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

Bert de Muynck & Mónica Carriço (MovingCities)

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. In the last 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 politics, commerce and tourism. Hutong residents, 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 case 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 area for real estate investment, courtyard yard 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 issue. 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 traditionale lifestyle and architectural qualities.

The hutong’s way of life is today understood as an endangered, volatile architectural and cultural complex 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 progressively 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. Paradigmatically, 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 given birth to a living culture, adapted to both the reality of 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 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 deserve 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 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 Tiantanmen 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.