

Beijing's Hutongs

- Caught between history and rapid urban growth



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1 Introduction

The problem of rapid urban growth all over the globe is omnipresent. The steadily increasing number of people who emigrate from the countryside to the city results in overcrowded city centers and an uncontrollable growth of the urban areas.

Therefore the problems most of these cities are facing is not only the lack of space and the ability to build a large amount of decent housing in a short time but also a plan to deal with the existing urban fabric. (Jenkins, Smith, & Wang, 2007)

Talking about rapid urbanization China is one of the most stated examples in the discussion. In 1978 the market reform was implemented and China opened its markets to the western world, it experienced a massive urban growth. Between 1978 and 2009 it had an average growth rate of 0.93 percent a year. By the end of 2009 nearly one fifth of the worlds city population lived in Chinese cities. Moreover it was estimated that by 2020 56 percent of the Chinese population would live in cities. (Zhao, 2001)

In 2015 I was studying in Beijing for half a year. During my time there and various travels throughout the country I realized the impact the rapid urbanization had on the built historical heritage of a city. It sometimes led to obscure situation like the one I experienced in one of my travels to Datong, a city west of Beijing, where the whole historical core was demolished to generate more housing. Just a few years later the new housing developments were demolished to build a replica of the historical buildings including the city wall.

In Beijing the discourse about preserving historical structures was mainly focusing on the Hutongs. When I was part of a Workshop concerning the

preservation of the historical neighborhoods and the problematic of Hutongs being erased from Beijing's cityscape I grew a deeper interest in the topic. In my opinion an architect should appreciate the consisting urban fabric and try to understand it in order to work with it. By ruthlessly demolishing historical heritage we also erase part of a city's story that can never be retrieved.

In this paper I would therefore like to evaluate on the area of conflict between rapid urban growth and the city's existing urban fabric. I will do so in focusing on Beijing and its Hutongs.



Image 1: Hutongs in the DongChen neighborhood Beijing

2 Literature Review

2.1 Urban growth in China

Since 1960 the uncontrolled urban sprawl is a major problem throughout China. This led to the phenomena that so called mega-cities (with a population above 10 million inhabitants) were growing out their boundaries and converted into mega-regions. They sometimes stretch over hundreds of kilometers and have more than 100 million inhabitants. (Zhao, 2001)

This phenomenon started to develop with the first five-year plan that was realized in 1953 by the Chinese government. The cities on the eastern coast should not be the main industrial focus anymore. Therefore new investments have been made towards the inland cities. In 1958 however the emphasis was put on

the development of the countryside and decentralization. The Cultural Revolution (1966-76) relocated a lot of industries away from the big cities to remote areas. At that time about 20 Million people were relocated from the cities to rural areas. By doing so the urban population growth decreased from 7.8 per cent a year to 2 per cent. Nevertheless over the course of the last 25 years the area of Beijing for example has been growing more than twice its size. (Jenkins, Smith, & Wang, 2007)

2.2 Urban Planning in Beijing

The first modern urban redevelopment Beijing underwent was in 1911 after the Republic of China was founded. The Forbidden City and the imperial gardens were opened to the public, the city walls were torn down in order to build new roads and a new business quarter was opened in the old city. In 1938 the first ring road was planned and built by the Japanese planning bureau. The road should connect new suburbs that were built to separate the Japanese inhabitants from the Chinese.

In 1949 Beijing was established as the capital of the People's Republic of China. Inspired by Stalin's principles of city planning, which stated that: "the capital cities of all socialist countries must be large, nationally important industrial centers", the government properties were placed in the center of the city. This plan was the first threat to the historical district including the Hutong areas. The demolition of the historical housing areas peaked in 1958 when two main axes were added to the master plan. In order to build the cultural axis leading from the Drum and Bell tower through the Forbidden City to the Tian'anmen Square. In addition a second axis was defined which breaks through east to west. As a result 540'000 m² of old houses were demolished.

The aim to stop the declination of traditional houses was addressed in 1990 by the Dilapidated Housing Redevelopment Project (ODHRP). (Yi, 2013) However this policy stands in conflict to the Weigai building code, which was implemented in the same year. It foresees to make space for new contemporary buildings and wider streets, which should push the urban growth. Therefore a large amount of the historical Hutong areas had to be demolished. (Krajewska, 2009) In addition the interest of big investors in the city center grew over the years and resulted in high-density office buildings that are replacing the historic settlements. (Zhao, 2001)

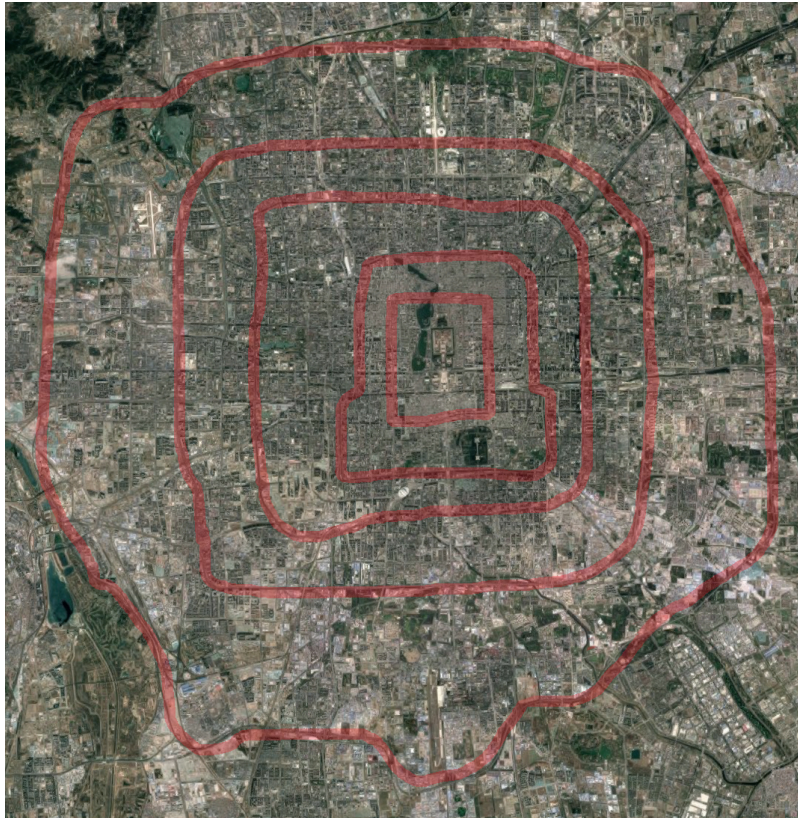


Image 2: Map of Beijing with its ring roads

2.3 The History of the Hutongs

The Hutongs are Beijing's most historical form of housing. They are located in the first ring area in different neighborhoods such as Shichahai, Qianmen and Dashilar. Developed in the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368 CE) the courtyard houses were planned as an orthogonal street grid in between the city gates. The grid is shaped by a strict three level hierarchy, which consists of the dominant east-west streets varying in width from 3 to 5 meters, the north-south streets, which are 18 m wide and the east-west streets with a width of 40 meters. (John Zacharias et. al., 2015) Through the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 CE) these urban patterns remained untouched. However since the communist era (from 1949) about three quarters of the buildings have been demolished (John Zacharias et. al., 2015). The Xin Bao newspaper estimated the annual demise speed of the Hutongs at 600 lanes. With the raising public and professional concern the government has since placed certain courtyard dwellings under protection. However the consequences of this has not been officially communicated. In addition it does not protect whole neighborhoods but only certain buildings or lanes of buildings. (Andre Alexander et. al, 2004)

The courtyard houses consist of a collection of several buildings that are facing the courtyard. This layout also protects the inhabitants from the sand storms in spring and the harsh winds in winter that are characteristic for the northern regions. Before the Cultural Revolution each Siheyuan belonged to one family. However, nowadays multiple families are sharing one courtyard. This results in a major lack of space. Therefore people are building mostly illegal extension to their houses. Moreover the houses only offer public toilets and insufficient sanitation as well as a proper heating system.

In 1992 Liangyong Wu designed multi-family courtyard houses at Ju'er Hutong. His aim was to reinterpret the traditional one story courtyard house in a more modern and dense way. The building blocks were 2-3 floors high and also facilitated green areas. Due to the limited height and the building shape it was still possible to create an intact community within the residences. (Krajewska, 2009)

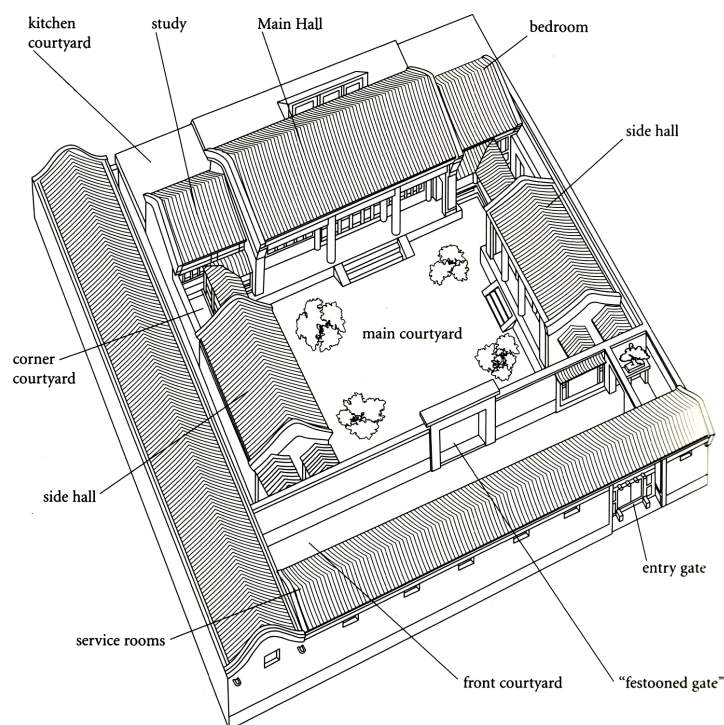


Image 3: Layout of a traditional Hutong

3 Argument, Critique and Discussion

For many years the Hutongs have been an important part of Beijing's cityscape. However the importance of preserving them is not only from an architectural point of view but also from a social one. As Li Dongshen writes in his essay about growing up in the Guozixiang Hutong in Beijing:

“Although courtyards were in a mass, neighbors were still in good relations and cared each other. There were date trees and persimmon trees in the courtyard, and boys climbed the trees to get many fruits. I was also one of them in my happy childhood.”

Even though the author stresses out the harsh living conditions in the beginning of the essay, reflecting on sharing 14 m² with five other family members and having to use the public bathroom where people would queue in order to use the facilities, he remembers his childhood as a happy one. It seems like emotional values such as social interactions and the community feeling was of more importance to him than the built living conditions. (He Jianqing et. al., 2016) When we were conducting the interviews in Manila for our housing project most of the inhabitants pointed out that the sense of community made them feel safe and secure in their houses and the neighborhood.¹ Therefore it is of great importance to build a functional community in order to create a safe environment.

In 2004 Tsinghua University Beijing introduced a series of studies in cooperation with the Tibet Heritage Fund on the Hutongs. It also shows that the residence have formed a deep-rooted community. Given that 60% of the interviewed people were living in their homes for more than 30 years. In addition their relatives are mostly living nearby. Because of the Cultural Revolution and the social changes during that time it is rare to still find such a communal spirit in China. Hutong residences often take great pride in their neighborhood and even speak their own Chinese dialect. Since the private space is relatively small one can often see people sitting on small stools in the alleyways, playing cards or talking to their neighbors. Therefore the streets are really important to the public realm.

However the study also showed that most of the Hutongs were not properly maintained and showed severe damages such as roof leaks or damage to

¹ During a three-week study trip to the Philippines with the Human Shelter course different housing projects were visited. In addition the students had the chance to interviewed inhabitants about their living conditions.

the timber structure. (Andre Alexander et. al, 2004) This is a serious threat to the built structure. Since the local government lost track of all the buildings including the extensions that are built into the dense network of courtyards and narrow alleyways it is hard to maintain the structure in good shape. However this problem could be solved by teaching communities how to maintain their own houses and carry out simple handy work. Not only would the preservation of the architecture be improved by teaching people how to maintain it, it would also increase the living comfort of the inhabitants.

A further issue is the lack of proper sanitation. Since the living standards in China have significantly changed and improved over the last 70 years most people are used to having their own bathroom and a direct water supply in their apartment. The system of shared public sanitation facilities and water taps is outdated. As a result of that people prefer to live in a modern apartment instead of moving in to a Hutong. This leaves the housing area mainly to poor and elderly people that have been living there for a long time and puts the Hutongs in danger of becoming a slum area.

Even though the problems mentioned above could be solved with taking certain measurements a lot of residences are reserved about investing in their housing. This is due to the Weigai System, which favors area redevelopment over land ownership. This means that the houses could be demolished anytime if the local government decides so. Moreover are the city plans not transparent and the residents can be notified about their relocation as little as 10 days before.

Despite the many problems the Hutongs face it also offers a lot of opportunities. Such as its central location and the proximity to public facilities for example hospitals and schools. Furthermore a range of small restaurants, shops and markets can be found in the Hutong lanes. Therefore most of the daily necessities can be found within walking distance. In addition the limited car access also makes it convenient to walk or bike around. (Andre Alexander et. al, 2004)

The Hutongs are also attractive on an economical level. A lot of tourists from all over the world take great interest in visiting the historic areas that are located closely as well as gasping the idyllic atmosphere within the ancient neighborhoods. This also reflects in the development of the Yandai street. Multiple bars and restaurants have been opening up which turned the area into a popular nightlife spot. As a result the government has put in some efforts to

maintain the facades of houses that are located next to temples or other points of interests. Although this does not apply for the structures located on the inside it shows that the government is aware of the importance of the buildings in order to have tourists coming in.

4 Urban Shelter Design

In order to secure the conservation of the Hutongs different actors need to be included. However the most important actor is the local government. The trust between the citizen and the government has been damaged and therefore needs to be gained back. By being transparent about the future of the Hutongs and guaranteeing security of tenure people would be more willing to make long-term investments to improve their houses. Moreover the study of Tsinghua University and the THF showed that people would like to be actively involved in the upgrading process and would be willing to cooperate with the government in that matter. (Andre Alexander et. al, 2004) This would create more personal ownership and therefore could secure the maintenance of whole neighborhoods. By additionally hosting workshops for the citizen to teach them about preserving ancient structures and proper building techniques professional knowledge can be passed on, which also has a economical benefit for the state.

In the meantime seminars and workshops could be hosted to raise awareness and to get more people on board. When I was in Beijing the Design Week was hosted in the Hutongs. Different workshops and talks took place in different locations in the community. Moreover walking tours were hosted that were led by professionals who have somehow been involved in the area. It put the ancient neighborhoods back on the map but also gave people a deeper understanding about the importance of conserving such areas. By hosting such events more frequently and also in different quarters one could reach a bigger crowd and also raise more awareness.

Lastly it would also be favorable to generate more social diversity within the community. This could be achieved by upgrading certain dwellings to a modern standard. The central location of the courtyard houses already provides a good selling argument. Which would probably make people compromise on the size of the living space. However the sanitary infrastructure must be upgraded so that private bathrooms and indoor kitchens could be provided. In addition the coal ovens for heating must be replaced by a modern heating system. This could also

attract private investors, which would be willing to invest larger amounts of money in order to preserve not only the buildings but also the surroundings.

5 The Role of Architects

As architects it is important to grow a deep understanding and appreciation of historic fabric. Instead of fighting against it we should try to work with it. The educational institutes play an important role. They have the opportunity to educate future architects about the importance of existing structures and the role they play in the identity of a city.

In the case of the Hutongs the architect does not only figure as a design professional but also as a mediator between the community and the government. By interacting with the people and studying the social environment one can get a better understanding of the users. In addition one also gains the trust and respect of the community. This plays an important role since the trust in the government is severely damaged. Furthermore the design process should be inclusive. The architect brings in the professional knowledge that is needed in order to maintain the historical structures adequate and passes it on to the inhabitants. As mentioned before this approach does not only create more personal ownership within the community but also professional knowledge. Therefore a more sustainable and long-lasting solution can be guaranteed in maintaining the Hutongs.

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Image Index

Image 1: <http://guidewithme.com/apk/China/content/data/3192.html>

Image 2: Google Maps

Image 3: Knapp, R.G., (2004). *Chinese Houses: The Architectural Heritage of a Nation*. North Clarendon, Vermont : Tuttle.