more exchanges with students overseas, so our students are exposed to Western theories,” says Li Boqian. “We used to study archaeology behind a closed door.”

City archaeologists have been heavily involved with the Olympic construction since 2004. The Beijing Cultural



Old and new collide throughout Beijing: The National Grand Theater (above left), the Great Hall of the People (above right), and a hutong neighborhood (center) lie to the west of Tiananmen Square, a stone's throw from the Forbidden City.

Relics Bureau surveyed more than a dozen locations over 16 million square feet where the Olympic stadia stand today. Over the course of nearly four years, archaeologists excavated some 700 tombs dating from the Han to the Qing Dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 1911) at the sites that were to become the National “Bird’s Nest” Stadium, the Olympic shooting range, and stadia for swimming, basketball, baseball, and other events.

The area lies so far outside the center of the city that until the metropolis’s great expansion over the past decade or so, it was considered countryside. Previously, it was used as a cemetery for high-ranking members of society, such as eunuchs who served the emperor. But archaeologists found no imperial graves, as the emperors’ Ming Dynasty tombs are located an hour even further north.

The burials fall into four main categories: bodies were placed either in wooden coffins, arched-brick structures, directly in the dirt, or in large ceramic jars (most, however, were in wooden coffins, and many burials held up to five coffins in a single tomb). The finds include artifacts that were typical grave goods for their respective periods—objects made of gold, porcelain, and bronze, as well as pottery and 6,585 coins. There were some especially pretty pieces among the discoveries, such as a Qing Dynasty jade fish and a Liao Dynasty (907–1125) lotus-petal-shaped bowl. After the artifacts are studied, they will go on display at Beijing’s Capital Museum, a monumental ultramodern building that houses art and artifacts touting the city’s rich history.

THE SITE OF THIS summer’s Olympics also marks the northern tip of the axis that has expanded to bisect the ever-sprawling city of Beijing for nearly 700 years. A half-dozen of the capital’s best-known landmarks, including Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City, line up perfectly to the south of the stadia. This historic divide is the capital’s “Dragon Vein,” its north-south orientation influenced by *feng shui*, the Chinese practice of aligning structures to achieve a harmonious flow of *qi*, or energy, which dragons were once believed to exhale. Theoretically, the buildings that straddle this line are ensured success and prosperity. Today, the vein also throbs at points with up to eight lanes of cars and trucks that exhale a thick, gray exhaust, instead of *qi*.

The nearly complete stadia form a tableau of twisted, shimmering steel beams, dazzling reflective metal surfaces, and concrete. They are the latest additions to a brand-new cityscape, an awkward architectural collage of buildings overlapping in so many different styles that they serve as painful reminders of the nation’s decades-long quest for development without a cohesive plan for reconciling the capital’s old and new buildings. This is “New Beijing,” the modern city poised to host the 2008 Summer Olympics.

In this metropolis, it is clear that China’s past and future are inseparable. “Naturally, it’s essential to move forward,” says Li Boqian. “But which way do we *choose* to proceed? That’s where history comes in. We must draw lessons and experience from it. Only then can we find a better way to look to the future.” Drinking tea and talking to the Luos in their tiny “Old Beijing” *siheyuan* made me feel like a giant in a dollhouse—there wasn’t even enough space for all of us to sit. But confronted with the oversized, futuristic megastructures of “New Beijing,” I never felt so small. ■

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