

Beijing's Preservation Policy and the Fate of the *Siheyuan*

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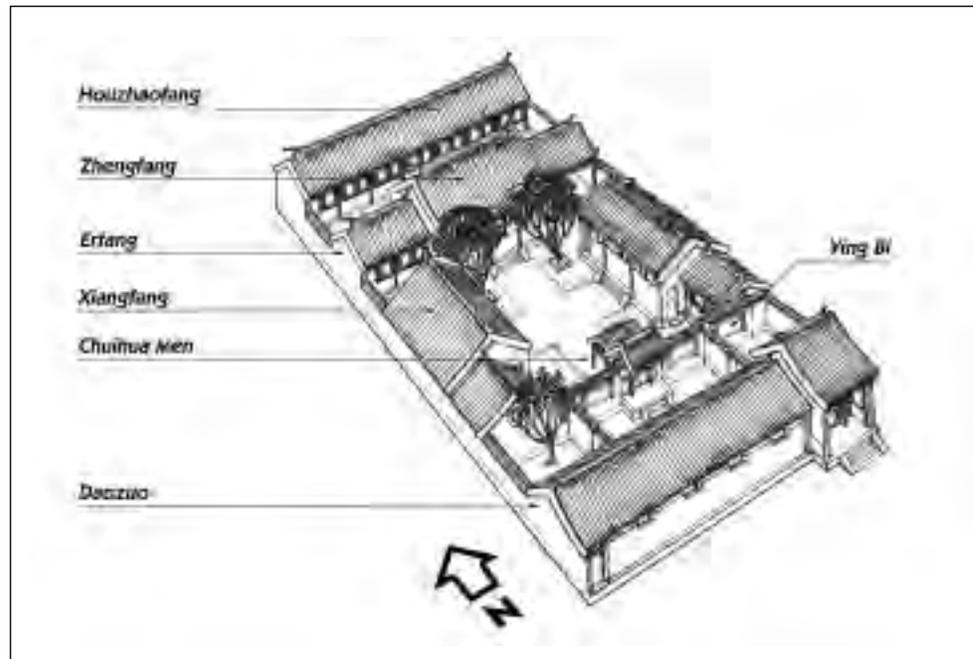
This close study of the policies and practices currently at play in the preservation and transformation of vernacular courtyard housing in Beijing reveals some of the sharpest social and political problems facing Chinese urban planning in this era of economic reform and the newly emerging land market. In addition to expressing the conflict between modernization and preservation that is common throughout the world, recent attempts to restore or mimic traditional dwellings expose deep contradictions about Beijing's accelerated developmental program — contradictions exacerbated by the particular architectural form of these dwellings, the *siheyuan*.

The *siheyuan* — the traditional Beijing family “quadrangle,” or courtyard house — has long received attention as a classic example of Chinese vernacular architecture (FIG. 1).¹ The courtyard house is particularly renowned worldwide for the way it is an integral part of old Beijing's entire layout — as the basic, microcosmic unit of a capital city plan that is itself cosmological in scale and intent.² During the past decade of sudden and rapid change in Beijing's historic center, however, the architectural and cultural significance of the courtyard house has come under a new spotlight in both the Chinese and non-Chinese popular press, as well as professional and academic planning discourse (FIG. 2).³

Before 1990 the courtyard house was viewed chiefly in terms of the typical opposition between tradition and modernity — as embodying half of the equation that balanced the claims of historic identity against the modernization imperative.⁴ However, for the majority of residents in Beijing's old city, courtyard housing had long since ceased to function as a private dwelling for one extended family, and had become crowded with many households under a bureaucratic housing-allocation system that could not afford to build new apartments for everyone (FIG. 3). And ever since the modernization program for central Beijing was linked to an increasing segmentation of the land and housing market in the early 1990s, the courtyard house's significance has been complicated by

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FIGURE 1. A classic Beijing siheyuan. (Drawing based on a part of the Ke Yuan multicourtyard compound, as depicted in J. Cheng and L. Yang, “Beijing Chuantong Jiefang de Baohu Chuyi — Nan Luogu Xiang Siheyuan Jiefang [A Modest Proposal for the Preservation of Beijing’s Traditional Street Blocks — the Nan Luogu Xiang Block of Courtyard Houses],” in Jianzhu Lishi ji Lilun Yanjiushi [Architectural History and Theory Research Room], ed., *Jianzhu Lishi Yanjiu [Architectural History Research]* (Beijing: Zhongguo Jianzhu Kexue Yanjiuyuan Jianzhu Qingbao Yanjiusuo [Architectural Intelligence Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Architectural Science], 1982).



new forms of national and class symbolism, nostalgia, and concern for social solidarity in the wake of increasing “social inequality and divisions.”⁵

For all its newfound and newly forged significance, the preservation of vernacular residential architecture in Beijing remains overshadowed by an even larger and older discourse on the preservation of the city’s monumental aspects — that is, its particular historic monuments and the structure of the entire Old City itself as a monument to ancient Chinese urban planning.⁶ This discourse not only predates the current interest in the courtyard houses themselves; but because the preser-

vation of Beijing’s monumental qualities involves problems of national-cultural, political, and ideological symbolism to a greater degree than does the preservation of vernacular housing, the discourse has also tended to ignore the socioeconomic dimension of heritage preservation in Beijing. Ever since Liang Sicheng and Chen Zhanxiang’s celebrated 1949 plan for the capital, the cause of preservation has often found itself opposed to Maoist urban priorities and policies.⁷ But this alignment has generally obscured the fact that, had the market rather than Mao been given full play in Beijing’s Old City, far more of the historic vernacular would likely have disappeared



FIGURE 2. The former residence of the Beijing opera singer Mei Lanfang, now a memorial hall and museum of his career. As a rare example of a well-preserved siheyuan, it is being used here as a set for a film about the life of Zhou Enlai.



FIGURE 3. A courtyard house in a typically dilapidated and crowded condition. Most of the open courtyard space is filled with “temporary” shelters, kitchens, and storage sheds.

before 1990. In fact, it has only been since the entry of the market into Beijing's development game that the neighborhoods of old courtyards have really begun to disappear. Like no other element of Beijing's cityscape, the *siheyuan* now highlights the social and economic tensions of the Reform Era.

The fate of the *siheyuan* in many ways reflects the challenges that face the preservation of architectural heritage throughout the developing world.⁸ However, it also casts light on China's particular evolution of urban policy and planning techniques in the context of an emerging market for housing and urban land. Even before the land market began to drive the redevelopment of Beijing's Old City in the 1990s, historic preservation had become a key component of a reborn Reform Era planning professionalism.⁹ Concern for architectural heritage, as elsewhere in the developing world, remains a predominantly elite concern in China. Its proponents often find themselves opposing both the political establishment's profit-making visions for the city center, and also the aspirations of residents to improve their living conditions. Yet while this situation is encountered in many countries, what is perhaps unusual about Chinese urban redevelopment is the prominence of its legitimizing socialist mandate and its paternalistic attention to the average city-dwellers' welfare. Although redevelopment is in practice driven by profit-seeking parastatal development companies, the redevelopment program itself can be justified only if it results in a significant improvement in the affected residents' standard of living *and* it contributes to an improvement in the city's overall public infrastructure.¹⁰

In the early experimental stage of the program, residential improvement was achieved primarily by replacing dilapidated housing with better (but not necessarily larger) dwellings for the residents *in situ*. Architects took it upon themselves to

design these new buildings in a contextually sensitive manner (FIGS. 4, 5). This approach was too small-scale and unprofitable to include significant infrastructure improvements, however. Municipalities needed to capitalize on land values in the old central neighborhoods in order to improve both housing conditions and infrastructure, and so the redevelopment program soon involved relocating whole communities to distant suburban greenfield sites, while the original neighborhoods were replaced with increasingly denser and higher buildings for sale to wealthy companies or powerful agencies and their employees.¹¹ The demolition and relocation involved in this effort was relatively easy, because the bulk of old courtyard housing is owned by the government (in Beijing, perhaps as much as 60 percent across the entire old city center). But the resulting impact on the historic cityscape has been severe (FIG. 6). And from the perspective of displaced residents, the improvements in standard of living have been questionable, given the increased commuting time and disruption of community life that has attended relocation to the far suburbs.¹² Finally, there has been a hidden or latent impact of the redevelopment program: a potentially dramatic increase in socio-geographic segregation. Traditional Chinese neighborhoods historically accommodated a relatively diverse mix of residents of different levels of wealth and influence. The traditional courtyard typology itself was largely responsible for this, since it allowed dwellings of varying quality and crowdedness to coexist in close proximity without mutual impact.¹³ The wholesale replacement of courtyard house neighborhoods by self-contained superblock estates of multistory apartments threatens to divide the city into distinct, socially exclusive enclaves.

Given the sharpness with which large-scale demolition and relocation is beginning to highlight social inequalities in Beijing, and the government's failure to test a broader range



FIGURE 4. (LEFT) New low-cost housing in Dong Nan Yuan, south of the historic Liu Li Chang arts district. Preservation regulations limited the height of the new buildings to approximately nine meters. All units have running water, flush toilets, and a south-facing room. All original residents returned after redevelopment. (Photo courtesy of Tan Ying.)



FIGURE 5. (RIGHT) New, moderate-to-high-cost contextual housing in Ju'er Hutong, in the Nan Luogu Xiang historic courtyard district. In addition to the amenities at Dong Nan Yuan, the new units have central heating, and they are larger. From one- to two-thirds of the original residents returned.



FIGURE 6. Demolition of siheyuan and hutong for new apartment blocks. According to Beijing's master plan, new high-rises are allowed only at the edge of the old city, along the Second Ring Road. But it is not unusual to see eight-story apartments now being built more than one kilometer inside the Ring Road.

of alternative development approaches, the preservation movement has the potential to move beyond its current elite intellectual circle, to encompass a more socially broad-based opposition to the prevailing government-sponsored redevelopment. Outside Beijing, the demolition of historic vernacular houses has provoked landmark lawsuits by residents against their municipal government.¹⁴ In Xi'an and in Beijing itself, residents have publicly protested and filed lawsuits against lower-level government agencies and developers to correct abusive demolition and relocation practices, if not to defend historic architecture, per se.¹⁵ The following description of historic preservation attitudes and practice in Beijing should help clarify why preservation has not yet emerged as a viable social alternative to redevelopment. On the contrary, preservation in Beijing has tended to reinforce the current narrow and exclusive approach to urban investment, and in some cases it has exacerbated social inequity even further.

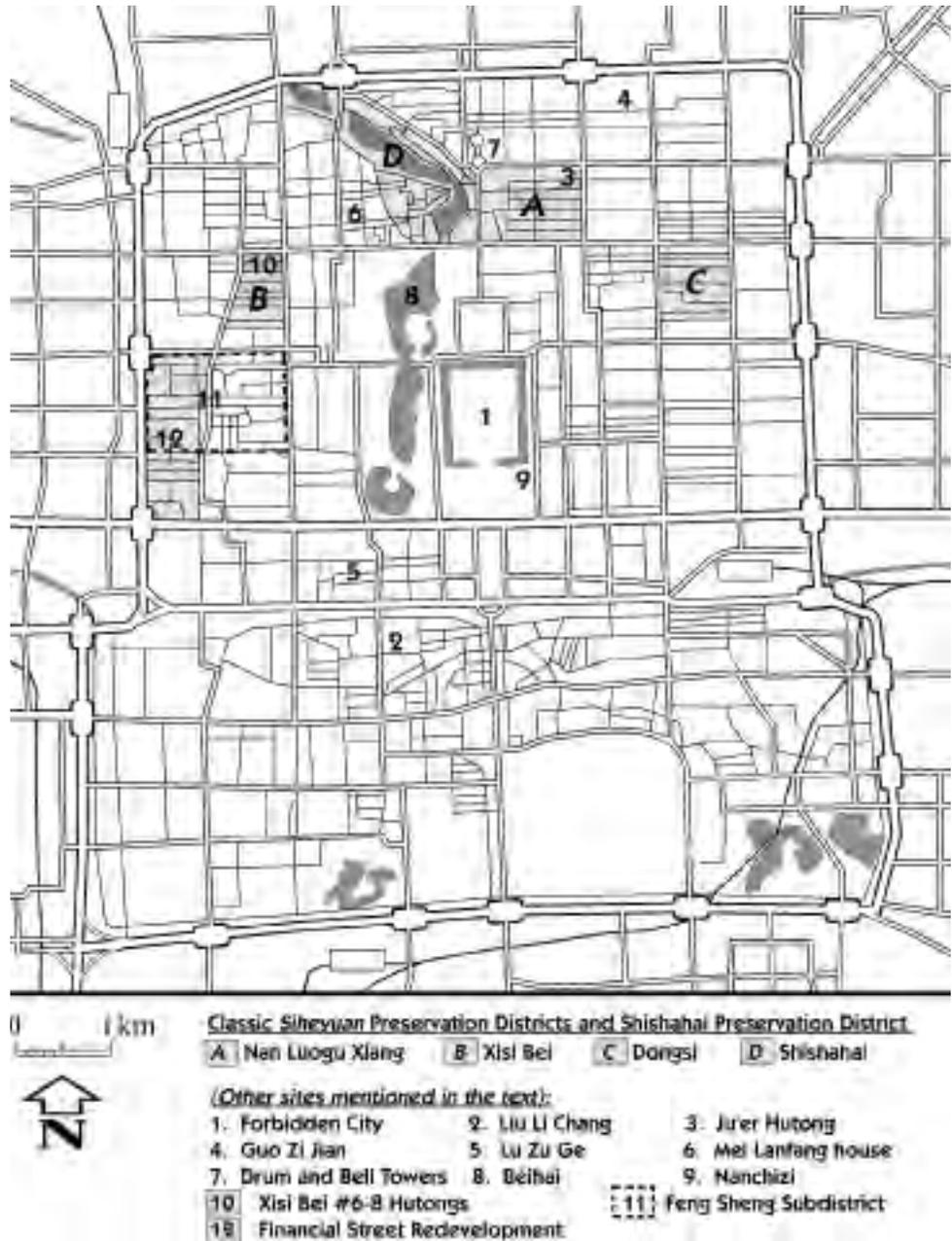
THE CLASSIC HUTONG-AND-SIHEYUAN NEIGHBORHOOD AS AN OBJECT OF PRESERVATION

In the debate over what precisely is worth preserving in the face of redevelopment in the Old City of Beijing, the neighborhood itself is the most recent battleground. That is, while palaces, temples, and other monumental features are broadly accepted as worthy of preservation, the historic value of the city's vernacular residential environment is still being hotly debated. Central to the preservationist position is the fact that Beijing was an integrally planned city from its inception. Not only does this place Beijing in a nearly unique position among world capitals of its age, it also means that the significance of indisputably important monuments like the Forbidden City cannot be fully appreciated except in the context of the neighborhoods that were laid out in orderly fashion around them in all directions for three kilometers (FIG. 7). Indeed, the architecture of even the humblest courtyard house is only a simpler, smaller-scaled version of the Forbidden City itself. Ultimately, however, it is the individual courtyards themselves, not the urban fabric in which they sit and of which they are a part, that has captured the imagination of the public and the powers-that-be in Beijing. The *siheyuan* as a focus for poetic recollection of Beijing's genteel and humanely sociable past (in contrast to the city's frantic and anonymous present) has overshadowed its historical urbanistic significance.¹⁶

Descriptions of the Beijing *siheyuan* have been published often enough that they hardly need to be repeated here.¹⁷ Still, it is worth mentioning a number of features of the *siheyuan* that pose special conditions or challenges to its preservation, as will be discussed in greater detail later. Figure 1 shows all the elements mentioned here, except for the open-air galleries, which would normally run from the inside of the *chuihua men* along the back of the wall separating the main courtyard from the front court, and would connect up the verandahs of each of the *xiangfang* and the *zhengfang*. Basically, a *siheyuan* is not a single structure, but a rectilinear walled compound of many pavilions composed around internal rectilinear courts, and often connected by galleries. Each court is a kind of modular unit, with a *zhengfang*, the main, south-facing pavilion on the north; two *xiangfang*, or east/west-facing side pavilions; and a wall or *daoziuo* ("sitting reversed") along the south side. The *zhengfang* typically has two small wings on its west and east, called *erfang* ("ear buildings"). When plot size allows, there is a narrow courtyard behind the *zhengfang*, and behind that a rear pavilion called the *houzhaofang* ("covering the back building"). All these buildings are almost never more than one story high, and never have basements.

The whole compound occupies the entire house lot, which may run the full depth of a block between two lanes, or *hutong*. Typical *hutong* are 6–9 meters wide, spaced 60–70 meters apart, and run east-west in parallel lines, though variations on this pattern are common. The *siheyuan*

FIGURE 7. Map of the Old City of Beijing, delineated by the Second Ring Road, which has replaced the old city walls. The Ring Road's entrance and exit ramps are located where the city gates once were.



turns a nearly blind face to the street; only high, small windows and the gate interrupt the gray brick facade. The publicly visible coloring and detailing are subdued, except for the gate, which could be colorful and richly ornamented, depending on the social rank of the inhabitants, and according to imperial sumptuary laws. Also depending on the wealth and rank of the family that built the *siheyuan*, the size of the entire compound varies a great deal. The larger and more articulated houses are subdivided into many subcompounds, separated by additional walls with gates. In the classic *siheyuan*, these walls and gates have symbolic importance, expressed in the high level of artistry that went into their

making. The intricately carved *ying bi* (“shadow wall” or “spirit wall”) guarantees both privacy and good fortune in response to the geomantic requirements of good *feng shui* (FIG. 8). The *chuihua men* (“hanging flowers” gate) is the point that separates the inner part of the compound, reserved for family members, from the outer part, for use by servants and guests. In the strictest households, marriageable women were generally not allowed outside this gate.¹⁸

The commonly understood definition of the classic courtyard house has been gradually translated into preservation law and policy, and the *siheyuan* as an object of preservation emerged at a particular time in the evolution of Chinese plan-



FIGURE 8. Newly restored siheyuan gatehouse and the ying bi “spirit wall” just inside. This courtyard is used for a business, not a residence.

ning law. The earliest monuments designated for preservation by the post-1949 regime appeared in the law in 1957. But, courtyard houses, *as such*, were not designated for preservation until 1984, one year after the State Council proclaimed Beijing a “Renowned Historic and Cultural City.”¹⁹ At this time all courtyard houses listed among the city’s preservation sites were designated at the municipal level, as opposed to the higher national level or the lower district level. In 1985 height limits were imposed on new construction in the Old City, and in 1987 these were further refined to include special “construction control zones” around designated monuments.²⁰ Thereafter, even the four districts that occupy Beijing’s Old City began to designate certain fine *siheyuan* for preservation. As of the 1993 master plan revision, thirteen courtyards in Beijing have been designated municipal-level preservation sites, solely because they are considered worthy of preserving as examples of classic Qing residential architecture, and at least as many district-level preservation sites have been listed for the same reason. This is not to mention the many more houses and mansions of various sizes that are being preserved mainly because of their association with historic figures, families or politics, but which are also good examples of classic courtyard architecture.

At the same time that classic *siheyuan* have become enshrined in preservation law, they have also become a celebrated object for presentation in a variety of other contexts. Real estate advertisements, storefront window displays, tourist promotions of Beijing, and other propaganda, for example, use images of the *siheyuan* to symbolize the essence of dwelling in Beijing. Richly illustrated books displaying all the elements of the classic courtyard house in great detail have been published to assist restorationists and replicators, or simply to document nostalgically a disappearing environment.²¹ The disembodied quality of these presentations is actually not unlike the way in which most *siheyuan* are destined to be preserved. Those courtyards which are officially listed for protection, are surrounded by the above-mentioned construction control zones, which limit building heights within a certain distance of the protected architecture. The zone closest to the preservation site is usually designated as “green” space where any form of construction is prohibited. Construction Control Zone maps are the most detailed tool that Beijing’s planning authorities use to regulate development around preservation sites (FIG. 9). They rarely delineate the context of the site; they only show the structures to be preserved, the boundaries of the site itself, and, for locational reference only, the outlines of the surrounding *hutong* and nearby large, modern structures. The maps also include the “red lines” that mark the limits of the block to be formed by major streets, once those streets are widened. The bulk of the predominantly one-story fabric of courtyard houses not shown on these maps is assumed to be subject to demolition.

The sparseness of Beijing’s preservation-related regulations is due as much to a lack of resources as to a lack of regard. Just as the government relies on development agencies to improve the city’s infrastructure and public environment in general, so it relies on them to augment the preservation plan with their own initiatives to find and preserve valuable architecture. Besides listing certain *siheyuan* for official protection, the Municipal Planning Institute has also promulgated a policy that each neighborhood redevelopment project should identify other “pearls” of classic architecture for preservation within the bounds of its site.²² Inevitably, though, developers resist this policy because it results in lower overall built floor area on sites that normally allow multistory buildings. They overcome the problem by making the preserved one-story buildings a part of required green space standards (FIG. 10).

This preservation practice, jokingly referred to as the *pen-jing* (“potted landscape”) approach, has many practical advantages: it renders maintenance and fire prevention easier; it ensures a degree of prominence for preservation sites that are otherwise threatened by new high buildings in their vicinity; it combines conservation with the general need for more public park space in the city; and it is usually compatible with the use of the site itself, which is often of a public nature, even when it is an old courtyard house.²³ The advantages notwith-

FIGURE 9. "Plan of the Preservation [Site] Limits and Construction Control Zones" for the Lu Zu Ge, listed with its address, Bei Xinhua Jie #112. Although the Lu Zu Ge is actually a Taoist temple, its treatment is similar to that for listed siheyuan. Another preservation site, a siheyuan at #87 Xi Jiaomin Xiang, is also shown at right, encroaching on the right-of-way of a future major thoroughfare. (Courtesy of West City District Urban Planning Bureau.)



standing, this manner of historic conservation is problematic, for it breaks the traditional close relationship between the monument and its vernacular context. When the “monument” is a courtyard house, itself an example of vernacular architecture, this rupture with context is even more severe.

In recognition of the problem, the Municipal Government initiated a new type of preservation object in 1990: of 25 listed historic-cultural “districts,” two large areas were designated as “traditional one-story courtyard housing preservation districts.”²⁴ These districts, the blocks of *hutongs* at Nan Luogu Xiang in the East City and Xisi Bei in the West City (Figure 7, areas A and B), have long been valued for their particularly high concentrations of relatively intact Qing Dynasty neighborhood architecture: the classic *hutong* and

siheyuan.²⁵ Since then, a third block of *hutongs*, to the northeast of Dongsi, has also been designated to be preserved for the same reason (Figure 7, area C). In contrast to other historic and cultural preservation districts in Beijing, which are considered worth protection either because they are adjacent to important elements in the immediate urban landscape, like the streets that flank the Forbidden City (for example, Nanchizi Street, shown in Figure 7, site 9), or have particularly important cultural histories of their own, like Liulichang, the Qing dynasty arts and crafts street (Figure 7, site 2), or the Shishahai lakes district, valued primarily for its scenic landscape and multitude of temples and palaces (Figure 7, area D), the particular histories of Nan Luogu Xiang and Xisi Bei are rarely invoked in justifying their

FIGURE 10. A scheme for redevelopment around the Lu Zu Ge, showing the preservation site surrounded by denser development, some of which encroaches on the required green area. This scheme is actually unusually sensitive: besides the Lu Zu Ge, it also preserves two unlisted courtyard houses (incorporated into a kindergarten), and the closest new buildings are less than five stories. (Courtesy of Urban Investment Development Consultants, Beijing.)

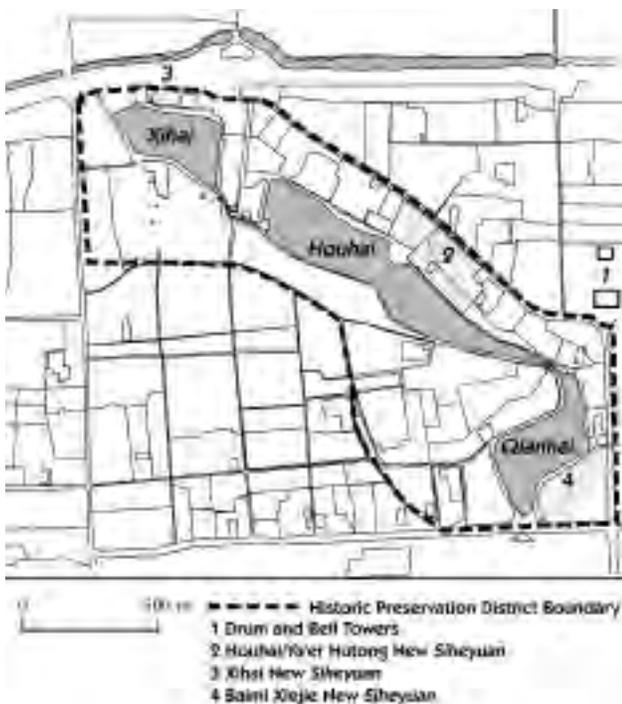
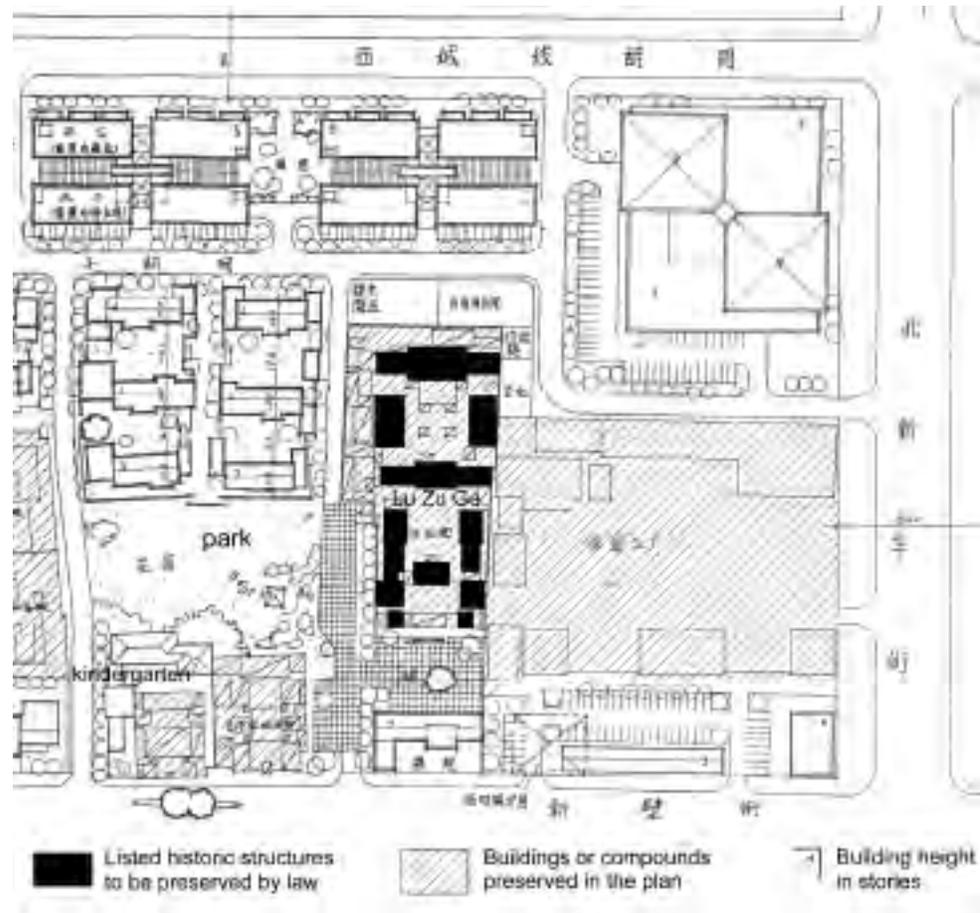


FIGURE 11. Map of the Shishahai lakes area.

preservation; their value is almost entirely presented in terms of their representativeness of a broader, “classic” residential architecture and culture (FIG. 11). But just how extensive was this environment in the history of Beijing’s residential environment, and what remains today?

According to an analysis of aerial photographs published in 1989, there were only 805 relatively large and classically laid-out courtyard houses remaining in the Old City, occupying only 115 hectares, or about 1.9 percent of the Old City’s total land area of 6,200 hectares.²⁶ The highest concentrations of these fine *siheyuan* were in the Nan Luogu Xiang and Xisi Bei blocks. Thus, the survey generally supported the initial policy of limiting preservation of vernacular housing to a very few isolated *siheyuan* and to two or three large, well-defined districts. But it also underlined how conservative the definition of “classic” *siheyuan* is. This conservatism has not only limited the application of legal and regulatory protection to vernacular housing in Beijing, it has also limited the feasibility of rehabilitating courtyards on the basis of existing or prospective residents’ needs, even where such courtyards are not designated for preservation. The current push to redevelop and densify the city center wherever the regulations allow (and sometimes even where they do not) presents serious enough difficulties to the maintenance of a low-rise, ground-

connected vernacular dwelling tradition; conservative assessments of this tradition's preservation value give even less room for alternative approaches to housing rehabilitation.

There have been a number of design studies that explore ways in which a mix of preserved *siheyuan*, upgraded or enlarged courtyard compounds, and new housing types could coexist within the historic pattern of *hutongs*, or in which most of the existing buildings are replaced by modern "new courtyard prototypes" that carry on the "spirit" of the *siheyuan* while satisfying residents' changed housing needs.²⁷ According to some of these studies, this "spirit" has more to do with the courtyard environment's hierarchies of access, indoor-outdoor relationships, flexibility of use, and ease of modification, than with specific architectural detailing.²⁸ Some of these studies were actually carried out as pilot projects for the overall renewal program, as mentioned above — the most famous being the Ju'er Hutong project designed by Wu Liangyong. All of these studies and projects, however, have so far failed to sway the municipal and district governments from their fixation on city-center land values as a short-term source of income for all manner of urban improvements. At the same time, the contribution these studies and projects might make to the preservationist toolkit has also been ignored by officialdom, largely because the architecture they advocate strays too far from what is considered worth preserving.

LUXURY SIHEYUAN: THE LOGICAL PRODUCT OF A CONSERVATIVE DEFINITION OF BEIJING'S ARCHITECTURAL TRADITION

Where courtyard housing is rehabilitated on a plot-by-plot basis, it requires the intervention of real estate companies and well-connected and wealthy individuals (FIG. 12).²⁹ It is necessary to have some back door in the bureaucracy to gain approval for this kind of construction, because individual courtyards are not normally allowed to install a septic tank for modern plumbing where such did not exist before. And it is expensive because the new resident must pay for the relocation of all existing residents of the courtyard to new housing — a process that requires the approval and intervention of the local Property Management Bureau. Some real estate companies — often spun off from the Property Management Bureau or other government agencies³⁰ — specialize in hunting for good-sized courtyard houses with relatively few residents who can easily be relocated, and then arranging for the houses' rehabilitation for sale on the luxury market. Cases of this kind of rehabilitation are increasing but still quite isolated, since only a few areas within the Old City appear safe from widespread demolition and redevelopment. These are either the designated courtyard preservation districts, or other preservation districts and areas surrounding major historic sites or monuments. In the block around



FIGURE 12. A privately rebuilt *siheyuan* on its original plot within the Shishahai preservation district. Note the garage door on the left.

the Guozijian and Confucian Temple, for example, a small concentration of individually rehabilitated luxury courtyards has emerged, with prices for *siheyuan* of 400 square meters reaching 3 million yuan (US\$360,000).³¹ Other areas in the Old City that have attracted this type of investment are the streets on either side of the Forbidden City and the neighborhoods around Beihai, Shishahai, and the Drum and Bell Towers; of course, the traditional courtyard preservation districts of Nan Luogu Xiang and Xisi Bei are also prime locations for individual luxury courtyard rehabilitation.

Critics of the individual luxury *siheyuan* have identified a number of problems. These houses are often not the primary residence of their wealthy owners, and thus bring gentrification and absenteeism to the neighborhood. Being owned by the wealthy, they also bring an increased level of car traffic into the narrow *hutong*. As isolated points of investment, they do nothing to improve neighborhood infrastructure. And to suit their owners' modern living, they often involve jarring elements like large "garage entrances, air conditioners, satellite dishes and aerials."³² In the name of solving one of these problems — the improvement of neighborhood infrastructure and the public environment — some developers in Beijing have successfully proposed the wholesale redevelopment of old courtyard neighborhoods into estates of new or rehabilitated luxury *siheyuan*. This approach effectively allows developers and district governments to capitalize on city-center land values even as they conform to the requirements of historic preservation districts.

In order to compensate for the low building density required by preservation district regulations, the prices for these new "old-style" houses are extremely high — in the order of US\$3,000–4,000 per square meter for houses of between 600 and 800 square meters. A brochure for one such project covering about 5.5 hectares along Ya'er Hutong (Crow Lane) on the north shore of Houhai in the Shishahai historic district (Figure 11, area 2), the self-proclaimed

“largest-scale Quadrangle residential district in Beijing so far,” emphasizes that it is located in an officially designated historic preservation district of traditional courtyard houses, and that the design of the new courtyard houses complies with the “Engineering Rules” of the Ministry of Construction of the Qing Dynasty and the “Building Standard of Qing [Dynasty] Style.”³³ Certain well-known features of the classic courtyard house were then listed to describe these new residences. And the brochure goes on to describe the particular attractions — “traditional architectural style” and “a taste of long culture” — of the Shishahai environment, including its history as a waterway since the Yuan Dynasty, its natural lakeside scenery, its many historic preservation sites (“cultural and architectural relics”), its many former residences of historic figures, and, last but not necessarily least, its convenient access.

Finally, under the slogans “Extend Traditional Culture” and “Reproduce the Style and Image of the Ancient Capital,” the brochure illustrates the product: a *siheyuan* which on the outside and from the courtyard appears completely traditional to the nonexpert (except for the garage door!). Indeed, the design principle for the Houhai project was “Very modern in living, very traditional in character and appearance.”³⁴ The interpretation of “traditional” character and appearance was very strict. According to the designer, Prof. Zhu Zixuan of the Tsinghua University architecture faculty, an expert on historic Beijing architecture, “if the galleries and verandahs around the yard are enclosed, then it isn’t a *siheyuan*.” In order to follow this rule while also allowing residents to pass through the entire house without walking outside, later versions of the courtyard design included two layers of galleries surrounding the yard: one enclosed, next to the rooms; another open, next to the yard. Inside, the rooms range in decor from “Chinese Classical” to “Western Modern,” and accommodate various uses from business conferences to servants quarters, to karaoke and billiards. There is even space for a bar, a gymnasium, and a swimming pool (FIG. 13). The final touch in the brochure is a sauna, complete with a blond, semi-nude model. However, since utmost effort was made to maintain the courtyard’s visual integrity, including its one-story height, many of these accessory modern functions had to be placed in an untraditional basement.

Although this brochure doesn’t mention explicitly what the market for these houses is, a brochure for another company selling individual courtyards of similar standard states very clearly in both Chinese (unsimplified characters, used primarily by Chinese outside the People’s Republic) and English that “the new quadrangle in Beijing becomes the most ideal residential investment for those overseas Chinese in Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and other countries.”³⁵ The fact that the Houhai brochure was printed only in English indicates that their market is even wider. At another new *siheyuan* project in the Shishahai district, along the north shore of Xihai (Figure 11, area 3), the arrangement for the interior design of the new courtyards also indicates the dominance of the Hong Kong

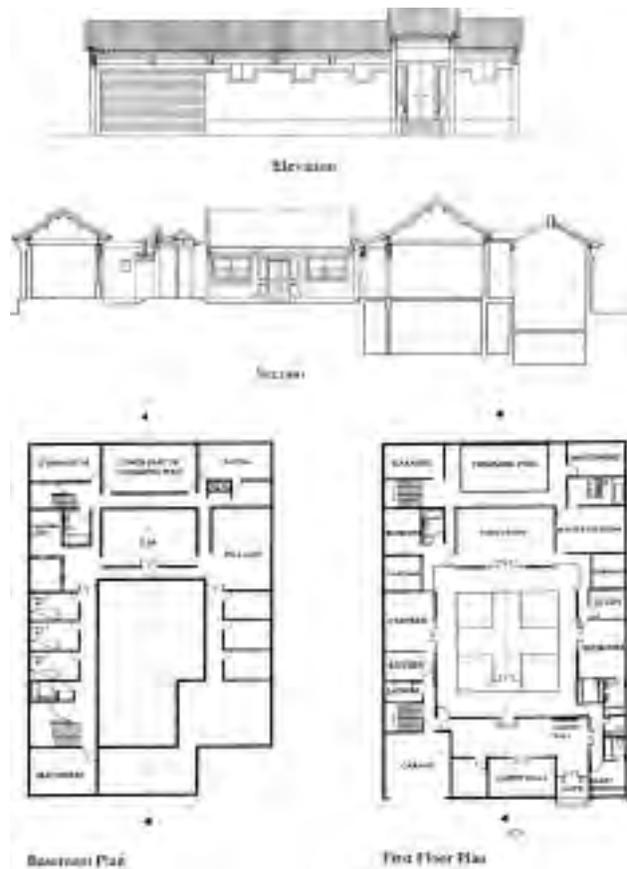


FIGURE 13. Designs for New Courtyard House in the Houhai redevelopment. (Courtesy of Beijing Shichahai Economy Construction and Development Co.)

and overseas market; Zhu Zixuan (who planned this project as well as the Houhai project) had responsibility for the exterior appearance of the housing, but the developer retained a Hong Kong architect to design the interiors.

These estates of new *siheyuan* involve the demolition of all but about a few of the existing houses in an entire neighborhood, the complete disappearance of the existing land division pattern, the realignment and widening of most of the lanes and access ways, and an increase in public green space. The entire population of this neighborhood also must move to the far suburbs, to be replaced by only a fraction of their number. The luxury courtyards designed for Houhai typically accommodate residents at a standard of 75m²/person, while crowded courtyards prior to renewal typically provided less than 8m²/person.³⁶ The first phase of the Xihai project displaced 230 households from 0.8 hectares in order to build only seven new courtyard houses.³⁷ A similar scheme by the same designer for the northernmost three *hutong* in the Xisi Bei courtyard housing preservation district (Figure 7, site 10) would replace a population of 900 households with only 47 (FIGS. 14, 15).³⁸ In both cases, the entire

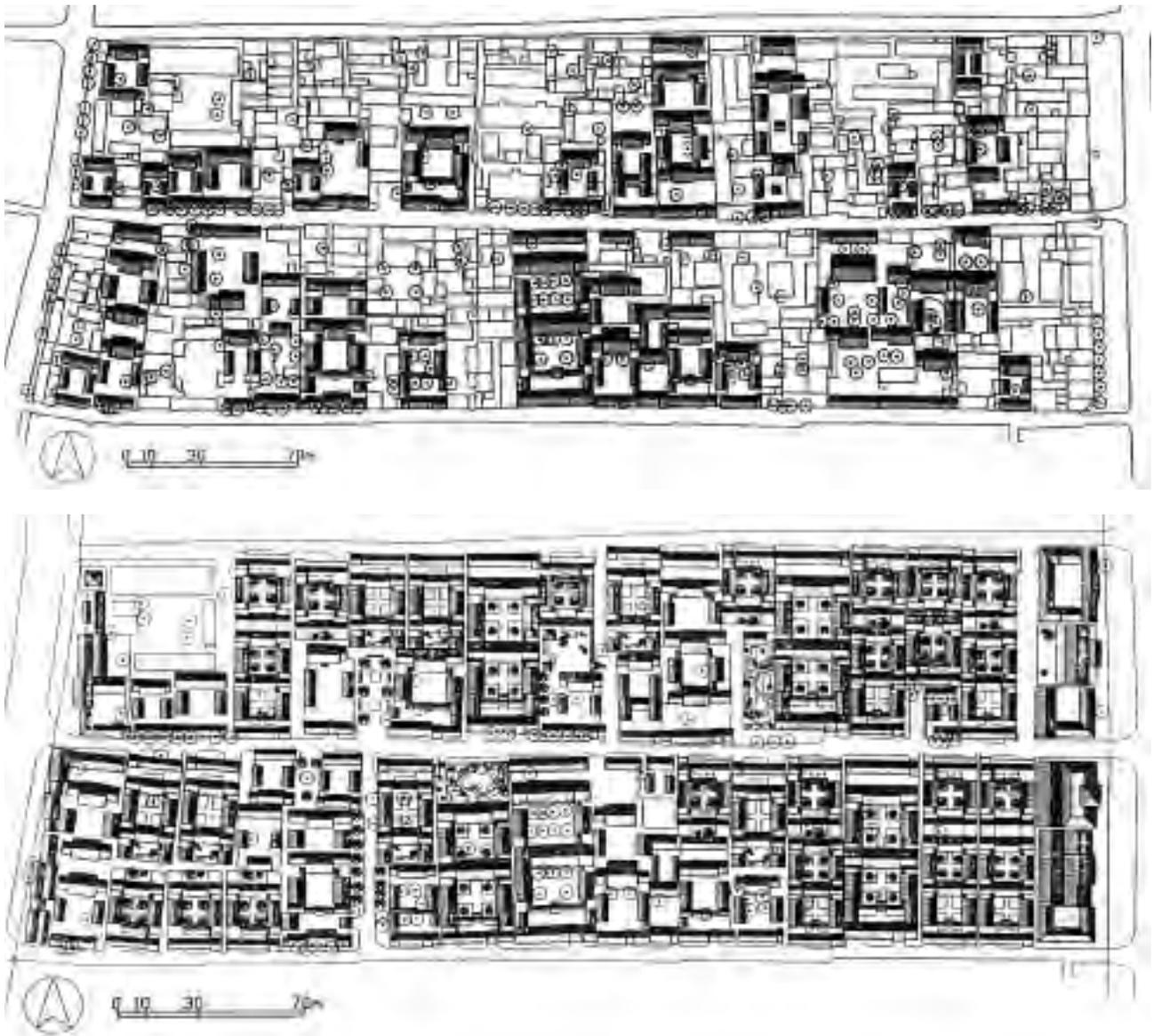


FIGURE 14. (TOP) Survey plan of the existing layout of courtyard blocks between the sixth and eighth hutongs of the Xisibei district. Siheyuan considered worth preserving are shown in roof plan; less regular, “replaceable” courtyards and buildings are shown in outline only. (Courtesy of Tsinghua University, Prof. Zhu Zixuan; drawing by Zhong Ge.)

FIGURE 15. (BOTTOM) Plan of proposed redevelopment of the courtyard blocks between the sixth and eighth hutong of the Xisibei district. Compare with Figure 14 to see how many of the original siheyuan and how much of the old plot layout are preserved. (Courtesy of Tsinghua University, Prof. Zhu Zixuan; drawing by Zhong Ge.)

neighborhood is likely to have its own professional maintenance staff and security patrol to guarantee the good condition of the common areas and the safety of the residents.

The Xisi Bei project — which remains for the time being only a scheme on the drawing boards with a low likelihood of ever being implemented — actually represents a different approach to large-scale luxury courtyard preservation and rehabilitation from that seen at Houhai and Xihai. The Xisi

Bei scheme differs from these projects in three major respects: (1) its design preserves more of the existing courtyards because more of them are classically laid out to begin with; (2) it would therefore preserve the existing street layout and width, and much of the lot pattern as well; (3) it would not be marketed to wealthy overseas investors, but rather is designed for high officials who are being displaced from their current large courtyard compounds to make way for redevel-

opment elsewhere. As indicated in the survey of aerial photographs referred to above, 80 percent of the largest and best-maintained *siheyuan* in the Inner City are occupied by military or central-government work units. Many of these, in fact, are the homes of high-ranking officers, officials, or “old revolutionary” leaders. A particularly high concentration of these is in Feng Sheng subdistrict, in the area being redeveloped into the vast 103-hectare “Financial Street” high-density commercial and office district, from which nearly all existing residents must be relocated.³⁹ Whereas most of the existing residents must move to suburban counties like Daxing, the high-ranking elite would have the option of moving to new or rehabilitated courtyards in the Xisi Bei classic *siheyuan* preservation district. But in order to make room for them, the original residents of Xisi Bei would also have to move out.

It would seem that the decision to redevelop some neighborhoods as completely new high-density commercial districts, plus the decision to preserve other neighborhoods as completely old-style low-density housing, have exacerbated a situation in which the mass of residents in both types of neighborhood will have to be relocated far from the Old City. In the case of Xisi Bei, the convenience of an aging revolutionary elite who devoted their active careers to the liberation of the mass of people, would become a direct link in this rolling process of displacement, even though the more basic catalyst would be the pursuit of profit in the initial commercial development. In the written description of the Xisi Bei scheme draft, the cultural contradictions appear clearly. Along with the goal of preserving the “ancient capital’s style and image,” as embodied in the classic courtyard residential block at Xisi Bei, the plan calls for “strengthening neighborhood vitality (*zengjia jiequ huoli*)” by, among other things, “maintaining the original social structure (*baochi yuanyou shequ jiegou*).” The next goal listed, however, is to “raise the standard of living” by moving original residents out to presumed better-quality housing elsewhere, and allowing the *shouzhang* (“superiors”) to move into the improved old courtyards. On the one hand, the draft considers the existing community to be of cultural value and worth preserving, but on the other hand, as long as the existing residents are moved to adequately improved dwelling conditions, the draft implies that the fine courtyards in this district are more appropriate as dwellings for families who have grown accustomed to the luxury of traditional *siheyuan* space.

For all its contradictions, this scheme for Xisi Bei is actually much more palatable to the district and municipal government, and perhaps even to the current residents, than is the situation on the ground at Houhai. At least the exclusive courtyard neighborhood of *shouzhang* at Xisi Bei could be considered the property of the state, on loan to deserving public servants. At Houhai, on the other hand, a prime piece of the city’s historic and scenic landscape may become the exclusive stomping ground of foreign investors. Although the advertising for luxury courtyards usually makes a point of selling to

ethnic Chinese abroad, the developer would be just as happy (and in general legally entitled) to sell to anyone who could pay, including non-Chinese foreigners. This concern for the image of the historic neighborhoods’ overall cultural-demographic profile has led the municipal government to issue an informal policy that any housing sold close to the Forbidden City should not be sold to “foreigners.” An East City District development company, eager to turn an historic parcel along Nanchizi Street just adjacent to the Forbidden City moat into luxury courtyards, had to insist on defining investors from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, etc. as “Chinese.”⁴⁰ The Nanchizi project was aborted, but the problem still remains at places like Houhai. Local officials’ sensitivity to this issue reflects how politically explosive the whole preservation and renewal program is in Beijing’s Old City. Popular nationalistic sentiment could easily combine with resentment against relocation to become an excuse for protest against the entire program and the blatant inequities it expresses.

Also, from a dwelling-cultural perspective, the designer Zhu Zixuan much prefers the Xisi Bei approach because the *shouzhang*, being Chinese and being relatively old-fashioned, do not require the completely modern, international interiors that the luxury-commodity courtyard residents do; likewise, their courtyards can be more faithful restorations or reproductions. Moreover, they require a wider variety of standards that more closely resembles the original mix of sizes and shapes of courtyards in the neighborhood, so that more of the old can be preserved and mixed in with the new. Zhu admits that the Xisi Bei residents are very suspicious of his group’s survey work and fear the displacement that may result from redevelopment. He, himself, also fears the consequences for public access: that the security demands of both foreign investors and domestic *shouzhang* would conflict with the public’s right to be able to appreciate the historic environment.

Displacement and exclusion appear to be the inevitable result of a preservation policy which (1) is coupled with a program of large-scale renewal as a strategy for infrastructure improvement, and (2) defines culturally valuable residential environments only according to the strict terms of a classic architectural form, especially when the essence of that architecture is as private and inward-oriented as the *siheyuan*. Unlike the historic urban housing of Europe and Europe’s colonies, which has a public facade that is in itself often considered worth preserving even if the interior is entirely remodeled, the essence of the traditional *siheyuan*, conservatively defined, is in its internal detailing and spatial layout, which evolved in tight relation to a premodern imperial-Confucian social structure.⁴¹ Planners and developers must go to great lengths to find a group of inhabitants whose social position and way of life can be practically accommodated by such architecture today. Then, having found such a group, there is no way to ensure that the group’s successors will be equally well accommodated. Whether these well-restored *siheyuan* remain in the hands of the *shouzhang*’s

children, or are in turn sold to different, wealthy residents, their utility will certainly change. Moreover, since the enclosed, introverted form of the houses itself prevents the public from appreciating them without being able to enter them, it will be particularly difficult to monitor and regulate any remodeling their inhabitants may wish to make. Indeed, the inherent public “invisibility” of the *siheyuan* architectural heritage raises in a new context the common but fundamental question facing so many preservation/restoration projects: for whom is this heritage to be preserved?

Finally, it is still not clear that even the current generation of *shouzhang* families can be accommodated by a scheme such as the current proposal for Xisi Bei. The architecture may be fine, but the social life of this kind of neighborhood has drawbacks. According to remarks by the West City District vice-mayor in charge of urban development, many of the *shouzhang* themselves do not like the idea of living next door to one another, where their every move can be scrutinized by peers who already know too much about their lives. They belong to a rank of society which is extremely exclusive and riven by factional in-fighting, and prefer the “buffering” effect of having the *laobaixing* (“old hundred-names” — the commonfolk) as their neighbors. Currently, the walls of their compounds and the familiarity of neighbors and local neighborhood police are enough protection from intruders. Developers are so wary of disturbing them that they prefer to design an entirely rebuilt neighborhood around the *shouzhang* courtyards rather than require them to relocate. In many schemes, the good-quality courtyards that are preserved as *penjing* in the midst of new multistory construction belong to high-ranking families who are left where they are precisely for this reason.

THE EVOLUTION AND IMPLICATIONS OF COURTYARD HOUSE PRESERVATION POLICIES IN BEIJING

In order to understand the nature of the apparent conflicts involved in conserving the city’s cultural identity through luxury-standard courtyard restoration, it is necessary to realize that the situation is evolving very quickly, and view it in a dialectical light. All of the remarks above about these projects must be tentative, because none of the projects has been completed yet or taken root on wide scale. The Xihai project is still under construction after breaking ground six years ago. Demolition and relocation for the Houhai project is only partially complete, and Xisi Bei has run afoul of difficulties inherent in accommodating a politically sensitive class of residents. Moreover, all the projects are under intense scrutiny by planners, developers and local authorities, who are prepared to take lessons from them and change the preservation policy and development approach if that appears desirable from any of a number of angles — political, social or financial. The entire development situation in Beijing has

been extremely fluid over the past decade, and it is impossible to predict with certainty what its outcome will be.

At the root of Beijing’s developmental fluidity is, of course, the recent and rapid introduction of market reforms, and their various political ramifications. When detailed preservationist visions for particular neighborhoods in the Old City first took shape in the early 1980s, there was no real estate market to contend with.⁴² Nor was there any fear among Old City residents of having to relocate en masse as far as the suburban counties. At that time, the primary threat to the environmental integrity of these neighborhoods was general overcrowding and neglect, plus the occasional insensitive construction projects of individual work units. Another threat was the grand modernist architectural visions of government leaders and planners themselves.⁴³ But this was secondary, because there was little chance under the centrally planned economic system that these visions could ever actually be implemented in the vast majority of neighborhoods.

Given this reference frame, it is understandable that preservation advocates welcomed any opportunity to bring the interests of preservation into line with the interests of the political leadership. After all, only the leadership had the clout and resources to maintain buildings in reasonable condition. Preservation advocates therefore welcomed the inhabitation of as much traditional housing as possible by high-level officials. As late as 1992 one East City District preservation official went so far as to propose that the entire Inner City should revert to its feudal status as the home of officials and wealthy businessmen, who could afford the privilege and obligation of occupying and maintaining traditional *siheyuan*.⁴⁴ Gradually, this view adapted to see the land market as an opportunity to fund preservation too. The authors of one of the most thorough books on the architecture of Beijing’s *siheyuan* noted that high land values in the center of the city should not be allowed to turn the Old City into a business district, but could be channeled into the preservation of old neighborhoods as exclusive, high-income residential districts.⁴⁵ Thus, when the first temptations of market-driven restoration projects began to emerge (most of them tourist-oriented, but some also geared to luxury housing), architects and planners who valued the historic environment could not resist the chance finally to build something in the classical tradition, regardless who would be the occupants.

The work of Tsinghua University’s Prof. Zhu Zixuan is an exemplary strand in this evolution. His research has contributed much to the theory of urban neighborhood and historic district preservation and redevelopment in Beijing and elsewhere in China.⁴⁶ Much of this research is based on years of devotion to the preservation planning of the Shishahai district, and he was the driving force behind the design of most of the projects that have been realized there. The first of his designs to be built at Shishahai were primarily landscape enhancements and touristic facilities conceived in the mid-1980s and built along the shore of the lakes.

When the *Wei-Gai* program began on a large scale, he was commissioned to recreate classic residential courtyard districts on the north shore of Xihai, along Ya'er Hutong on the north shore of Houhai and along Baimi Xiejie between Qianhai and Di'anmen (Figure 11, area 4). Having invested so much of his career in the research and design of the Shishahai district environment, Prof. Zhu could not refuse this commission. Moreover, he saw it as a primarily architectural opportunity — far preferable to the massive housing projects that were displacing residents elsewhere in the Old City.

Nevertheless, the Houhai experience confirmed two lessons for Prof. Zhu. The first is that, from a purely architectural standpoint, even in all-luxury-standard, classic-style environments, it is far better to preserve more of the old and mix in less of the new than to replace large areas of old housing with brand new “old-style” housing. In this respect, the project at Xisi Bei represents progress over Houhai. The second lesson, to use Jane Jacobs’s term, is that “catastrophic” changes in the economic and social status of a district are not complementary to its traditional character, no matter what architectural form these changes take. Zhu’s most recent plan for the entire “Shishahai Scenic, Historic and Cultural Tourism District” recognizes this drawback of “newly built *siheyuan* districts,” and essentially places a moratorium on their further development.⁴⁷

Municipal policy, too, evolved as a result of this experience. The Director of the Municipal Cultural Relics Bureau during the mid-1990s, Shan Jixiang, remarked in a meeting at Tsinghua University that individual courtyard restoration and rehabilitation is preferable to large-area estates of new or restored courtyards because the former at least allow for a mix of social types among the residents. By the end of 1999 this preference had become municipal policy. In the year 2000 the municipal government confirmed that no large-scale development of any kind could occur within the city’s 25 historic preservation districts.⁴⁸ It is now exploring the possibility of selectively selling courtyard houses to their current residents, on the condition that they rehabilitate them according to preservation guidelines.⁴⁹

In the shifting landscape of redevelopment and preservation policy in China’s capital, issues of housing and environmental improvement, social stability, economic growth, and cultural stewardship, are all inextricably entwined. As for the fate of Beijing’s *siheyuan*, it is clear that there will always be at least a few classic examples to serve as displays of a highly refined building tradition. But unless that tradition itself is defined in a more flexible and inclusive way — a way that allows it to continue to house the mass of Beijing’s “commonfolk” — it is doomed to an unusually extreme kind of museumization or gentrification.

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