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Article:

Ren, X. orcid.org/0000-0002-6086-616X (2020) Xiang Ren on reading grassroots architecture in Beijing's conservation area - Hutong Mushroom By Han Li and Qiuye Jin. *arq: Architectural Research Quarterly*, 24 (3). pp. 295-298. ISSN 1359-1355

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135520000330>

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Abstract:

A review of 'Hutong Mushroom,' a highly illustrated architectural and ethnographical survey of the contemporary informal buildings and structures which coexist within the traditional fabric of courtyard houses in Beijing.

reading grassroots architecture in Beijing's conservation area

Hutong Mushroom

Han Li and Qiuye Jin

Beijing, China Architecture & Building Press, 2018

ISBN: 9787112219179

Hb, pp. 174.

RMB 68.00

Hutong Mushroom, a highly illustrated book in both Chinese and English, is based upon a collaborative research-led teaching project which was led by contemporary architectural practitioner Han Li and theorist Qiuye Jin, and supported by 50 student-researchers.¹ The book radically shifts the prevailing academic focus on Beijing's traditional courtyard house – Hutong – from its formal historical preservation of heritage buildings, to the informal contemporary conservation of “grassroots architecture”.²

‘Hutong’ is a local archetype in the city of Beijing, and specifically refers to the built heritage type of traditional courtyard house. It originated from Imperial Beijing, yet is facing constant challenges, such as contrasting views on authenticity between its daily users and outsider experts, in the discourse of contemporary conservation and regeneration, mainly because of its ambiguous ownership status and decaying infrastructure.³ The idea of “grassroots architecture” refers to those informally built structures inside the city's most traditional Hutong fabric, which have been produced by and for the local people in the past decades. All “grassroots architecture” are self-built and used to solve the general sanitary or living issues of decayed Hutong buildings, either as washrooms or extended habitable rooms. They are the products of constant negotiations between public and private, rooms and courtyard, buildings and neighborhoods.

Much research has been undertaken on Hutong design in terms of its traditional architectural and heritage value,⁴ but *Hutong Mushroom* is the first intellectual attempt to understand and vividly document the ongoing contemporary architectural elements evolved from - and coexisting with - this traditional building typology. This is particularly important in the broader context of Beijing, whilst the regeneration of the traditional Hutong conservation area is progressing much slower compared with other rapidly urbanizing parts of this Chinese mega-city.

Hutong Mushroom is heavily based on visual ethnographies and architectural representations, which easily reminds readers of Japanese practice Atelier Bow-wow's early outputs, such as *Pet Architecture* and *Made in Tokyo*, from a neighboring context with a similar interest to those “Da-me architecture” stimulated by a fast urbanism.⁵ But unlike the extremely neat articulation of black and white drawings with the thinnest line weight in those two far-reaching and seminal publications, *Hutong Mushroom* presents a visually messy, inhabited, and weathered image of “grassroots architecture” from more than 100 selected examples and through a deliberate retreat from classical architectural representational methods, such as rendered elevations and handmade models. Documented through use of old-fashioned architectural representation with novel anthropological and ethnographical perspectives, *Hutong Mushroom* presents a frozen slice of the everyday from one individual self-build structure to another, which collectively make the contemporary Hutong aura even without being fully categorized by academia as a part of the Hutong oeuvre as yet.

One of the book's co-authors, Han Li - who also co-founded Drawing Architecture Studio based in Beijing - has already received international recognition in recent years, through his extremely-detailed, large-scaled axonometric drawing projections of diffident pieces of Beijing.⁶ Han Li's opening to *Hutong Mushroom* asks an open-ended question – more than providing an answer – about how to conduct contemporary urban study through architectural methods in a rapidly developing context like Beijing. Li traces and questions the post-war theoretical attempts towards an autonomous architecture led by Western theorists such as Peter Eisenman and John Hejduk.

In the following 125 pages of this 174-page-book, each page presents a freestanding image of a selected example of “grassroots architecture”, through either a handmade model [1, 2], or an elevational or perspective drawing [3 – 6], based on close observations and measurements, and presented with neither descriptive texts nor captions. In this way, the majority of the research in this book secures an autonomous presence as the observed object itself, rather than the representation with any cultural burden from a conventional Chinese approach to architectural research on Hutong. Each measured example of “grassroots architecture” is visually different from the others, in terms of the scale and use, but there exists a clear common grammar among them. They speak an old language which is persistently practiced by ordinary users and laypersons from generations to generations, in order to accommodate their changing needs towards a more decent way of living, if not surviving, in the Hutong area. Specific building materials and construction techniques vary from time to time, but the underlying structure to generating this grassroots form stays unchanged – which is exactly the author's fundamental research statement behind this book and after the research project.

The closing comments by the book's co-author, Qiuye Jin, proposes a more theoretical agenda of the “grassroots architecture” of Hutong through four interpretations – “shameless honesty”, “material super-collage”, “natural transformation of space”, and “complexity of formal meaning”.⁷ Thinking outside the sanitized environment of the academic world, Jin celebrates the complications, roughness, provisional nature and compromise in this “grassroots architecture”, in contrast to fantasy of the perfect product. The conclusion also clarifies the intellectual origin of the humorous title of this book, which was inspired by Kazuo Shinohara's statement that (traditional) “houses are (like) mushrooms”.⁸ None of the structures are the same; just like no two mushrooms are. Most of the world's traditional dwellings, including Beijing's Hutong, have physically evolved in a self-referential way throughout history. The contemporary “grassroots architecture” which has appeared in the Hutong conservation area echoes this self-referential quality. This suggests an intellectual transferability of an ethnography-based architectural methodology, as proposed and tested by this book, for application elsewhere in the world, where there is a need to read the informal urbanism emerging from the traditional conservation areas more closely.

Peter Blundell Jones noticed the methodological challenge of the ethnographical and social-anthropological approach to architecture, particularly to those architectures without architects; that “the raw material is direct observation of practices and oral accounts about what people do and why they do it, but for this reason it is primarily in the present tense”.⁹ This relates to a fundamental philosophical question about reading architecture, that whether what it is determines how it works, or vice versa. *Hutong Mushroom* is clearly a manifestation of the former, which has shown an existential approach to explore what the contemporary Hutong's “grassroots architecture” is, visually and physically, devoid of any attempted debates on meaning or memory. This can lead to an argument that *Hutong Mushroom* is not completed without intellectual blind spots. Without a historical mapping of the locations and creative adjacencies between these self-build structures, or at least making an as-found general layout map at the neighborhood scale, the selection and the presentation of more than a hundred building objects seems relatively random, and lacks a stronger intellectual justification. In the meantime, *Hutong Mushroom* presents the anonymous architectural object itself, which missed an opportunity to more deeply interpret its relationships to its diverse users' everyday lives. The repetitive routines, spatial practices, and communal activities should frame the “grassroots architecture” not only as a thin and amateur architectural product, but also to be a thicker socio-spatial process.

But if these are shortcomings, both authors have nonetheless demonstrated the potential of *Hutong Mushroom* to join a long intellectual lineage of architectural study, which strives to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of those ordinary built environments without architects' involvements. This lineage has already been contributed by Maki Fumihiko, Bernard Rudofsky, Hassan Fathy, Giancarlo de Carlo, Amos Rapoport, and Paul Oliver, just to name a few. However, *Hutong Mushroom* does not claim that 'architecture is too important to leave to the architects'.¹⁰ On the contrary, it is a reaffirmation that architecture without architects is still important to leave to contemporary architects, through their creative re-documentation, re-interpretation, and perhaps most of all, re-imagination.

Notes and References

¹ Han Li and Qiuye Jin, *Hutong Mushroom* (Beijing: China Architecture & Building Press, 2018), pp.169-171.

The research project "Urban Studies Degree Zero Series" includes a 4-week undergraduate first year teaching project at School of Architecture, Beijing University of Civil Engineering and Architecture, where the co-author Qiuye Jin is a Professor of Architecture.

² Han Li, 'Don't Ask Me What Urban Studies Is', in *Hutong Mushroom*, ed. by Han Li and Qiuye Jin (Beijing: China Architecture & Building Press, 2018), p.20.

³ Shuishan Yu, 'Courtyard in Conflict: the transformation of Beijing's Siheyuan during revolution and gentrification', in *The Journal of Architecture*, 22:8 (2017), pp.1337-1365.

⁴ See for example, Liangyong Wu, *Rehabilitating the Old City of Beijing: a project in the Ju'er Hutong neighbourhood* (Vancouver: UBC press, 1999).

⁵ Momoyo Kajijima, Junzo Kuroda and Yoshiharu Tsukamoto, *Made in Tokyo* (Tokyo: Kajima Institute Publishing, 2001), p.9.

⁶ Particularly the highly-successful architectural graphic project *A Little Bit Beijing* directed by Han Li and Yan Hu since 2013, with three series on the three most fashionable places in urban Beijing -- Sanlitun, 798 Art District and Nan lu o gu xiang. See for example, Han Li and Yan Hu, *A Little Bit Beijing: Nan lu o gu xiang* (Shanghai: Tongji University Press, 2018).

⁷ Qiuye Jin, 'A Lesson From Hutong', in *Hutong Mushroom*, ed. by Han Li and Qiuye Jin (Beijing: China Architecture & Building Press, 2018), pp.158-67.

⁸ Ibid. p.163.

⁹ Peter Blundell Jones, *Architecture and Ritual* (New York; London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), p.12.

¹⁰ Giancarlo De Carlo, 'Architecture's Public', in *Architecture and Participation*, ed. by Peter Blundell Jones, Doina Petrescu and Jeremy Till (Abingdon: Spon Press, 2007), pp.3-22.



Figure 1 A house transplanted onto an existing foundation, model in wood and cardboard



Figure 2 An Internet Bar using the interstitial space between civil electricity components, model in paper and metal

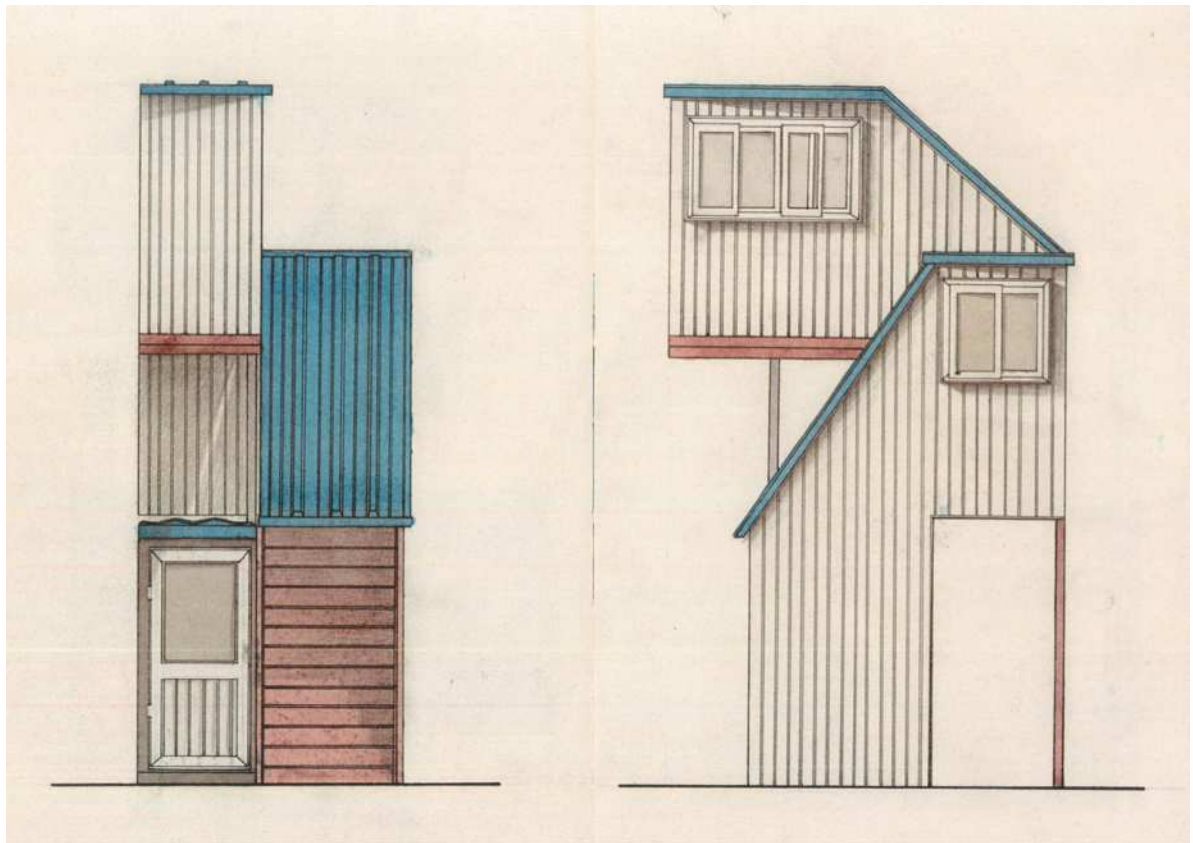


Figure 3 Drawing of the front and the side of an Internet Bar

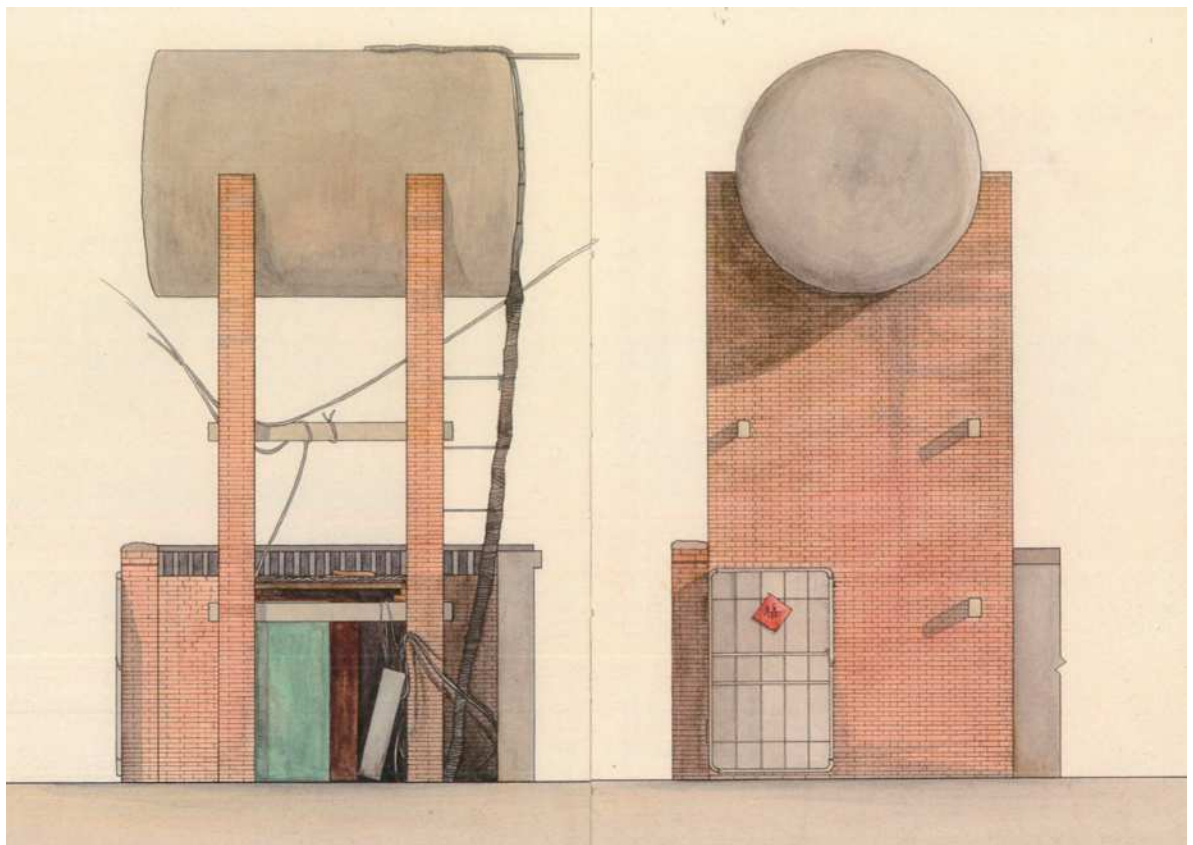


Figure 4 Drawing of a house set beneath a disused structure

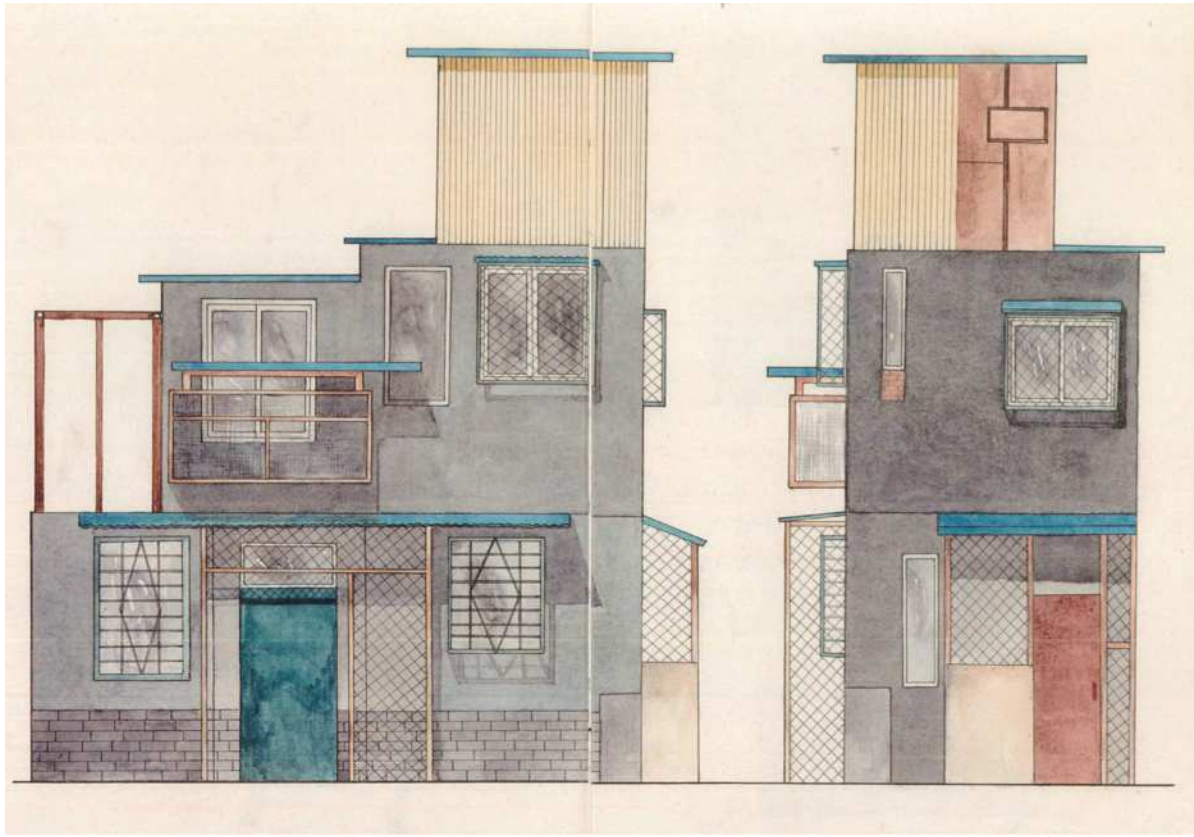


Figure 5 Drawing of a three-floor concrete house with self-build elements in light-weight, affordable industrial materials

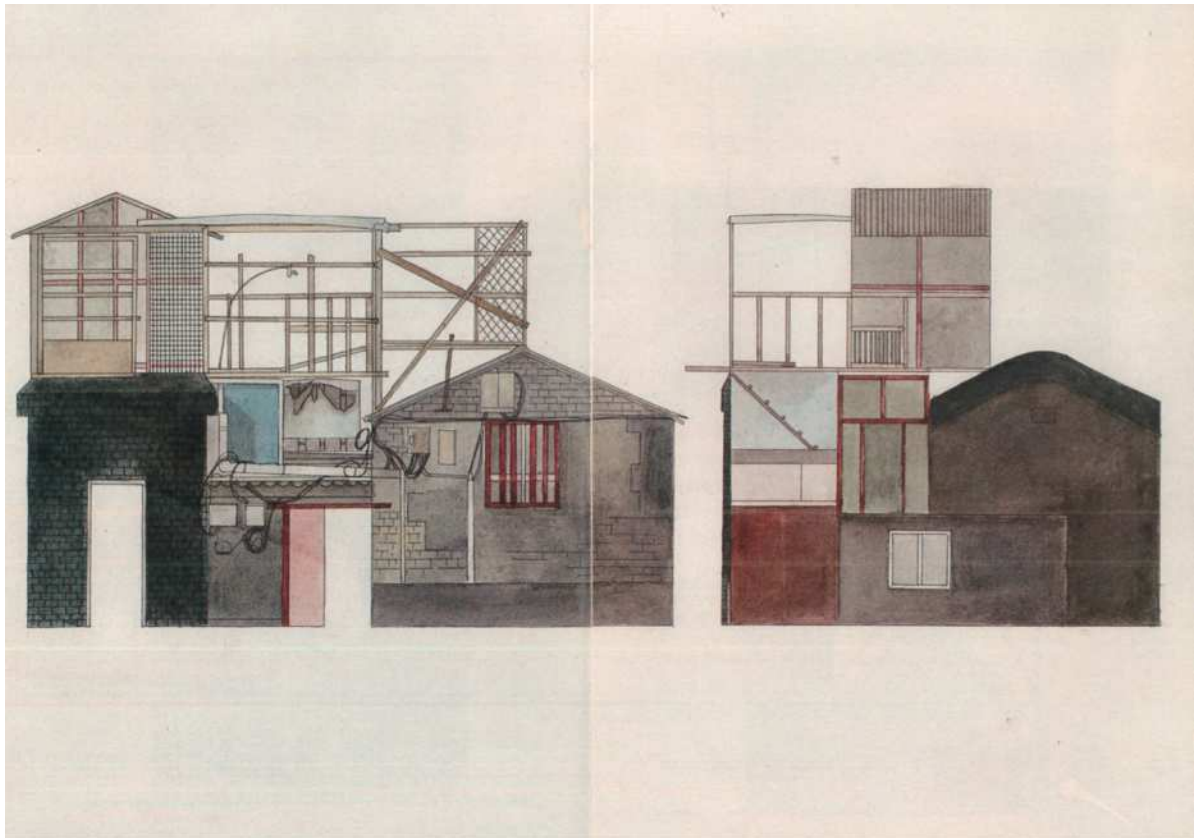


Figure 6 Drawing of temporary rooms and structures upon a traditional Hutong building