



MAKING MINCED MEAT OF MEMORY

Bert de Muynck, Beijing, February 2007.



INTRODUCTION

The destruction of the past and the erasure of memory out of the city are part of a well-known, rather obvious and uncritically repeated, story of the price China is paying in order to launch its cities and people into the twenty-first century. The rapid, unprecedented and hyper development of the Chinese city has allegedly created cities-without-memory. More precisely I would argue that what the Chinese city displays is an urban setting composed out of unstable dimensions. These amount to an urban experience where multiple constructed temporalities are brought into strange relations with each other. This is a unique situation demanding to be studied better and measured through other than the fossilized Western urban parameters. A possible outcome of the attempts to analyze this would probably be an image, text, thesis, manifesto,... composed out of elements hinting at a positive, versatile and flexible metropolitan evolution.

The tremendous wave of construction which washed away history (to say nothing of the destruction wrought by Mao's Red Guards) launched this country into a time and space where different urban laws reign. Today's urban culture, to which I mostly refer to as an in-between culture, shows an internal freshness based on an architectural adaptability and flexibility to bring into one city all kind of styles , an evolution which from the outside is closely watched and discussed with shock and awe. This is a freshness which is of course questionable. In his text "Some Problems of Foreign Architects Working in Chinese Architectural Practices," Chinese artist and architect Ai Weiwei refers to this in no uncertain terms:

"This nation, whose architectural output has, in recent years, surpassed the sum total of all its architectural output in the course of its several thousand years of cultural history, is currently, in every domain, displaying all the elegance of a famished beast."

China, at this moment in time, is ruled by cities of the moving type, the ones that re-organize their culture, labor, creativity, economics, knowledge, people, space and position within the world. Cities of the moving type aren't necessarily cities without a memory but bear resemblance to a newness Blaise Pascal centuries ago described as follows; *"What's new is not the elements but the order in which they are arranged."*

Within the state of euphoria that goes with China's urban development, there is critique. In June 2007 the Chinese newspaper People's Daily featured the article *Historical sites 'devastated' in renovations*, which was largely framed around a statement by Qiu Baoxing, China's vice-minister of construction. This Financial Times picked up the story, referring to Qiu's statement as *"unusually blunt comments from a senior central government figure"* [1]. Qiu Baoxing expressed his concern about certain aspects of China's urban development, and the treatment of its historical sites, as *"senseless actions" that have "devastated" historical sites and cultural relics in the name of renovation* [2] while adding that "this is leading to a poor sight - many cities have a similar construction style. It is like a thousand cities having the same appearance." [3] At the same time Qiu Baoxing placed the current wave of demolition in a historical and political perspective by connecting it with campaigns of destruction during the "Great Leap Forward" movement in the late 1950s, and the "cultural revolution" (1966-76), when huge numbers of relics and sites of historical value were demolished. In Michel Houellebecq's *The Impossibility of an Island*, the protagonist states that *"I suppose that the revolutionaries are those who are capable of coming to terms with the brutality of the world, and of responding to it with increased brutality."* [4] In that sense one could think that this urban revolution has a similar attitude towards the brutality of the

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[1] Beijing minister critical of urban growth, Financial Times, June 11, 2007;

[2] http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/c1216014-1845-11d0-b736-000b5df10621.dwp_uuid=9c33700c-4e86-11da-89df-0000779e2340.html?nclick_check=1

[3] *Historical sites 'devastated' in renovations*, People's Daily, June 11, 2007; http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200706/11/eng20070611_382935.htm#0 Qiu Baoxing in *Historical sites 'devastated' in renovations*, People's Daily 11, 2007; http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200706/11/eng20070611_382935.html

[5] Houellebecq, Michel, *the possibility of an island*, Phoenix, London, 2006, p.133

[6] *Interpretation of China Space - Renovate Restorate Renew*; http://www.orgnets.net/bdm_rrr

[7] *Full list of participating architects: China: Qing Ma (MADASPM, Shanghai, China), Pei Zhu (Studio Pei-Zhu, Beijing, China), Spacework Architects (Beijing, China); Japan: Hiroshi Nakamura (Hiroshi Nakamura & MAP Office, Tokyo, Japan), Atelier Bow-Wow; Europe: Rem Koolhaas (OMA, Rotterdam, Netherlands), Odile Decq (Odile Decq and Benoit Comette, Paris, France), Flavio Albanese (ASA Studio Albanese, Venice, Italy), Archea Studios (Milan, Italy), Eva Castro & Holger Kehne (Plasma Studio, London, England) and González & Sosa (Magüi González & José Antonio Sosa, Madrid, Spain)*

[8] *Interpretation of China Space - Renovate Restorate Renew*; http://www.orgnets.net/bdm_rrr

[9] *Ou Ning, The Story of Zhang Jinli*, <http://www.altamativearchive.com/en/news/20051231.htm>

[10] *The China Syndrome*, NY Times, May 21, 2006

[11] *Yue Dong, Madeline, Republican Beijing*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2003

[12] *Koolhaas, Rem, Content, Taschen, Cologne, 2004, p.483*

[13] *de Beauvoir, Simone, The Long March*, Phoenix Press, London 2001, p.3514de Beauvoir, Simone, *The Long March*, Phoenix Press, London 2001

43

47

urban world, one responding to it with increased brutality. What role does memory plays in this debate? Where to position memory on the axis of evil architectural strategies?

HUTONG HALLUCINATIONS

China's most obvious metropolitan martyrs are the courtyard houses and the hutongs, the traditional roads or alleys running within the Second Ring Road from east to west through the city blocks. Their disappearance provokes in architecture circles a similar sentiment as the disappearance of the penguins on Antarctica for the consciously anti-globalizing but worldly masses. Everybody thinks it is such a pity they disappear, but nobody really cares about their living conditions. Beijing had over 1,200 hutongs during the Ming Dynasty, a number that grew to more than 1,800 in Qing Dynasty and to 1,900 or so during the Republic of China (1912-1949). A census in the 1980s put the number at more than 3,000. Today it is estimated that since the 1980s 40 percent of these hutongs have disappeared. The debate instigated by the hutong preservation authorities illustrates the way the debate on memory enfolds; largely post-factum. Once everything has disappeared one starts questioning the motives behind these acts, and for whatever emotional, ideological, economical or simply backward reasons, not infrequently adopts an ambition to recreate a past. This recreation is a very demanding and exhausting. But what can't be forgotten is that the angel of amnesia made Beijing blank, and this angel is actually very benevolent. Losing your memory can be very enlightening, but probably only then when you forgot you lost your memory. A more poignant question, which I will not answer in this text, is the relation between memory and what we actually know about the city.

Unfortunately this whole situation leads to debates where the modern is positioned in opposition to memory. The persistence on the resurrection of the hutong has lead to initiatives that can be categorized either as "hutong hallucinations" or "pimp my hutong" strategies. One example of this is the 'regeneration xisibei' initiative launched by Domus China during spring 2007, an initiative which inscribes itself, according to the organizers, in the following global current: *"The renovation of historical areas has become a global trend in recent years. Tokyo, New York, Berlin, London, Milan and other cities, have successfully increased the value of their historical and cultural areas through the integration of contemporary creative industries. One trend in recent years is for well known architects to implement new design concepts in spaces such as the flagship stores of top-grade commercial brands, often in traditional historical areas, and some of these have become successful examples of innovative and forward-looking architectural renovation."* [5] A selected group of international architects (ranging from MADA s.p.a.m. to Atelier Bow-Wow to OMA to Odile Decq) [6] were asked to make a conceptual design, all with the objective to increase value, a strategy one could call *cashing in on cities in crisis*. The idea was to deliver designs expressing a careful balance between modern and memory, thereby probably restraining their tendency to make minced meat of the historical condition. \ Architects in doubt or considering themselves unworthy for such a precarious task must have changed their minds when confronted with the project's final goal: *"The ultimate aim is to position the area as a world-class centre for creative industries and to create a commercial/leisure street to host famous international brands, whilst*

maintaining a specifically Chinese character and incorporating the preservation and renovation of the surrounding courtyard houses." [7] The final outcome wasn't much of a surprise as architectural elements expressing the idea of preservation were parachuted in through different forms and organizations throughout the area. The majority of the designs of the crusaders of the lost courtyards could be, despite their aesthetical qualities, described as rather ignorant and surprisingly unengaged, displaying design delusions that assassinated the designers' previously proven architectural intelligence. It fulfilled its aspirations as a world-class centre but was short on regeneration.

CAPITALIZING ON THE CRISIS

In his documentary Story of Zhang Jinli [8] (2007) Beijing based film director Ou Ning followed Zhang Jingli and the adventures, regulations, bulldozers, slogans and police men he encountered when large parts of the hutong he was living in, located South of Tiananmen Square in the Dazhalan Area of Beijing's historic Qianmen District, was destroyed. In the documentary, largely composed of footage shot by the self-proclaimed architectural activist Zhang Jinli, one gains an unusual insight in the effects that such enormous urban sanitation has on the life of an individual. Zhang appears to be a strange activist and through the documentary combines the Zen of morning exercise with a fierceness in demonstrating against false regulations, fake documents and economical compensations. The most interesting scene happens near the end when, in a room crowded with policemen, people start measuring his house. One can almost feel the disappointment when Zhang is confronted with the data, with the facts. He appears to despair over the fact that his house in not larger. To Zhang size matters as he knows that square meters, not memory, equals money. One minute later a bulldozer moves in, the house crumbles, shrinks, collapses, walls are torn apart, dust fills the screen and amidst the rubble stands Zhang Jinli. The memory of Meishi Street, how I would rename the documentary, has an unavoidable outcome from the moment it starts; one knows that there will be no happy ending. One knows that resistance is futile. But presented as a documentary recalling the erasure of Beijing's urban memory, it was a convenient European-funded opportunity for both Ou Ning and Zhang Jinli. What the documentary shows is the image of a man grasping this opportunity to document his disagreement with the financial compensation for his property. Money makes minced meat of memory.

PARADISE LOST

The creation of an architectural memory is mostly connected to strategies like copying, duplicating, rebuilding, renovating and this with the objective to bring into sub-consciousness new elements that look like they are old. We find similar attitudes like the ones mentioned before in the fast transforming cities of the developing world. The suffering of a society in rapid change, with the consequent psychological demand for people to endlessly adjust to an eternal present, is counteracted by a simple design objective and philosophy; in the eternal contemporary city happiness is essentially a thing of the past. Happiness can be built on demand. Training memory equals, as Nietzsche saw it, the beginning of a civilized morality. More and more one can witness a tendency, on a global scale, where memory becomes an active and destructive force, a remembrance of time gone, a contemplation of paradises that are lost.

China's rapid urbanization largely neglected the theme of Eastern cultural awareness in design. After a period where primarily foreign architects took the opportunities to experiment with different forms and styles, now the Chinese architect is faced with an even bigger task to find an architecture style reflecting a modern age and life-style. This happens on all scales from the smallest interior design job, over government buildings to large city extensions. In search for identity architects and design firms draw both from Oriental and Western concepts debate between ancient and modern forms of constructions. Large building blocks topped with a Chinese roof, or concrete slabs covered up on the ground floor with imperial wood constructions are the most visible effects of a confused nation. Confusion radiated since the late 1980s from Beijing outwards, when the city's mayor preferred that skyscraper architects connected with the Chinese past, this led to a banal interpretation of history. All over Beijing one can see tall buildings capped by absurdly historicist roofs in the style of the Forbidden City. "If you wanted your

building approved, you had to add a big roof," says Cui Kai, the chief architect of the CAG, in an article in the New York Times. "That's a very simple way to connect modern and traditional." [9]

NEGOTIATING NOSTALGIA Between 1911 and 1937, when it lost its status as a capital, Beijing already underwent an attempt to reinvent its memory and tested the city's ability to fill the new space with memories and meaning. Madeleine Yue Dong wrote a highly interested book on this, *Republican Beijing*. In his foreword to the book Thomas Bender explains carefully what is at stake, bearing resemblance with current tendencies, globally and locally, to see the future in the past; "*Nostalgia is part of modernity and modern city life, and Dong opens that question up. Partly, she is helped in her work by the striking tendency among intellectuals in today's Shanghai and Beijing (and Republican Beijing) to see the future in the past, to find in nostalgic memories the outlines of a city to come. The very particular twentieth century history and politics in China no doubt contribute to this complicated understanding of past and future, of constructed amnesia and fantastic memories and futures, but it is not unique. In post-Communist Budapest there was a remarkable nostalgia for the prewar Hapsburg Empire, and only a few years ago the city of Buenos Aires pursued a vision of its future by celebrating the rich success of the city of 1910. Dong has touched a rich theme for urban studies in her exploration of the dynamic that projects urban pasts into the future.*" [10]

CONCLUSION Would it make sense to take an inflexible position when it comes to memory, amnesia and the future of the urban past? I don't think so. Would it be better to simply ignore this and embrace the random development of these cities? No. What we will probably see more and more is a tendency to make a mash-up of urban memories, memories which even can't be related to one specific place at all. But equally necessary is to understand the history that is in the making. What could be the memory that a city of the moving type leaves behind? Would it be instantaneousness, based on the fact that the Chinese urban development seemingly happened suddenly, instantaneously, seemingly out of nowhere, and solely based on economic motives? Would today's easy urban explosion make it easier for future generations to erase, replace, update, transform it? Could it be that we will leave nothing behind, except for a few icons? It seems sometimes so that these icons are at odds with the evolution of the city, attempts to freeze a moment in time which actually give a false image and consciousness of the state of the field?

Just before entering the competition for the CCTV-building in Beijing, which he won, Rem Koolhaas allegedly experienced a moment of enlightenment, as he wrote recorded in the essay 'Saved by a Fortune Cookie': "*The life of the architect is so fraught with uncertainty and dilemmas that any clarification of the future, including astrology, is disproportionately welcome. My fortune cookie read, "Stunningly omnipresent Masters make minced meat of memory."* [11]

In her book *The Long March* (1957) Simone de Beauvoir has strikingly and poignantly analyzed Beijing as the most artificial city on the planet, and this probably still holds truth today. A city with an artificial intelligence and memory. She points out that "*for despite its age Peking has no history either; the history of Paris is the history of the Parisian people; and the Pekingese people never existed as a totality.*" [12] The city here is at a point in time which goes beyond its physical appearance, beyond its icons, its ringroads, beyond memory. Something else is happening here, fueled by a memory that is not visual but part of the DNA of its people. To me Simone de Beauvoir's view upon China still holds true today and might clarify our mindset in this matter: "It is striking that their history (i.e. Chinese) – which as a matter of fact has the appearance of an absence of history, not of the genesis of the present – the Chinese prefer the image of it that popular culture has perpetuated, that is to say, legend. Their past survives not as a succession of dated events but in the guise of tradition and symbols. (...) The day – it will come – when they (China) are the equal of the world's most advanced nations, there will not be any more drawing distinctions between China and the West: everyone will share in a universal culture. This assumes its particular figure in each particular country: no question but that China shall put her impress upon it; but her originality lies ahead of her, not behind; she shall forge it out of a living future. She is not to be defined or checked by a dead past." That day still has to come, as we are still moving ahead, clearly living the future. ➔