Steering towards growth

Symbolic urban preservation in Beijing, 1990–2005

This article examines the rise of symbolic urban preservation as a means of urban growth in the spatial transformation of Beijing from 1990 to 2005. The author argues that urban preservation, often considered to be in opposition to demolition and redevelopment, is nevertheless adopted by public officials and developers in Beijing as a more sophisticated instrument to achieve urban growth. While the housing renewal programme led to the demolition of a large number of courtyard houses and the construction of modern high-rises, a variety of symbolic preservation projects were carried out by the local government to reconcile various economic and political interests. These included the designation of preservation districts, the restoration of historic monuments and the creation of cultural tourism districts. This twisted take on urban development has had negative effects on the maintenance of cultural heritage and community life in the city.

At the southern end of the Central Axis of Old Beijing, a city gate named Yongding Men was restored in 2005. First built in the fourteenth century, it was torn down in the 1950s (together with the city walls) in the construction of a socialist capital. Part of the ‘Cultural Heritage Preservation Plan for an Olympiad of Humanity,’ the restoration project is considered significant because it completes the configuration of the entire Central Axis and highlights the historic value of the Old City. Further north on the Central Axis, not far from the Forbidden City, a historic district called Qianmen was demolished in the same year that the city gate was rebuilt. The plan is to replace the centuries-old one-storey courtyard houses with two- to six-storey buildings of historical appearance for high-end residential and commercial use. None of those who lived in the area before will be allowed to move back after the redevelopment.

How to explain the paradoxical picture of urban transformation in Beijing, in which vanished historical monuments are restored while authentic urban fabric is bulldozed? Examining the dynamics of spatial restructuring in Beijing from 1990 to 2005, I argue that the mixed pattern of demolition and preservation is generated by the coexistence of two mechanisms of urban growth. The growth machine tears down old neighbourhoods and puts up modern high-rises to maximise the economic return from urban land. On the other hand, it converts selected architectural heritage...
sites into cultural showcases or new amenities, so as to placate those who object to demolition, create a better image for the city and promote the development of the tourist economy. Symbolic urban preservation is used by the growth coalitions as a more sophisticated approach to achieve urban growth in the era of globalisation.

Reflecting upon different mechanisms of urban growth, this article intends to contribute to the political investigation of how the growth machine reacts to various exogenous forces and transforms the built environment of the city. Specifically, it sheds light on the cultural and social problems of symbolic urban preservation as a product of hybrid urban growth. In the following sections, I first provide a theoretical overview of urban growth and introduce the concept of symbolic urban preservation. Then I proceed to apply the theory of symbolic urban preservation to the process of spatial transformation in Beijing between 1990 and 2005. Besides the rapidly developing housing renewal project, I also examine the government’s recent efforts as regards urban preservation, including the designation of preservation districts, the restoration of historical monuments and the creation of cultural tourism districts. Combining the theoretical and empirical strands of the article, the conclusion provides insights into the negative effects of symbolic urban preservation and offers some potential remedies.

**Preservation as growth: re-conceptualising the growth machine**

Urban preservation and urban growth are often considered to be two contradictory processes. Urban preservation refers to the maintenance and repair of existing historic structures, including historical monuments and vernacular dwellings (or ‘urban texture’: Choay, 2001; Fitch, 1982; Barthel, 1989). Urban growth, in comparison, is usually achieved through the demolition of old structures and the intensification of land use. In recent decades, however, with the changes in the world economy and in consumption patterns, the horizon of urban growth has expanded. As a result, the role of urban preservation has altered; rather than being seen as an obstacle to urban growth, it is now considered a contributor. This section theorises the changing role of urban preservation, as well as its impact on the cultural and social dimensions of cities.

The original concept of urban growth was rooted in the post-war North American context, in which three decades of almost untrammelled urban renewal drastically transformed the urban landscape (Jonas and Wilson, 1999). The growth machine theory was developed in the 1960s and 1970s to explain the rapid urban redevelopment in US cities (Molotch, 1976; Logan and Molotch, 1987). It presents a picture in which coalitions of the land-based elite expand the local economy and accumulate wealth through the intensification of land use. When decisions are to be made about historical
architectural profiles, the growth coalitions never hesitate to demolish old buildings. By replacing low-density old structures with high-density new ones, they prioritise the exchange gains of urban land over its use value.

The notion of the growth machine as a 'bulldozer' has been refined since the 1970s. The development of the new service economy, the emergence of transnational cultural consumption, and the integration of production and consumption networks at the global level have fundamentally changed the function of the city (Jonas and Wilson, 1999; Sassen, 1991; Zukin, 1991). Land is no longer the only resource that provides an economic return; instead, culture, entertainment and amenities are incorporated into the arsenal of the growth machine. Policy-makers start to use the recreational tools to enhance the image of the city, attract tourists and creative people, and promote the local economy (Jonas and Wilson, 1999; Molotch et al., 2000; Xu and Yeh, 2005; Zhang et al., 2007). Concepts like ‘consumer city’, ‘entertainment machine’ and ‘tourist bubble’ are created to describe the new dynamics of urban growth worldwide (Clark, 2004; Glaeser et al., 2001; Judd and Fainstein, 1999).

The re-conceptualisation of the growth machine changes the role of urban preservation. In recent studies on the spatial restructuring of post-industrial cities (Ren, 2008; Kwok and Low, 2002; Trasforini, 2002; While, 2006), scholars argue that historical structures are increasingly treated by public officials and developers as exotic cultural elements to attract domestic and global consumerist elites. Instead of tearing down old buildings, cities adopt the strategy of maintaining selected historical quarters and converting them into luxury entertainment districts. The posh entertainment hubs enforce the image of the place as a global city, stimulate tourism and consumption, and push up the property values in the nearby areas. The adaptive reuse and commercialisation of cultural heritage demonstrates that urban preservation becomes another instrument, a more sophisticated one than demolition, employed by the land-based elite to achieve economic growth.

The literature on post-industrial cities provides nuanced understandings of urban preservation in the pursuit of growth; however, it simplifies urban preservation as an instrument invented to obtain economic return and enhance the image of the city. The more sophisticated political considerations of the growth coalitions that shape the preservation projects are largely neglected. In this article, I argue that the complex web of overlapping and occasionally contradictory goals of the growth regime generates a pattern of symbolic urban preservation. As a booster of the growth machine, symbolic urban preservation does not necessarily end demolition but it raises new challenges to the cultural and social dimensions of the city.

The concept of symbolic urban preservation has four aspects.

1. In terms of function, symbolic urban preservation plays an active role in promoting the local economy and marketing the city, and a passive role in facilitating
demolition. It facilitates demolition by lending legitimacy to redevelopment efforts outside the preservation zones and pacifying those who object to urban renewal.

2. In terms of object, symbolic urban preservation prioritises significant monuments that have obvious appeal but ignores the broader urban texture.

3. In terms of approach, symbolic urban preservation heavily relies on methods like restoration and façade protection, which highlight selective elements of the structures but challenge their overall authenticity.

4. In terms of effect, symbolic urban preservation threatens the cultural integrity of the city and undermines the life quality of indigenous inhabitants.

Drawing on these insights, the following sections examine how symbolic urban preservation is carried out in Beijing in the service of the growth machine.

Urban renewal: the growth machine at work

The Old City of Beijing is considered one of the great treasures of urban history. The acreage of the Old City is 62.5km², about 13 per cent of the entire metropolitan area. The urban design of the Old City was laid out in the thirteenth century, based on the Chinese design philosophies of hierarchy, symmetry and unity. It is divided into four roughly concentric encirclements, each surrounded by a city wall. The 7.9km Central Axis runs south to north, and the most significant buildings are situated along it (Tung, 2001). Siheyuan (courtyard houses) and hutong (narrow lanes) are the residential types most common to Beijing. Since most courtyard houses face south to get the maximum amount of sunshine, the narrow lanes by the houses usually run from west to east. They create a chessboard street pattern and provide an ideal backdrop for historical monuments in the city (Wu, 1999).

Beijing experienced notable urban renewal when the Old and Dilapidated Housing Renewal (ODHR) programme was launched in 1990. To provide a comprehensive picture of urban renewal, we need to start with the dilapidation of historic neighbourhoods decades ago. Due to an increase in population and a shortage of housing in the 1950s, the government settled a large number of families in existing homes. The courtyard houses became extremely overcrowded and lacked basic maintenance. Many of them were turned into ‘courtyard-less compounds’ and suffered from deterioration (Fang, 2000). To solve the housing problem, the city implemented small-scale housing renewal projects in the late 1970s; however, the early projects were not effective (Fang, 2000). It was against this background that the municipality initiated the ODHR programme to improve the living conditions of inhabitants.

The ODHR programme started as a social welfare project, but it turned into an engine of real estate development before long. The transformation of the programme was prompted by land-market reform and political decentralisation. While the selling
of land has been an ideological taboo in socialist China for decades, the central government introduced a land-lease system in 1987 and Beijing adopted it in 1992 (Gaubatz, 1999; Xie et al., 2002). According to the new statutory policy, although land is still publicly owned, local government could contract-out land-use rights to private agents. The transition of land-leases into commodities significantly reshaped the housing renewal programme by creating ways for developers to participate (Fang, 2000).

Decentralisation reform (another motor of the ODHR programme) was launched in the early 1990s. It empowered and urged both the municipality and district governments to raise revenue locally (Ma and Wu, 2005). As a crucial part of political decentralisation in Beijing, the power to approve the ODHR programme was given to the district governments in 1994 (Fang, 2000). The prospect of collecting revenue and enriching themselves persuaded district officials to collaborate with real-estate developers. More importantly, by replacing old structures with modern high-rises, redevelopment projects produce a kind of ‘visible growth’. As the showcase of an economic boom, encouraging ‘visible growth’ becomes an important way for public officials to get promoted (Ma and Wu, 2005).
Huge economic and political gains from the manipulation of urban land encourage public officials and developers to walk hand-in-hand. The increased autonomy and fiscal responsibility of local officials make their ties even stronger. To attract more investment to the ODHR programme, the municipality implements a series of policies that give preference to developers, including the reduction of or exemption from land-lease fees and taxes, despite the fact that some of the privileges are in conflict with the national policy (Fang, 2000). Public officials and developers work more closely at the district level, as the district government holds the power of issuing land-leases. As affiliates of district governments, demolition companies (chat qian gong si) help developers clear the sites and remove inhabitants. More importantly, they use their networks to assist developers in building up personal connections (guanxi) with public officials (B0412).

The interlocking pro-growth regime of local government and real-estate developers in Beijing makes up what Molotch (1976) calls the ‘growth machine’. The overall goal of the ODHR programme is no longer to improve the living conditions of the majority, but to bolster development and increase gains for the powerful. Accordingly, the programme is usually managed in a pattern of real-estate development in which old neighborhoods are demolished, the sites used for commercial or luxury housing development, and the majority of residents relocated to cheaper land in the suburbs. Following this pattern, the choice of areas to be demolished is increasingly based on their location and latent land value, rather than the degree of dilapidation (Fang, 2000).

Both inhabitants and preservationists questioned the aggressive approach of housing renewal (the ‘razor’, in their words). They proposed a different approach of preserving the old neighbourhoods, reducing population densities and repairing the houses. This approach was dismissed by public officials as unfeasible. A municipal official reacted in this way (B0305):

To reduce the density of population in old neighbourhoods is too difficult. How to decide who stays and who leaves? If the houses remain one-storey after renovation, how can we get financial rewards? If there is no financial reward but only cost, which developer would want to invest in those projects? We shouldn’t depend on the government to finance everything. The government doesn’t have the money. We should respect the rules of the market.

The concern of the official reflects some of the difficulties in preserving courtyard

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1 The Demolition and Removal Companies’ formal affiliation with the local governments ended in 2004. However, the informal connection still exists. For more information, see http://www.china.org.cn/chinese/2004/Apr/528826.htm.

2 The interview codes in the article are in the form of ‘BYYXX’, in which ‘B’ refers to Beijing, ‘YY’ is the year the interview was conducted, and ‘XX’ is the number of the interview in that year.
houses. However, it reveals that, in order to minimise the cost to local government, public officials attempt to avoid fulfilling their roles in public goods provision. Instead, they link themselves with private developers to capture the economic returns of urban redevelopment. Behind the shell of housing renewal, a growth machine is at work.

Local government officials and real-estate developers are key figures in the growth coalition in Beijing, and Chinese public officials play a more dominant role than their US counterparts. In US cities, elected officials often find themselves confronted by ‘a business community that is well-organised, amply supplied with a number of deployable resources, and inclined to act on behalf of tangible and ambitious plans that are mutually beneficial to its own members’ (Stone, 1984, 292). The dominance of the business elite in US cities is largely due to the fact that they are landowners (as well as having other important resources) and thus have more discretion in making decisions. On the other hand, as major providers of campaign money for politicians, real-estate entrepreneurs are able to scrutinise the activities of local officials and administrative details (Logan and Molotch, 1987). The situation does not preclude the initiatives and direct participation of local government; nevertheless, private landownership and electoral politics in the USA give greater weight to business elites in the growth regime.

In Chinese cities, by contrast, local government is the supplier of major resources, including land. Decisions about whom to lease land to and at what price are often manipulated by local governments, especially district governments (Wu and Yeh, 1999). The primary goal for local officials in making the decisions is to produce ‘visible growth’ in order to satisfy upper-level officials. In other words, it is local officials who set the agenda for the growth regime. In doing so, they are not accountable to anyone but their boss. As Wu (2002a) points out, these dynamics create a Chinese version of the growth machine, in which the leading actor is the local state apparatus. Further, the municipality and its district governments become partners in many real-estate projects (Logan, 2002). This implies that an ‘entrepreneurial state’ is emerging in urban China (Duckett, 1998; Wu, 2002b; Walder, 1997).

The operation of the growth machine is fuelled by economic competition between district governments. In the last a few years of the 1990s, a large share of local government revenues in urban China was drawn from urban renewal and real-estate development (Fang, 2000; Logan, 2002; Wang, 2003). New Oriental Plaza (Dongcheng District), Financial Street (Xicheng District), New World Shopping Center (Chongwen District) and SOGO Plaza (Xuanwu District) are mega-projects that significantly changed the urban landscape of Old Beijing. While the projects were all approved in the name of the ODHR programme, none of them provides housing for local inhabitants. The construction of shopping centres, office towers and financial districts

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3 ‘Entrepreneurial state’ refers to a state that has direct involvement in business because of profit-seeking behaviour by individual state bureaux and their subordinate agencies (Duckett, 1998, 14).
helps local officials to reach such economic targets as district GDP, and gives the areas a modern appearance; however, it also causes the demolition of courtyard houses and the removal of hundreds of thousands of inhabitants.

With the implementation of the ODHR programme, the urban texture of Old Beijing has been severely damaged. According to the data provided by the Beijing Academy of Urban Planning, while the number of hutong exceeded 7000 in the early 1950s and was reduced to about 2000 in 1990, there were only around 1500 left in 2003 (Wang, 2003). In other words, half of them disappeared within fifty years. In 2006, the total acreage of courtyard houses shrank to 15km², accounting for just 24 per cent of the Old City. A Washington Post article commented: ‘for centuries, the architecture of Old Beijing has withstood rebels and invaders, warlords and imperialist powers, Communist central planners and Red Guards’. During the last decade of the twentieth century, the city was levelled by real-estate development (Mufson, 1997).

**Symbolic urban preservation: in the service of growth**

Urban renewal is not the only means employed by the growth machine to achieve growth. Besides the intensification of land use, the growth regime incorporates new strategies to preserve selective cultural heritage. This section examines three major preservation efforts: the designation of historical preservation districts, the restoration of the city walls and the city gate, and the revitalisation of Shishahai. By reflecting on the political dynamics of the preservation projects, it shows how urban preservation is used by politicians and developers as an engine of growth.

**The birth of historical preservation districts**

Massive urban demolition and profit-driven housing renewal in Beijing have been widely many criticised. Besides domestic dissent, the growth regime has faced increased global media exposure and international pressure from the late 1990s onwards. The voice of criticism became even stronger after Beijing was selected to host the 2008 Olympic Games. In this context, in 2000 the municipality designated 25 historical preservation districts. Two years later, it added another five. The total acreage of preservation districts represents roughly one-fifth of the Old City (Wang, 2003). Under the authorisation of the municipality, the Beijing Municipal Commission of Urban Planning (BMCUP) made detailed preservation plans for those districts (BMCUP, 2002). Since previous preservation policies dealt only with individual buildings, the designation of entire districts is considered as a great step forwards in Beijing’s urban preservation history.

After designating the districts and making the preservation plans, however, there was no real effort to turn the plans into concrete policies and carry them out. One
reason for this is the fragmented political structure in urban China (Lin, 1999; Wu, 2000; Fu, 2002). In Beijing, the authority of urban preservation is dispersed between at least five municipal agencies, including the Beijing Municipal Administration of Cultural Heritage (BMACH) and BMCUP. Some agencies are in charge of historic monuments, while others are responsible for the designation of preservation districts; some make preservation plans for old neighbourhoods, while others issue demolition certificates for the same areas. Public officials are careful to do only things that fall within their jurisdictional boundaries; otherwise they might be accused of violating the authority of other agencies, which is bad for both the interests of their bureaux and their career paths.

In this system of functional fragmentation, the preservation of historical districts falls between the boundaries of different municipal bureaux. When asked why they did not take further steps to implement preservation plans in the designated districts, one official at BMCUP answered: ‘The duty of our agency is just to make the plans, no more than that’ (B0510). On the other hand, while officials at BMACH expressed a strong will to preserve the designated districts, they felt powerless because their authority is limited to monuments (B0505). As a result, the actual procedure by which the designated areas will be preserved is ambiguous. Some preservation districts are lacking basic maintenance. For them, ‘preservation’ means only that have not been demolished. Even worse, others are ‘preserved’ as part of a wholesale redevelopment approach. For instance, in Nanchizi (a district adjacent to the Forbidden City), 206 out of 210 courtyard houses were torn down in the name of ‘preservation’ and replaced by two-storey buildings with historic-looking roofs.

The fragmented political structure of urban preservation is only part of the story. To have a deeper understanding of the puzzle of ‘designation without preservation’, we need to uncover the real intention behind designating preservation districts. There is increased demand for both urban preservation and the enduring desire for redevelopment, and designation reconciles these contradictory demands. It placates domestic and international protest about demolitions by showing that the land-based elite is attempting to protect the cultural heritage. Designation also facilitates the redevelopment of other areas. An urban planner at BMCUP who was involved in the designation process recalls (B0619):

The city government faced lots of critiques in the late 1990s when Beijing was in the age of massive demolition and massive construction (da chai da jian). The municipal leaders and developers got very frustrated, so they urged us to designate the preservation districts as soon as possible. Some municipal leaders told us, ‘Draw the boundaries of

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4 The five municipal agencies are: BMACH, BMCUP, the Beijing Municipal Construction Committee, the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Landscape and Forestry, and the Beijing Municipal Commission of Development and Reform. For more information on the specific responsibility of each bureau regarding urban preservation, see http://www.beijing.gov.cn/.
the preservation districts right away, so that we know where we can demolish and where we cannot.’

This shows that the intention behind the designation process is not to constrain the growth machine, but to facilitate its functioning. If this is the real intention, there is no incentive for the city government to implement effective preservation after the designation is made. It echoes to the situation in many US cities, where planning tools and redevelopment controls are used as a ‘Trojan horse’ to serve the interests of the growth machine (Logan and Molotch, 1987, 154).

Behind the façade of the designated preservation districts, the growth machine accelerated the speed of demolition. In 2000, the year in which 25 historic preservation districts were chosen, the municipality approved a proposal to complete the ODHR programme by 2005 (Wang, 2003; Deng, 2003). A big reason for choosing this particular deadline was to finish urban renewal before the Olympics. Following the ambitious plan, 9.34 million square metres of old houses were bulldozed between 2000 to 2005, nearly twice the number that were demolished between 1990 to 1999 (Deng, 2003). The number of the demolition companies reached a peak of more than 700 in 2002 (Bo412).

The restoration of the city walls

While the broad urban texture lacks effective protection, historic monuments receive a lot of attention from the government. The annual municipal budget for monument renovation was less than 9 million renminbi in the 1980s and the 1990s, but it increased significantly when the city launched the 330 Million Programme in 2000. Under this programme, the municipality provided the funds of 330 million renminbi for the renovations of historic monuments over three years (Long, 2003). Two years later, the Cultural Heritage Preservation Plan for an Olympiad of Humanity was initiated, and 600 million renminbi were given to the preservation of monuments (Long, 2003; Wang, 2003). Thanks to the generous financial support, a number of significant historic monuments were renovated or restored.

The restoration of the city walls is one of the largest preservation projects carried out in Beijing recently. The city walls and 16 city gates were demolished between the early 1950s and the late 1970s, despite the proposal of renowned architect and urban planner Liang Sicheng to preserve the walls and convert them into an elevated City Walls Park (Shen, 2002; Wang, 2003). The demolition was legitimised by ideological concerns, as well as the claim that the walls blocked traffic and constrained the development of a socialist capital (Wang, 2003). Preservation at the sites of the walls began in 2000. It led to the restoration of the southeastern corner of the inner city

walls, the base of the eastern Imperial city walls, and the Yongding Men gate in the Outer City. Two city walls parks were also constructed.

The restoration of the inner city walls took place between 2000 and 2002, and cost more than 700 million renminbi. Fieldwork discovered 16km of city walls at the southeastern corner of the Inner City. They had survived the demolition because many temporary shelters had been built in them in the 1960s. However, this also meant that the remaining walls were in very bad shape. The city government encouraged citizens to donate the city wall bricks that many of them had used in building their own houses. Local newspapers publicised a slogan: ‘In the past, to demolish the city walls was to love Beijing; today, to restore the city walls is also to love Beijing.’

Using the old bricks donated by citizens and some new ones, the municipality renovated the remaining walls and built a new segment. The area was finally turned into the 154,000km² Ming City Walls Relics Park, with gardens and walking paths (Kong, 2002; Zheng, 2003). As the first major restoration effort in Beijing’s urban

preservation history, the project is considered a great success by public officials. It has helped the city to rediscover a part of its memory that was forcefully erased decades ago. More importantly, the restored city walls serve as a showcase for the cultural and historical significance of the city.

Following the example of the Ming City Walls Relics Park, Dongcheng District initiated the construction of the East Imperial City Walls Site Park in 2001, and spent 800 million renminbi on the project. Since no relic of the wall remained above ground, two underground plazas were constructed to display the bases of the wall, as well as a wide pedestrian path to symbolise the eastern wall (Kong, 2001). According to local officials, the project is not only a milestone in reviving the traditional culture of Beijing, but also a great step toward the Imperial City’s designation as a UNESCO World Heritage site (Kong, 2001).

Despite the cultural significance of the project, a municipal official at BMACH reveals that the goal of the East Imperial City Walls Site Park is not just to capture the historic value of the place (Bo605):

It’s very cunning of the district governor to build the park. You know the district constructed the New Oriental Plaza\(^7\) in 2000. The project was very controversial because it caused the demolition of a large amount of well-maintained courtyard houses. Many people criticised this project. A major goal for Dongcheng District in building the wall park is actually to shift people’s focus. If they blame the district for the demolition caused by the project of the New Oriental Plaza, the governor can point to the park and say, ‘look, we have preservation’. So the building of the park is basically a strategy to shut people’s mouths. Actually, to make space for the heritage park, they demolished several historic neighbourhoods nearby. But the district never mentions this to the public.

The story of the East Imperial City Walls Site Park clearly shows how urban preservation is manipulated by the growth regime. Regardless of the cultural value of the park, the preservation project plays a sophisticated and invisible part in paving the way for the growth machine.

Another project implemented by the municipality is the restoration of Yongding Men, the central city gate of the Outer City. The project took two years (2003–05) to complete and cost more than 19 million renminbi.\(^8\) While the original Yongding Men consisted of a gate tower, an embrasure tower and a barbican, the restored version has only the gate tower. Situated at the southern end of the Central Axis, the rebuilt city gate is considered to have a unique value, because it completes the configuration of the Central Axis of Beijing, the longest central axis in the world (Gao, 2003).

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7 New Oriental Plaza is an exclusive complex of shopping malls, office buildings and hotels in the heart of the old city.

Figure 3 Yongding Men in the early twentieth century

Figure 4 The rebuilt Yongding Men in 2005
Furthermore, since the Olympic Park is located at the northern end of the Central Axis, the gate is also claimed to be a ‘new starting point’ that will enable Old Beijing to ‘embrace the future’ (Wang, 2003).

The rebuilding of Yongding Men is a typical example of how cultural heritage is selected and reinterpreted to promote urban growth. The gate is no longer thought of as the politically incorrect relic of the Imperial era, nor is it an obstacle to the construction of a socialist capital. Instead, it is repackaged as a symbol of Beijing’s superiority in urban design history and its prosperity as a global city. Despite the significant role of the project in creating a better image for the city, it poses many questions for urban preservation. First, does the rebuilt city gate have any cultural or historical value? Or is it simply a fake antique, without any authenticity? Secondly, even if the rebuilt city gate has a certain value, is it appropriate for the government to invest so much money in this project, given that many existing monuments and centuries-old courtyard houses are suffering from dilapidation? And, finally, does the restoration project stress or deny the importance of urban preservation? If demolished buildings can be restored, why should we preserve?

The revitalisation of Shishahai

Another aspect of the government’s agenda of urban preservation is the development of cultural tourist districts. In 2002, the municipality chose six Historic Preservation Districts as experimental areas in which to develop cultural tourism and revitalise the local economy (Bo620). Without any guideline from the city government on how to achieve the goals, district governments are given great discretion in managing the areas. Shishahai is the largest Historic Preservation District in Beijing, and one of the experimental areas. The revitalisation of Shishahai is also considered an important part of the Cultural Heritage Preservation Plan for an Olympiad of Humanity.

Shishahai is located at the northwestern part of the Old City. Within its 301.57ha area there are more than 40 historic monuments (including temples and royal mansions), the largest natural lake in the city, and a large historic residential area with relatively well-maintained courtyard houses (BMCUP, 2002). While Shishahai is under the administration of Xicheng District, local issues in the area (including planning and preservation) are managed by a sub-district agency named the Shishahai Scenic Area Administration (SSAA). To facilitate sustainable preservation and development in Shishahai, UNESCO and Asia Urbs conducted research there and gave their conclusions to the municipality and Xicheng District. However, their suggestions did not have any substantial impact on the policy (Bo522, Bo523). Under the lead of

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Asia Urbs is a programme launched by the EU in 1998 to facilitate cooperation between local governments in EU Member States and Asian countries in urban preservation and redevelopment. For more information, see http://www.asiaurbschn5-08.org.
district government and the local administration, Shishahai has been transformed into a ‘bar district’.

Bars first emerged in Shishahai in 2003; at first there were only a few (around ten). In the heart of the historic district, these bars provide a combination of traditional Chinese culture and Western-style entertainment. The unique juxtaposition of the old and the new, the Chinese and the foreign, has generated a hybrid diversity that makes the area increasingly popular with foreign visitors and young urban professionals. The district government quickly realised the economic potential of the bars, and strongly supported their growth. The vice-governor of Xicheng District commented on the its policy towards the bars:

The emergence of the bars suggests that history and recreation finds a juncture in the revitalisation of the historic district. We are glad to see the bars succeed. At the early stage, the management approach of small businesses and low costs brings vitality to this area, but this stage is going to be over soon. The government’s policy at the next stage is to encourage bar owners to increase inputs, expand the scope of the businesses and improve their condition. The government is not prepared to forcefully control the number of the bars, nor are we going to enhance the quality of the bars unrealistically. The development of the bars should be ultimately determined by the market.¹⁰

The statement shows that the revitalisation of Shishahai is driven by the expectation of economic returns from investment in business and tourism. To maximise the economic return, the local government takes a market-oriented approach to encourage the growth of bars without effective regulations on the commercial activities. Under such policies, the number of bars increased to more than 120 by 2005 (B0610). Almost all the houses facing main streets or surrounding the lake have become bars. Public space, including the lake shore and the pavements, have been colonised. In an old street named Yan Dai Xie Jie, a centuries-old Taoist temple has been turned into a bar.

To enlarge the business scope of the bars, SSAA built a ‘bar street’ called Lotus Lane on the banks of the lake in 2003. The construction of Lotus Lane led to the demolition of the old street market, where the locals used to watch the lotus and enjoy seasonal food in summer. At Lotus Lane, high-end bars, cafés, shops and restaurants are located in new two-storey buildings that mimic the ‘historical’ style. It has become one of the most popular places of entertainment in Beijing among tourists and young professionals, especially at night. More importantly, it enriches the district government and SSAA with rents of more than 5.5 million renminbi each year (B0610). Considered a big factor in revitalising Shishahai, Lotus Lane was nominated Tea, Art and Bar District by Xicheng District and Beijing Municipal Bureau of Commerce in 2005.¹¹

With the boom in bars and the increase in tourists, various tours and cultural activities have been introduced to attract more visitors. The district government and the local administration are committed to maintaining the balance between economic development and cultural preservation.

¹⁰ See http://news.rednet.com.cn/Articles/2003/06/429692.HTM.
¹¹ See http://beijing.qianlong.com/3825/2005/07/06/1860@2708301.htm.
festivals take place in Shishahai. Some tour companies organise a *hutong* tour to show tourists around the neighbourhood using pedicabs. Others provide boats to visitors so that they could enjoy sightseeing on the lake. Besides the popular *hutong* tours and the lake tours, many cultural festivals are held in Shishahai. The Tourism and Culture Festival and the Olympic Cultural Festival are two major activities held annually (Bo612). The cultural festivals turned the historic district into an ‘outdoor theatre’.

Motivated by the prospect of economic returns from recreation, the SSAA was no longer satisfied with being the regulator of entertainment activities, and has become a player itself. It established its own tourism company in 2003 (Bo610, Bo613). Because it has a monopoly on local resources, it can institute many policies that are preferential to its company. Besides the franchise for organising the *hutong* tours and lake tours in the most desirable areas, the company has special permission to organise tours of royal mansions and courtyard houses, which private tourism companies are not allowed to enter (Bo610). The monopoly of the SSAA in local commercial activities leads to illegal and unregulated competition. An urban planner from Tsinghua University who works with SSAA said (Bo614):
The administration wants us to help it to regulate commercial activities and solve the problems of the area, such as the deterioration in the urban environment and illegal competition. Actually, most of the problems in the area are caused by the administration itself and its own company.

The adaptive reuse of heritage resources has created new urban amenities and turned the historic neighbourhood into an entertainment district that appeals to the domestic and international consumerist elite. While the commodification of heritage resources has improved the local economy, it does not necessarily contribute to the preservation of the historical district. Excessive commodification tends to undermine the cultural significance of the area. For instance, the renovations made to the old houses by the bar-owners tend to damage the historical structures; unregulated commercial activities (such as pedicab tours) often destroy the peaceful atmosphere of the old neighbourhood. In contrast to the excessive reuse of cultural heritage, genuine steps to preserve the historical district are absent. To prepare for the Olympics, new preservation plans were carried out in 2005; however, they focused on the improvement

Figure 6: Hutong tours in Shishahai

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of tourist facilities, without much attempt to maintain and protect historical structures
in the district (B0613, B0614).

Besides the harm caused to the aesthetic unity of the area, the creation of the
entertainment district has also had negative impacts on the social dimensions of
the neighbourhood. First, while the recreation projects enrich local governments and
private business owners, they provide few economic benefits to the local community.
Most inhabitants of Shishahai are working-class people with low or medium incomes.
Very few of them have the capacity to run their own businesses in their rapidly
commercialising neighbourhood. The only chance for them to obtain an economic
benefit is to rent their houses to bar- or shop-owners from outside the district, and this
option is open only to those whose houses face the street or the lake (B0503, B0615).
In addition, since most bars and shops like to hire young, cheap migrant workers,
the inhabitants are also deprived of job opportunities in the booming local service
economy (B0503, B0618).

Secondly, urban revitalisation does not help inhabitants to improve their housing
quality. Residents claim that although the district government claimed that there were
plans for housing renovation before the recreation projects took off, nothing has yet
been done (B0415, B0518). The busy commercial streets and the lake-front receive a
lot of attention from the local government, while vast areas of old housing stock sink
into dilapidation.

Thirdly, the creation of urban amenities does not enhance the quality of life for
the inhabitants; instead, it generates inconvenience. Since the majority are working-
class people, they generally cannot afford to visit the expensive bars and restaurants in
their neighbourhood. Nonetheless, they have to suffer from the associated problems,
such as the loss of public space, the noise of the bars at night, and traffic jams caused
by pedicab tours (B0415, B0503, B0518).

A process of Disneyfication is at work in Shishahai. Heritage resources have
been commercialised in the service of the global consumerist elite. The creation of
urban amenities facilitates urban growth but undermines the cultural significance
of old neighbourhoods, and adversely affects the lifestyle and wellbeing of local
communities. Shishahai is neither the first nor the only historical district to suffer the
effects of Disneyfication. Liulichang Cultural District in Beijing was one of the first
to be remoulded and commercialised in the early reform era. In recent years, while
Shishahai has been converted into a luxury entertainment district, similar processes
have taken place in Xintiandi (Shanghai; Ren, 2008), Jinli (Chengdu) and Fuzimiao
(Nanjing). These processes raise serious concerns about the cultural and social impacts
of such projects.
Conclusions

The notion of urban growth has changed since the post-war era with the emergence of transnational cultural consumption and the rise of global cities. Consequently, urban renewal is no longer the only tool used by the growth machine to capture economic returns. Urban preservation has been adopted by local officials and developers as a more sophisticated way to achieve urban growth. Through the investigation of spatial restructuring in Beijing from 1990 to 2005, this article has analysed how redevelopment and preservation efforts have coexisted and generated symbolic urban preservation. While the ODHR programme intensified land use by tearing down old courtyard houses and putting up modern structures with higher densities, a variety of preservation projects were carried out by local governments to smooth out the functioning of the growth machine, create a better image for the city and promote tourism.

As a product of the hybrid pattern of urban growth, symbolic urban preservation reconciles various and often contradictory interests, demands and goals. Besides maintaining selected aspects of the cultural heritage and converting them into urban amenities, it also facilitates demolition by lending legitimacy to redevelopment efforts. To better serve the growth machine, symbolic urban preservation is highly selective in terms of the object and the approach of preservation. In Beijing, while significant monuments with obvious audience potential (such as the city walls) were restored, a large number of residential areas were demolished. Even though some old neighbourhoods are designated as preservation districts, there is no effective policy to protect them from demolition or dilapidation. A few designated districts have been turned into entertainment districts, where heritage resources have been reused or commercialised.

The devastating impacts of urban renewal on the built environment and human conditions are well documented, whereas the negative effects of symbolic urban preservation have yet to be fully recognised. As this article shows, symbolic urban preservation prioritises monuments over urban texture, exploits the economic value of cultural heritage without protecting it, and entertains visitors at the cost of the original inhabitants. Solving these problems requires a more balanced view of urban preservation. First, we should effectively preserve both individual monuments and the urban fabric. Without ordinary residential blocks, the city will lose its character, and historic monuments will become little more than decorations within the modern panorama. Secondly, the reuse of cultural heritage should be sustainable, or it will damage the cultural heritage and result only in short-term gains. Finally, the creation of urban amenities for consumers should be balanced against the interest of the inhabitants. If we do not respect the way of life in local communities, urban preservation will become an empty shell and a new source of social inequality.
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