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Harbin's Past, Modern Style

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By James Carter

Historical preservation in China's ever-growing cities is a challenge. Transformations to Beijing and Shanghai are best documented (for example, as evocatively narrated by Michael Meyer in his *Last Days of Old Beijing*), but dozens of cities, up and down the coast especially, are witnessing historically rapid change, and a rapid change to their histories.

Up north, the unique architecture of Harbin is among those being threatened, and like those other cities, the losses will be serious and permanent.

When I first visited Harbin, in the early 1990s, the city's architecture was shabby, but magnificent. Russian-designed onion domes and spires are Harbin's signature, but they were just one element. Near my dormitory, the former Danish embassy—then a kindergarten—resembled a fairy-tale castle. The city's mosque, built in the 1920s, seemed to combine Islamic and art nouveau influences. Unique to the city, in the Fujiadian district—Harbin's "Chinatown"—was the "Chinese Baroque" style, found nowhere else. Developed when Harbin was truly cosmopolitan (because of the Trans-Siberian Railway, it was closer to Europe than any other Chinese city and boasted a sizable population of Russians), this style blended European and Chinese with a result that was neither Chinese nor European, yet both Chinese and European.



Harbin streetscape

A June [China Daily](#) article discussing ongoing changes to Harbin's streetscape shows that this idea of Chinese Baroque has taken a new turn. The city government, eager to spur development in this economically depressed metropolis, is razing millions of square meters in the city center and replacing the old with new buildings intended to recapture the architectural sensibility of the structures being torn down. The new development style, also named "Chinese Baroque," is meant to be modern and efficient, while maintaining the city's

architectural richness. But in the process the very buildings that made up Harbin's older diversity are being lost.

During that first trip to Harbin, my letters and calls home were not filled with romance or exoticism. The city was dirty and crowded, with few conveniences—living there was fascinating, but difficult. My parents' image of the city, though, changed when I gave my father a gift of a coffee-table book of Harbin architecture. It featured dozens of the city's buildings, constructed from the 1890s to the 1950s, blending the work of designers from China, Russia, Japan, Britain, France, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, the United States, and others. My father doubted he would ever visit Harbin (and indeed, he's yet to make the trip), but seeing this architectural cornucopia—dilapidated though it was—made him want to go. I don't think he is alone in being fascinated from a distance by Harbin's surprisingly jumbled cityscape, but I don't think many will take a long journey to China's northeastern corner knowing that what they will find there are not original structures but rather modern reproductions with European-style facades.

Chinese Baroque, the sequel, will certainly maintain a sense of Harbin's unique identity. But it will do so in the soulless, too-perfect spirit of Shanghai's Xiantiandi or Nanjing's 1912, Beijing's Qianmen dajie or any of the other dozens of projects that remodel China's architectural past in user-friendly packages. Soon, China's major cities may all be unique...in exactly the same way.

Photo via Asian Wave Magazine.

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