

Urban Theatrics: A Beijing Anthology
Supplemental Essay on the Histories of the Hutong

Our thesis started with an encounter in Beijing: ` this is a traditional Chinese door knock on a dazayuan. When we took pictures of it, a resident came around, and an older gentleman asked what we were doing. We said we were captivated by the history of the city, as the door knock was clearly weathered and suggestive of Ming or Qing dynasty motifs. He waved his hands and dismissed us, saying that This is not real, its nickel-plated plastic. ` The government installed it a few years back when they did the street renovation, ` along with these thin pieces of brick veneer, `“ and finally, he admits his annoyance of tourists ` by telling us that there is no use taking photos of these streets, because nothing you see here is really authentic anymore.”

`Beijing, the capital city, having a history of over 3000 years old, has drawn tourists everywhere to gawk at the monumentality of the imperial city. But since the rapid real estate and commercial development in the 1990s, `the inner city of Beijing has been readily demolished for commercial development and the municipal government has time and again violated designated preservation boundaries in favor of government expansion and commercial opportunities. `

Understanding this, a question we posed was: ` if the government prioritizes the exchange value of land over its use value, and heritage planning has not halted the rapid demolition of the old city, why have some hutongs been selectively preserved?

`We argue that this shift in government attitude can be traced to a single character change in the *Beijing City Planning Guidebook*. ` In the 2004 edition of the *Guidebook*, the inner city was described using the character “旧 (jiu),” meaning “dilapidated” or “worn down.” However, `in the 2021-35 edition, they have substituted “旧 (jiu)” with “老,” which simply means “old” in the sense of longevity. While both translate to “the old city,” this subtle shift is significant, as the latter suggests a place more worthwhile for the mainstream tourists, catering to the international gaze, elevating the city to a truly world class standard.

`So when the special preservation zone was first proposed, the municipal government thought it was a ludicrous idea, it broke the zoning height limit by nearly 500m and it reeked of modernist sensibilities. ` But when the real estate market finally tanked and the bulk of the recession hit, the municipal government looked for other ways of income. ` They redirected their attention to tourism, as the city, with all their efforts of superficiality, appears no longer dilapidated but historical, and they intend to capitalize on their preservation efforts. `So a group of young architects were invited to survey the streets and document the living conditions. Their findings revealed that the modern tourists are picky, cultured and have a short attention span. ` In order to attract the new generation, the young architects borrowed the blueprints from the Soviet constructivists and CIAM modernists, to enact a new mode of historical entertainment. The 1.7km street between the Drum Tower and the Lama temple was selected as a testing ground, to compose an image of total curation. `So, the Beijingers' improvised constructions were covered up selectively with brick veneers and plaster, revealing crevices here and openings there

reminiscent of days of simple living. `The street here becomes a layered, geological existence reinvented to become a series of fragmented strange encounters, where the body dialogues with the selected artefacts in a curated manner akin to rides in a theme park,` all instagrammable, all episodic. Still life, in this case, becomes the perfect metaphor for the Beijing streetscape: an inherently western scenographic practice infused with carefully curated placements of object-driven narrative, once assigned, objects can no longer escape the dogmatic framework that encapsulates them, becoming motifs of themselves, reduced down to an image. `

The government and planners watched as the diurnal and nocturnal drama unfold through the perspective of the tourists, the process as a voyeuristic journal, adjusting the curation gradually and accordingly. The architects participated because they were enamored by the dilapidated aura, enchanted by the mundane and the most vernacular, began a laborious documentation process, ultimately, the framing devices themselves were mapped as part of the project. The objects themselves began as a bystander, one to witness the destruction without participation, was forced to participate in the theatrics when the walls were erected, and when the objects became shells, they could have only confronted the viewers, those who assigned them roles in the play.

Most residents of the special preservation zone, due to curated layering and covering of their home entries, are forced to relocate. The architects also thought of this, having proposed a tower to house the displaced residents, one that shows an attitude of care towards the locals as the architects` resigns their design responsibilities and sensibilities to those who know Beijing the best ----- the residents themselves. `The municipal government couldn't be more happy with the proposal, it checked all the boxes of the guidebook except for the height limit, which didn't really matter because there have been precedents. So the babylonian tower with no qualities was greenlit for construction because this act would free up the surrounding neighborhoods for further development opportunities and signal to the world how much China cares for its citizens.

The residents of the old city, once an object of observance now overlooks the city. The tower becomes a social condenser, with most social activities occurring on the four ramps on the periphery of the tower, with shops opening up along the ascension of the tower.`

One of the residents along the street was unhappy with how the city planners had redefined cultural conservation and preservation, and decided to hire a small team to redesign his family home of over 70 years.

The courtyard house is perhaps a misleading term, describing its current state. Considering it is only a portion of the houses that surround the courtyard, nor there to be a sizable courtyard remaining within the property. The goal of the design was to mediate the contemporary adjustments made post cultural revolutions, thus the house being an outward facing type, to its original typology, which is an inward facing typology, a courtyard. How does one navigate this dichotomy? One houses primarily one family, one houses many; one reserves the court for social

activities, the other takes the social life to the street in the front; one is a traditional Chinese type, the other is a typology forced by necessity and limitations; The goal, to make the house perfect within the limited conditions.

The owner was very proud of two things: owning the shop through the window since 1994, and building the extensions upward allowing him, his wife and his son to each have a room and a level. The design seeks to empower that while addressing issues facing most Hutong residents: storage and natural light.

The project is divided into two parts, first half, we catalog and document experiences that actually happened; second half is a hyperbolic analysis of what could be happening. We chose a street in the inner city as our site of investigation, where tourists would pass through walking from one attraction to the next. Namely, the bell and drum tower of the city to the Lama Temple. This site is renegotiating the historical role of the political apparatus and religious apparatus to the same level of being tourist attractions. With this being the groundwork, the second stage of the project is intended to design with this pseudo reality in mind, investigating methods of memory preservation in a city that is experiencing paramnesia.

This project meditates on the current projection of what it means to preserve in the Chinese context (perhaps global as well) and what it means to design under the broader spectrum of cultural conservation. The project is thus a meditation on the role of preservation, what does it mean in protection of “authenticity” in a cultural context: does it mean the conservation of the building in its original state and image, or such understandings are limiting, perhaps exploring preservation assuming the roles of interpretation, translation and ultimately, transformation