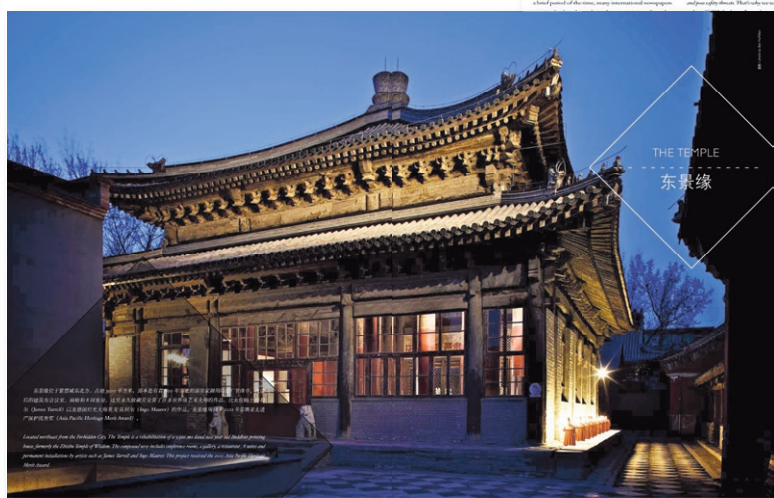


Reports

HUTONG | Adaptation, Special issue of Abitare, on the Beijing Hutong

Bert de Muynck & Mónica Carriço (MovingCities)



GULOU, HISTORY WILL NOT REPEAT ITSELF

Especially prior to the start of the 1980 Beijing Olympic Games, the phenomenon of the disappearance and demolition of the hutong gained great momentum. The threat posed by demolition, once considered an exception...

Following analysis of the present architectural condition of the hutong in and around Gulou, 'The connection between the past and the future' is the subject of the article. The article discusses the role of the hutong in the city's development and the impact of modernization on its traditional structure.

SINCE THE ESTABLISHMENT of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Beijing has undergone several infrastructural and architectural makeovers that have altered the morphology of the city's historical core. During the past two decades this process accelerated and the Old City, the terrain within the former city walls (turned second ring road) became a focal point for architects, conservation experts, local residents and governmental institutions to think about – but also to refute – the importance and need for preservation of its accumulated layers of history, *in casu* the hutong, the typical narrow alleyways that provide China's capital with its characteristic social life and construction culture.

Old city, new Beijing

Hutong life at the beginning of the 21st century has many faces, perspectives and shapes. Beijing's inner city has become an arena for real-estate investment, courtyard upgrading and localized gentrification with building regulations putting literally and figuratively a cap on the height of construction. The decision, in 2001, that Beijing would host the 2008 Olympic Games set new pressures on the inner city's traditional residential areas, the hutong, while also instigating queries on how to develop and preserve this urban tissue. Since then, the tension between the demands to consolidate an image of the 'Old City' and the yearning for a 'new Beijing' provoked discussions about the value and future of Beijing's hutong traditional lifestyle and architectural qualities.

The hutong's way of life is today understood as an endangered aspect of Beijing and of Chinese cultures that needs to be conserved and/or adapted to contemporary needs. Decades of adaptations and inhabitations of the many courtyard structures not only obscured the original architectural structures, but also provoked questions about property ownership and rights, implementation of governmental policies, reckless destruction by real-estate developers, 'accidental' demolition, gentrification and the need to secure people's livelihoods in the centre of China's capital.

During the past decade, tourism injected itself prominently as a program into this territory – it has brought new life, business and people to the hutong. It created new and localized scales of economies and activities. Hutong tourism celebrates and capitalizes on the intertwining of construction and destruction. Its architectural representation leads to a double-identity syndrome that balances heritage protection and consumption. Paradoxically, tourism does not totally oppose the discourse on demolition, but accelerates the hutong's demise through a pastiche-like architectural redevelopment agenda. Replacing small-scale residential programs with strip-like commercial activities, tourism has thus triggered an economic benefit while having a gentrifying effect on some neighbourhoods. Today, the hutong's vibrant and messy theatre of daily life co-exists with these crowded and sterile historical copycats. Areas like Nanlugouxiang, the Drum & Bell Tower and Qianmen Area (South of Tiananmen) have all exploded in less than a few years and have been flooded by masses of tourists seemingly unaware that most of these places represent a reconstructed architectural authenticity. At the same time the hutong is still a battleground for property rights disputes (resulting from the *danwei*-system, forced eviction or influx of migrant population in search of cheap and temporary housing), and most of its streets are in need of renovation of its basic public amenities.

Today, Old Beijing still breathes hutong and history, while also choking and running out of air. From within, the hutong has given birth to a living culture, adapted to both the reality of and rumours about ongoing and sudden change. It is mutating to the demands of modern China, both negatively and positively, and some buildings are rusted and ramshackle, others grand and ghostly. Even though facing rapid demolition, many areas have also been 'protected' from the 1990s onwards and strangely influence the rapid disappearance of those hutongs not included in these protection plans.

Abitare/MovingCities

Coinciding with the 2013 Beijing Design Week, Abitare China Magazine asked us (MovingCities) to guest-edit a special issue on the hutong. Rather than lamenting loss, or trying to turn back the tide, to a traditional understanding of heritage preservation, we tried in 100 pages (featuring more than 20 contributors) to look at the future by understanding the present. And rather than dealing with professional architects' opinions on what needs to be done, we investigated and talked with those directly affected by, or those influencing, the development of the hutong: local residents, business people, artists, lawyers and government officials who have chosen to live and work in and with the hutong.

A living organism absorbing the demands and influences of its surrounding urban environment, the hutong sustains a uniquely evolving and localized living culture; a place where territorial changes abound, where new professionals move in, yet local residents remain; where traditions are continued and revived, reinvented and reinterpreted. It raises the questions of what, how and why to preserve, demolish and renovate. As such, a new understanding emerges; despite all the destruction, the hutong continues to respond to the demands of twenty-first century Beijing, and, most importantly, new life is ceaselessly generated in these territories.

The hutong presents problems that eschew straightforward solutions, as all of its predicaments are interconnected: housing conditions and property issues, cultural and heritage preservation, commercialization and tourism, governmental initiatives and individualistic approaches, accessibility and environmental degradation, as well as the upgrading of basic public amenities.

Under the keyword HUTONG, MovingCities presents a volatile architectural, urban and cultural condition, concerning the transformation of a local Beijing spatial culture. Let us call this HUTONG/adaptation; so to encompass the multitude of strategies, visions and reflections flourishing in this urban tissue. Beyond the demand or desire for preservation, ideas and visions of renovation, revitalization, occupation, relocation, legislation, urbanization and gentrification are explored. The content of the magazine is organized in three complementary sections, identifying locations and actors influencing the perception and planning of these urban areas. Firstly, by looking back – REWIND – to reflect and remember; secondly, investigating and touching upon the present – NOW – so as to feel a possible future, and finally – DASHILAR – a historically important area just South of Tiananmen Square that throughout the past year has become a focal point for a new mode of urban development. Rather than large scale destruction and construction, DASHILAR embraces 'nodal development' – infusing small scale creative business within a living community.

Adaptation is a common thread in the discussion on the future of Beijing's hutong, in the many interviews conducted with professionals (architects, lawyers, urban planners, decision makers, journalists, writers and creatives), entrepreneurs, and residents, living and working in and with the hutong. They speak of the urgency to debate the role and relevance of architectural and urban preservation in Beijing. In this special issue of ABITARE CHINA, MovingCities argues that the hutong does not demand utopian visions, but rather common sense and solutions for basic and tangible problems.

MovingCities is a Shanghai-based think-tank investigating the role of architecture and urbanism in shaping the contemporary city. Established in 2007 by Bert de Muynck [BE] and Mónica Carriço [PT], MovingCities' varied work ranges from publications, creative collaborations, cultural consultancy and setting up new international architectural and urban relationships. Bert de Muynck is an architect and writer, and assistant-professor at the University of Hong Kong, Shanghai Study Centre. Mónica Carriço is an architect-urbanist, researcher, and a member of the Portuguese Architects' Guild.

ABITARE seeks cutting edge design, architecture and art projects, all seen from a new perspective. Based on the 50-year-old classic magazine Abitare, specializing in culture and architecture, ABITARE China always follows a characteristic, literary writing style, and provides in depth cover of events and stories about architecture, design, culture and people in a lively and interesting way. (www.abitare.it/en)

For further inquiries, updates, background, interviews and lectures related to the special issue of ABITARE China (#34 Hutong/Adaptation), visit www.movingcities.org/projects/abitare-china-34-hutong-adaptation or contact MovingCities at info@movingcities.org

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