

**Preserving Beijing's Old City:  
The Vision and Reality of Historic Conservation Planning**

by

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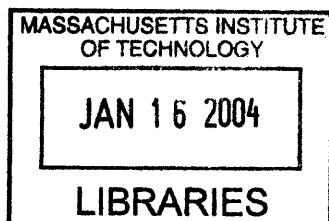
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Beatrice B. Chen

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## Abstract

In 2000, the Beijing Municipal Planning Commission drew up a conservation plan for the 25 historic areas in Beijing's Old City. The main principles for the conservation plan were as follows: 1) To preserve the traditional cityscape and hutongs, 2) To ensure the authenticity of the preserved heritage, 3) To implement preservation using a gradual and measured method, 4) To improve the infrastructure and living conditions of the local residents, and 5) To encourage public participation.

The residential district of Nanchizi was one of the 25 designated historic areas. In 2001, the area became the pilot site for the implementation of the conservation plan. In June 2002, demolition crews arrived at Nanchizi ready to destroy the courtyard homes. The resulting transformation of Nanchizi reveals that the plan did not succeed in preserving the historic area.

This thesis explains why this initial implementation of the historic conservation plan failed to achieve the principles of the plan and examines the causes of this disparity between the vision and the reality of conservation planning in Beijing. It argues that the cause of the disparity between vision and reality lies in the competing visions of those involved in the planning process and that certain visions are valued over others. This cause stems from the inability of planning institutions and processes to respond to the political and economic transitions of China in the past decade. The thesis concludes that in order to succeed in conservation, the function and process of planning must be reconsidered. In addition, the discourse on conservation should also be reexamined in order to ensure that other designated conservation districts of Beijing do not suffer the same fate as the Nanchizi historic area.

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On a personal note, I am forever grateful to my parents and grandparents for their “leaps of faith.” I also feel blessed to have great friends and roommates, without whom I would never have survived the past two years. Finally, this thesis with all its imperfections is dedicated to my dear friend Maile Hale (2.14.75 – 9.11.01). I hope that this thesis possesses just as much potential as she had.

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## Introduction

The people of Beijing were led to believe that the government's conservation planning efforts of the 25 historic areas would herald Beijing into a new era of redevelopment – one that would strike a harmonic balance between modernization and preservation. The last thing the residents of the Nanchizi conservation area expected was the wholesale demolition of their neighborhood. Yet, this was the result of the pilot project for the conservation plan of the 25 historic areas.

A residential neighborhood at the heart of the Old City, the Nanchizi area represents the typical residential fabric of Old Beijing: rows of single-story courtyard houses along the narrow tree-lined lanes. What's more, among this architectural heritage of Beijing resides a lively community of families, many of whom have been there for fifty years. On any given afternoon, the lanes outside the homes would be filled with activity, from chess playing to chatting, the neighbors socialize and look out for each other. The physical environment of Nanchizi and many other neighborhoods in Beijing's Old City has inspired this "way of life" that is familiar to the residents of Beijing. This form of architectural and the cultural heritage are unique to Beijing, but much of this heritage is being destroyed at an alarming rate as China strive to demonstrate its economic growth in the form of high rise apartments and shopping malls.

China is not alone in this phenomenon of the disappearing Asian city; in the past few decades, cities around Asia have seen their historic and cultural heritage destroyed under the wrecking ball and replaced with nondescript skyscrapers and concrete super highways. Unless the building is a national historic monument, it could be torn down. For a long time, Chinese cities escaped the bulldozer and managed to preserve the charm, elegance and vitality of the historic urban fabric. Since the Chinese economy's unprecedented growth in the 1980s Chinese cities have followed in the footsteps of other Asian cities and by the end of the 1990s, much of Beijing's historic fabric has been demolished.

In the summer of 2002, I had the opportunity to work on a documentary project in Beijing that explored the implications of this fast-paced development on the historic urban fabric. For the documentary film, we wanted to produce a coherent narrative of the process of Beijing's urban transformation: from the historic urban fabric of the courtyard houses in

the hutongs to the modern high rise apartment complexes. Throughout the summer, we attempted to capture the lifestyles of residents in the courtyard houses and the modern apartments; we asked the residents about their views on Beijing's development; we also interviewed those involved in the development process, including planners, academics, developers and advocates. Because we intended to present an objective portrait of the urban development process, we sought out diverse perspectives on the subject, both on and off camera.

Coincidentally, a controversy surrounding the future of a historic neighborhood was brewing. That neighborhood was Nanchizi, a conservation district designated as such by the Beijing Municipal Government in 1990 and identified as the pilot site for conservation in 2001. In May 2002, the residents received notice that their homes would be demolished in mid-June. When we began filming in early June, the Chinese character for demolition, "chai" had already been painted onto the walls of the courtyard houses in Nanchizi while the demolition workers had begun knocking down the houses.

Given my interest in examining the challenges of preserving historic and cultural heritage within the context of fast-paced development, I was fascinated by the events unfolding at this conservation site. This thesis attempts to uncover the Nanchizi conservation project from its inception to its implementation through personal interviews, site visits and printed sources. By tracing the development of the conservation plan for the 25 historic districts and the implementation of the Nanchizi pilot project, the thesis examines why the vision of the conservation plan could not be transformed into reality in this pilot project. The in-depth investigation of the Nanchizi conservation project provided me with a lens to understand the current processes and institutions of conservation planning in Beijing.

In exploring why and how Nanchizi turned out the way it did, I have determined that the disparity between the vision and the reality of the Nanchizi conservation plan stems from the inability of the planning process to respond to the political, economic and social transition undergone by China in the past decade. Moreover, I have discovered that in Beijing, conservation cannot be separated from urban planning and urban planning is inextricably linked to politics. Recognizing these inter-linking relationships, this thesis argues that fundamental transformation in the politics of planning and the interpretation of conservation is necessary to lay the foundation for practicing effective urban conservation that integrates the built and the socio-cultural heritage in the long run.

The thesis is organized as follows

Chapter one provides a brief overview of the evolution of historic preservation in Beijing. I begin with the origin of the Old City of Beijing and go on to highlight notable moments of historic preservation, or lack thereof in Beijing from the early years of the Republic to the present day. Historically, Beijing's political leaders have determined what is worth preserving and what is not worth preserving; the decision is not open to discussion. The chapter also explains the conservation planning process for the 25 historic areas.

Chapter two presents a comprehensive narrative of the pilot conservation project at Nanchizi, from its conception to its execution. I point out the origin of the conservation planning for the 25 historic areas and trace the planning process applied to Nanchizi. The key questions addressed are: what were the initial objectives for the conservation of Nanchizi and what became of those goals?

Chapter three examines why these initial objectives were not met. I argue that there were competing visions for the conservation planning of Nanchizi and because certain visions were valued over others, the initial objectives were not achieved.

Chapter four evaluates conservation planning within the context of urban planning in Beijing. I highlight the planning issues that led to the failure to achieve the main principles for conserving Nanchizi and conclude by proposing that reform in the planning process may be a necessary precondition to long term success in planning.

Before planning reform can occur, however, there is a need to reframe the discourse on conservation. The concluding chapter briefly examines how conservation planning is governed and interpreted in three conservation cases in Asia, before considering the possibility of a conservation planning process that is equitable and effective.

# Chapter One A Brief Overview of Historic Preservation in Beijing

This chapter provides a brief overview of the evolution of historic preservation in Beijing. I begin with the origin of the Old City of Beijing and go on to highlight notable moments of historic preservation, or lack thereof in Beijing from the early years of the Republic to the present day. Historically, Beijing’s political leaders have determined what is worth preserving and what is not worth preserving; the decision is not open to discussion. The chapter also explains the conservation planning process for the 25 historic areas.

## Origins of Old Beijing

The “Old City” of Beijing, as we know it today, originated in the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) when cities were planned according to traditional planning principles that emphasized unity, symmetry and hierarchy. Thus Beijing was planned as a single, three-dimensional entity and resembled a work of art. The famous architect and scholar of Chinese architectural history Liang Sicheng argued that “we must first of all realize the value

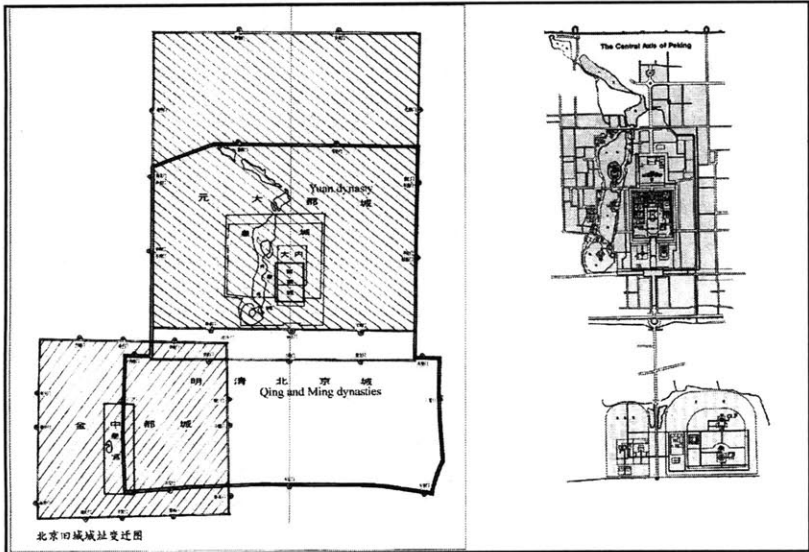


Figure 1. The central north-south axis of Beijing has been preserved since the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368).

of the wonderful structure which gives the city its intrinsic character. Beijing’s architecture as an entire system is the most intact anywhere in the world and as a most extraordinary and precious work of art, it still retains its vitality and maintains its tradition. This should be the point of departure for any attempt to understand the city. The majority of

monuments in fact are not free-standing buildings; rather they are often architectural complexes, each of which consists of quite a few buildings interrelated in a particular manner.



This feature in itself is the city's most valuable contribution to art and architecture."<sup>1</sup>

This architectural system essentially remained unaltered through the Ming (1369-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties despite shifts in the location of the city.<sup>2</sup> The rulers of the Ming and Qing dynasties conformed to the traditional Chinese planning principles and thus ensured the physical continuity of the imperial capital. The imperial capital of Beijing under the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties all abided by a geometrical plan with a central axis running south to north that divided the city in half. The most important buildings of Beijing were situated along this central axis that eventually spanned 7.9 kilometers: the Imperial Palace, the Bell Tower, the Drum Tower, the Temple of Heaven and nine city gates. The street layout was formed in relation to the central axis with major avenues running parallel to the central axis while narrower streets ran from east to west. Consequently, the street blocks are rectangular and the narrower streets or hutong are lined up with courtyard house residences or siheyuan that are also rectangular in shape. The arrangement was like a chessboard: "Ten thousand houses are like a game of chess, The streets are like market garden plots."<sup>3</sup> The comparison to the chessboard not only emphasized the order of the city plan but also the hierarchy of a patriarchal social system transfigured onto an urban plan; the imperial buildings were at the center, the aristocracy lived in majestic courtyard houses near the central axis while the common folks lived in basic courtyard houses further from the central axis.

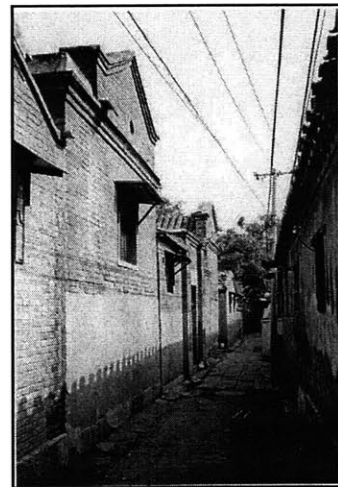


Figure 2. A typical *hutong*.

The organization of the features in the city was based on relationships: "the different types of buildings and complexes match each other perfectly; they have achieved a perfect relationship with the plan of Beijing as a whole."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the homes of ordinary residents had grey rooftops in order to create a contrast with the yellow rooftops of the imperial court and the irregularly shaped lakes Houhai and Beihai were created to complement the rectangular grid of the city.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Liang, Sicheng quoted in Wu, Liangyong, *Rehabilitating the Old City of Beijing: A Project in the Ju'er Hutong Neighborhood*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1999, 10.

<sup>2</sup> Pirazzoli-T'Serstevens, Michele, *Living Architecture: Chinese*, London: McDonald Press, c.1971, 49.

<sup>3</sup> A poem by Bai Juyi (776-846) quoted in Pirazzoli-T'Serstevens, 45.

<sup>4</sup> Liang Sicheng quoted in Wu, 15.

<sup>5</sup> Wu, 14.

The courtyard house (siheyuan) is the traditional vernacular architecture typical to Beijing. Similar to the plan for Beijing, the spatial organization of the courtyard house is also based on



Figure 3. A classic courtyard house.

the hierarchical system of Chinese society. The classic siheyuan is a quadrangle compound consisting of four sides facing an open courtyard in the center. The house is one storey in height and surrounded by a wall so that the actual house is not visible from the street. The main building faces south in order to catch the maximum amount of sunlight and the rooms along this row belong to the head

of the household. The rooms on the eastern and the western sides of the house are generally for the children and their families while the southern row houses the servants' quarters. Through historical accounts and literary narratives, the classic siheyuan evokes the romantic image of an aristocratic lifestyle of comfort and serenity.

The palatial compounds, the street grid, the natural landscape and the vernacular architecture all contributed to the perfection of Beijing's city plan. However, this "unparalleled masterpiece of city planning,"<sup>6</sup> was the product of a pre-modern feudal society where the symbolic significance of the city's spatial organization was almost more important than its use value. Hence, the plan did not contain provisions for a political regime change nor leave room for the organic growth of the city. Consequently, certain urban characteristics of Beijing became points of contention as China entered the modern era.

### **The Early Republic (1919-1949)**

The modernization of Beijing began under the influence of the "New Culture Movement" during the May Fourth period in 1919. This intellectual movement attacked the traditions of China and looked toward the Western experience as a model for transforming China into a nation of the modern era. Urban planning of this era encompassed more practical concerns for the city such as constructing roads, surveying urban districts and

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<sup>6</sup> Liang Sicheng quoted in Wu, 6.

improving public health.<sup>7</sup>

The modern era needed more roads and the city walls that surrounded the imperial city and no longer served a useful purpose. In fact, they blocked traffic traversing the city, so the Capital Administrative Office removed the walls and replaced them with new roads. The removal of the city walls disconnected the city gates from each other and eliminated a significant feature of Beijing's urban composition. The city gates now stand in isolation and appear out of context as they are surrounded by traffic. The replacement of historic features of Beijing with modern development had begun.

In 1927, the Nationalist government shifted the capital to Nanjing so the development of Beijing slowed down considerably for the following decade. Then Beijing came under Japanese occupation in July 1937 for twelve years before succumbing to the Chinese Civil War between 1945 and 1949. Very little progress was made, either in the development or the preservation of Old Beijing during this transition period from the imperial empire to the republic nation.

### Communist China (1949-1977)

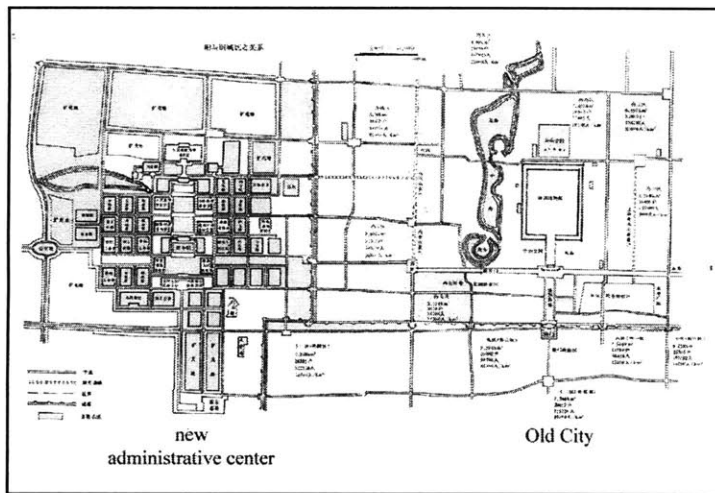


Figure 4. The Liang-Chen plan for the preservation of the Old City, 1949.

of Beijing in its entirety and relocate the new administrative center to the western suburbs of

The Soviet influence on urban planning in Beijing in the early 1950s had irreversible consequences on the preservation of Beijing's Old City. As a member of the Beijing City Planning Committee, Liang Sicheng and his colleague Chen Changshiang proposed a new plan for the future development of Beijing. Their vision was to preserve the Old City

<sup>7</sup> Wang Yi, (2002). *A Brief History of the Transformation of Beijing's Urban Fabric in the Twentieth century*. PhD. First year paper (unpublished). Cambridge: Cambridge University, 10.

Beijing.<sup>8</sup> However, the Soviet team of experts who believed in Joseph Stalin's view that "to replace the new city center at another place instead of the city center is an unpractical idea from the bourgeois,"<sup>9</sup> managed to persuade Mao Tse Tung to locate the administrative buildings within the old city, at the western and southern sides of the Forbidden City.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the Communist government did not have the financial resources to support the cost of relocating the administrative center so the Liang-Chen Plan was shelved in 1956 and the Communist government began its "Ten Major Building Structures" program that introduced socialist architecture to the Old City of Beijing.

Throughout his regime, Mao's ideas of cultural legacy are characterized by "more present, less past" and "using the past to serve the present," both of which are reflected in the efforts of historic preservation under his regime. The heritage of Beijing was preserved only when it could be symbolically reconstructed to glorify the achievements of the Communist regime.

Because Mao appropriated the symbolic representation of Forbidden City, this monumental heritage from the imperial era remained intact throughout the turmoil of changing Chinese political fortunes. The Communist leaders could interpret Forbidden City as a monumental space that symbolized the political authority and legitimacy of the Chinese nation. By reconfiguring the imperial palace into a national museum, the Communist party redefined Forbidden City (now the National Palace Museum) as the monumental space that symbolized the power and identity of the modern Chinese state.<sup>11</sup>

The courtyard houses could not be reinterpreted from the feudal ideology they embody, so many of the architectural features of the courtyard house were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution's attack on the "Four Olds" (old idea, old customs, traditional culture and old habits). The damage done to the courtyard houses is still visible today. Furthermore, under Mao's orders, hectares of residential areas comprised of courtyard homes were demolished for the construction of Tiananmen Square.<sup>12</sup> In modern Communist China, courtyard houses had no value, historic or otherwise, in fact, they were intentionally targeted for destruction.

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<sup>8</sup> Wang, Jun. (2002) "A Historical Study of Liang and Chen's Beijing Project," Dialogue, Issue 55, 101.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Sit, Victor (1996), "Soviet influence on urban planning in Beijing, 1949-1991." The Town Planning Review 67(4), 478.

<sup>11</sup> See Watson, Rubie. (1995) "Palace, Museums, and Squares: Chinese National Spaces," Museum Anthropology 19(2): 7-19.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., and Reuber, Paul. (1998). "Beijing's *Hutongs* and *Siheyuans*." Canadian Architect. October 1998: 41.

The fate of the courtyard homes was further endangered during the housing shortage crisis after the Cultural Revolution; the Beijing Municipal Government instituted a policy that would allow work units to build new houses in the Old City and to build additions in the courtyards.<sup>13</sup> The majority of the new housing was socialist in style and incompatible with the architectural context of the hutong neighborhood, while the informal additions were built using the cheapest materials that damaged the original structure of courtyard houses. The government's priority was to combat the housing shortage in Beijing and the preservation of the vernacular courtyard houses would not satisfy this objective.

### **Reform Era (1978-1980s)**

At the beginning of the open door and reform era in 1980, the Central Committee redefined the role of the capital: "Beijing was to be the political center of the nation, and the center for China's dealings with foreign countries and should be developed into one of the best cities of the world in social order and morality, cleanliness and hygiene, culture, technology and level of education, economic prosperity, convenience and stability."<sup>14</sup> In accordance with this directive, the Beijing Municipal Planning Commission redefined the planning principle of Beijing from the "productive city" to the "political and cultural center of the nation."<sup>15</sup> Hence, the master plan of 1983 emphasized the preservation of historic and cultural heritage in a modernizing city.<sup>16</sup> The 1983 Master plan not only emphasized the need to preserve the historic architecture but also its immediate surroundings. Furthermore, the plan reinforced the need to protect and develop Beijing's unique character:

Beijing is the capital of our country as well as a historic and culturally significant city. The planning and reconstruction of the capital, Beijing ought to reflect the unique character of a nation with a long history and culture, a revolutionary tradition and a socialist political ideology. Historically significant architecture should be preserved and maintained. The surrounding area ought to complement the historically significant architecture. The old city should be reconstructed gradually and piece by piece. Via the reconstruction, the

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<sup>13</sup> Wang, Y., 18.

<sup>14</sup> Sit, V., 475.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Dong, Guanqi (1998). *Beijing Chengshi guihua szhanlue sigao* [Thoughts on the Strategy of Urban Planning of Beijing]. Beijing: China Architecture Press, 112.

infrastructure of the old city will be improved to modern standards.<sup>17</sup>

The government enacted a set of regulations to safeguard the monuments of Beijing and its surroundings. The 1982 Cultural Assets Protection Law gave landmarks different levels of historical significance: national, municipal and county. These landmarks could not be demolished and nothing new could be built around the landmarks, which were designated as cultural asset protection areas. The government instituted two additional policies were instituted to ensure against the over-development of the Old City: the 1985 Regulations on Building Heights and the 1987 Controls on Land-Use and Floor Area Ratio.

While the focus remained on the monuments, some vernacular architecture was also protected in order to maintain the character and quality of historically significant landmarks. Without this set of regulations, it is unlikely that vernacular architecture in the Old City would have escaped destruction. It is widely held that courtyard houses still exist in Beijing because the government lacked the funds for redevelopment prior to the 1980s. Nevertheless, the policies were not foolproof.

In the mid 1980s, the Shishahai district, a historic area located north of the Forbidden City, was designated as a Historical Cultural Scenic Area. During the preservation process, a bathhouse was at first planned to be rebuilt into a three-story building, which would be incompatible with the surrounding environment. After much negotiation, it was finally agreed to lower the building to two stories with traditional architectural character. However, the finished building still ended up with three stories. The lack of guidance and control over the process allowed some people to break the regulations without being penalized.<sup>18</sup>

The 1993 master plan reiterated the goal of preserving the city's historic character: "Beijing is a historic and culturally significant city and therefore its construction has to reflect the history and culture of Chinese civilization, the revolutionary and socialist traditions that make Beijing unique."<sup>19</sup> The master plan also incorporated the concept of conservation district, "an area (streets, settlements, towns, villages, buildings) that contains the traditional

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<sup>17</sup> Beijing Municipal Planning Commission. (2002) Conservation Planning of the 25 Historic Areas in Beijing's Old City, Beijing: Yam Shan Press, 18.

<sup>18</sup> Zhu, Zixuan (1989). "New Exploration into the Conservation and Rehabilitation of Old Cities," Building in China,3(4), 26.

<sup>19</sup> Dong, 112

landscape and distinct local character of a particular historic era.”<sup>20</sup> The plan stated that in order to maintain Beijing’s status as a historic and culturally significant city, Beijing must seek to protect its historic monuments, its historic areas as well as the city of Beijing as a whole.<sup>21</sup>

In response to the specification in the revised Master Plan, the Beijing Municipal Government created a list of 25 historic districts with the intention of preserving their historic character. Thus for the first time since Liang Sicheng’s proposal to preserve Beijing in its entirety, the proposed sites recommended for preservation extended from individual buildings to entire areas.<sup>22</sup>

Many of the conservation districts were selected because they had or were close to cultural relics already under national or municipal protection. Since the list was intended as a preliminary list and considered as the first step towards raising awareness of urban conservation in Beijing, the boundaries of the districts were not clearly defined and no stipulations accompanied this list.

Before the Municipal Government could clearly demarcate the boundaries of each area and create a conservation plan, the redevelopment of the Old City intensified at unanticipated rate.<sup>23</sup> The preservation objectives of the master plan could not prevail against the emerging market forces of the 1990s.

### **Redevelopment of the Old City (1990s)**

The redevelopment of the Old City was not meant to destroy the Old City, the goal had been to “to improve the appearances of the Old City, transform the city into a modern metropolis while keeping the traditional characteristics.”<sup>24</sup> According to the redevelopment project implemented in 1990, the Old and Dilapidated Housing Renewal program, the way to transform the city into a “modern metropolis” was to improve and upgrade old and dilapidated housing in the Old City.

After decades of neglect, many of the houses in the historic center were in poor

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Beijing Municipal Planning Commission, 20.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>23</sup> Zhu, Jianguang, Director of Beijing Planning and Design Institute. Interview with the author and J. Gldman.. April 1, 2003.

<sup>24</sup> Zheng, Lian.. (1995) *Housing Renewal in Beijing – Observation and Analysis*, M. Arch Thesis, McGill University, 1995, <http://www.mchg.mcgill.ca/mchg/lia/lianch3.htm>.

condition and structurally unsound: the walls were cracked, the roof would leak and the wooden structure supporting the house would rot. According to the 1990 housing census, over 70% of the housing stock in the Old City were structurally unsound<sup>25</sup> and could collapse without warning. The Municipal Government realized that people's livelihoods were at stake so in April 1990, the Municipal Government announced the need to accelerate the housing renewal program<sup>26</sup> and proposed four phases of the renewal projects that would affect 22.6% of the total inner city area and 710,000 residents.<sup>27</sup> However, the Municipal Government lacked adequate funds to carry out these ambitious, large scale renewal projects so the government sought private funding sources from real estate developers, a profession that emerged from the land and market reforms during the 1980s.

The government officials realized that the upgrading of old and dilapidated housing in the Old City would not be a profitable venture; therefore they created incentives to attract developers. Once a developer has agreed to upgrade a tract of land in the Old City, he also receives a piece of undeveloped land outside of the Old City where he could build high rise residential or commercial complexes. He then could use the profit gained from the project to off set the loss from upgrading the houses on the tract of land in the historic center. Unfortunately, the Municipal Government failed to set up planning requirements for the incentives so the original plan for this program never came into fruition.<sup>28</sup>

As a result of the decentralization of the housing and land market, the district level government shared the financial burden of the Old and Dilapidated Housing Renewal Program. Moreover, the District Government was also responsible for implementing the program. Without sufficient funding and faced by increased pressure from targets set by the Municipal Government, the District Government officials sold the land use rights to the developers, usually at a discounted price in return for the installation of infrastructure and for widening the streets.<sup>29</sup> Once the rights to the land were sold, the developers basically had free reign over the land so they strove to maximize profit. Instead of upgrading the existing housing stock, the developers relocated the original residents, demolished their single-story

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<sup>25</sup> Zhang, Jie (1997), "Informal construction in Beijing's old neighborhoods," *Cities*, Vol. 14, No. 2, p.86.

<sup>26</sup> Fang, Ke and Zhang, Yan (1998) "To Redevelop Beijing or To Destroy Beijing?" *City Planning*, 7.

<sup>27</sup> Zheng, Lian.. (1995) *Housing Renewal in Beijing – Observation and Analysis*, M. Arch Thesis, McGill University, 1995, <http://www.mchg.mcgill.ca/mchg/lia/lianch3.htm>.

<sup>28</sup> Huang, Yan. Interview with the author and J. Goldman. January 15, 2003.

<sup>29</sup> Nilsson, Johan. (1998). "Problems and possibilities in today's urban renewal in the Old City of Beijing." *City Planning*(4): 44.



courtyard homes and replaced them with high rise apartments to be sold at market price. The original residents were welcomed to return, but only if they can afford these new units.

What ensued from the Old and Dilapidated Housing Renewal program was “a period of intense modernization that focused on development and resettlement with very little attention to historic preservation.”<sup>30</sup> Each day, residents of the courtyard homes in the Old City would find the character for “demolition” painted on the exterior walls signaling the impending destruction of their homes and their departure from their neighborhood they knew. This cycle of relocation, demolition and redevelopment continued unrestricted for much of the decade. By the end of the 90s, one third of the historic urban fabric in Beijing’s Old City had been bulldozed and redeveloped into high rise commercial housing. In fact, Niu Street, one of the 25 historic areas listed in 1990 had already been demolished and rebuilt as a residential high rise complex.

The demolition of the historic architecture also meant the displacement of hundreds of millions of residents to the outer skirts of the city, who were often given less than two weeks to move out. The measly compensation they received was rarely enough for them to purchase or even rent a new apartment elsewhere; faced with the prospect of homelessness, many residents cried injustice. Periodically, groups of home owners would gather at the Municipal Government offices and demand a public hearing but they are seldom successful.<sup>31</sup> The escalating protests, however, have garnered media attention and generated public outcry, especially those from academics who criticized the redevelopment process of the Old City.

### **Conservation Planning of the 25 Historic Areas (2000s)**

Finally, after a decade of what the Beijing Municipal Government refers to as “unanticipated speed of redevelopment,”<sup>32</sup> government officials became increasingly “aware of the fact that the traditional appearance of a city is a form of wealth rather than an impediment to its development.”<sup>33</sup> With this in mind, a more inclusive concept of historic preservation emerged: “In this century, what to conserve has expanded from individual

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<sup>30</sup> Huang, Yan. Interview with the author and J. Goldman.. January 15, 2003.

<sup>31</sup> See Fang, Ke, *The Redevelopment of Beijing’s Inner City*, Beijing: Tsinghua University Press,

<sup>32</sup> Zhu, Jianguang. Interview with the author and J. Goldman. April 1, 2003.

<sup>33</sup> Xinhua News Agency (January 19, 2003) “New Beijing mayor speaks on housing, improving life for ordinary people.”

building to the surrounding environment. From buildings to natural landscape, from streets to cities, the scope of historic conservation has expanded and the content of preservation has become richer and richer. The focus of preservation has shifted from the physical preservation of the built environment and its appearance to the culture and the intangible aspects.”<sup>34</sup>

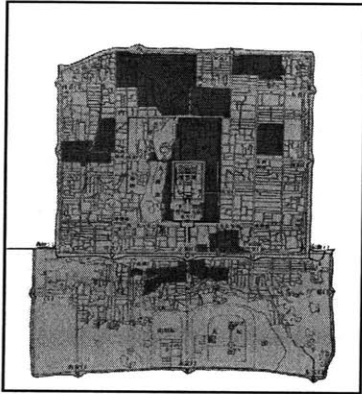


Figure 5. Map of the 25 historic areas.

The Municipal Government recognized the need for a comprehensive plan for the conservation of the 25 historic districts, the Municipal Government appointed the Beijing Municipal Planning Commission to produce conservation plans for the 25 designated historic districts. The Beijing Municipal Planning Commission is the administrative planning arm of the Beijing Municipal Government whose primary responsibility, according to the 1989 Planning Act of China, is to “promote the economic and social development of cities through allocating and managing urban land and urban space.”<sup>35</sup> Usually, the Beijing Municipal Planning Commission manages the planning process while the design and production of the plans are done at the Beijing Municipal Planning and Design Institute, an affiliate of the Beijing Municipal Government as well as the municipal planning commission.<sup>36</sup> In addition, the planning commission would set up an expert consulting group comprising of academics and leaders in the architecture, engineering and planning professions to advise and evaluate the planning process and result.

Prior to the formal planning process, the Beijing Municipal Planning and Design Institute conducted trial studies for the Beijing Municipal Planning Commission. The architects and planners at the institute analyzed and planned the historic conservation of three designated historic areas between May and December, 1999: Nan Chang Street, Bei Chang Street and Xihua Men Street. The research team from the Institute first looked at the history of the three areas and the transformation of the land uses. Then the group performed an in-depth investigation of the existing conditions that included population density, land use distribution, quality of architecture and assessment of architectural appearance. In addition, by drawing

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<sup>34</sup> Wang, Guan Tao. (2002). *Beijing Lishi Wenhua Mingcheng de Baohu yu Fazhan* [The Preservation and Development of Beijing as a Historic and Culturally Significant City ] (in Chinese). Beijing: Xinhua Press, 10.

<sup>35</sup> Zhang, Tingwei.(2003) “Challenges Facing Planners in Transitional China.” *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 22 (Spring 2003), 65.

<sup>36</sup> Leaf, Michael (1998) “Urban Planning and Urban Reality Under Chinese Economic Reforms,” *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 18, 150.

upon past experiences in historic preservation at home and abroad, the group proposed a strategy appropriate for Beijing's historic areas.<sup>37</sup>

Based on the reports compiled by the Planning and Design Institute, the Beijing Municipal Planning Commission formulated guiding principles for the conservation plan of the 25 historic districts based on two documents approved by the Beijing Municipal Government, the *Regulatory Plan for the Urban Central Area* and the *Conservation and Control Scope Planning for the Historic Areas in the Old City of Beijing*:

- 1) To preserve the traditional cityscape and hutongs.
- 2) To ensure the authenticity of the preserved heritage.
- 3) To implement preservation using a gradual and measured method.
- 4) To improve the infrastructure and living conditions of the local residents.
- 5) To encourage public participation.<sup>38</sup>

The planning commission also developed regulatory guidelines for the conservation areas based on the guiding principles above:

- 1) New or renovated buildings must be compatible with the style of the key conservation areas and cannot negatively impact the environment of the key conservation areas.
- 2) When embarking on renovation, careful consideration must be given to the nature of the land use, the height, scale, forms and color of the architectures, as well as the floor area ratio and the proportion of green space.
- 3) Renovations must not result in large scale demolition and special attention must be paid to historic continuity.
- 4) Valuable historic architecture, hutongs and old trees must be preserved.<sup>39</sup>

In January 2000, the leadership of the Beijing Municipal Government announced that the conservation planning process needs to be accelerated and allocated funding specifically for this task. The tight schedule imposed by the Municipal Government made it impossible for the Beijing Municipal Planning and Design Institute to produce all the plans for the 25 conservation areas so twelve academic and research institutions of architecture and planning were asked to participate in the plan making process, including the Chinese Academy for Planning and Design Research and Tsinghua University.

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<sup>37</sup> Zhu, Jianguang. Interview with the author and J. Goldman. April 1, 2003.

<sup>38</sup> Beijing Municipal Planning Commission, 10.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

Since some of the institutions selected were rather inexperienced in the historic conservation planning, the Beijing Municipal Planning Commission organized a two-day training session on the planning of historic conservation districts for the participants in late August, 2000. Besides providing the guiding principles, the Commission also provided the groups with guidelines for the investigation, research and drafting of the historic conservation plans and the required components for the plan, taken mostly from the trial study performed in 1999. The key components of the planning document consisted of the evolution of the street layout of the area, the cultural relics on the site, analysis of the existing conditions of the area including population, land use, classification of the architecture, the hutong layout, the green space, the urban infrastructure system, as well as, the area's historic characters and qualities. Based on the investigations, the institutions would propose conservation measures specific to each conservation area.

In early November 2000, while the plan making process was still in progress, the Beijing Municipal Planning Commission conducted two preliminary evaluations of the plans. Members of the Planning Commission held meetings with the participating institutions to discuss the proposals, pose questions, and make recommendations. The planners at the Planning Commission and members of the experts consulting group constantly monitored and evaluated the plan production process.

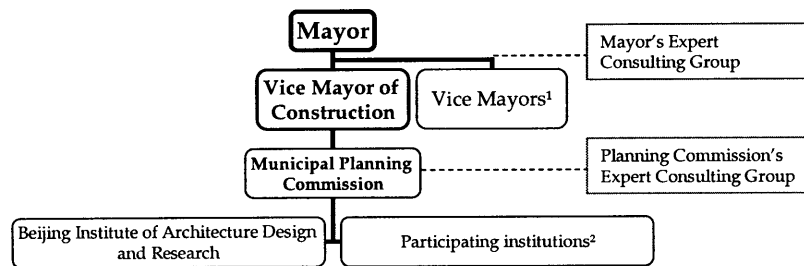
Concurrently, the work on conservation planning of the 25 historic areas was publicized in the media. Newspapers such as the Beijing Youth Daily created a section entitled Urban Spaces to introduce the principles, objectives and measures taken for the Conservation Plan of the 25 Historic Areas. Experts were also invited to comment on preservation while citizens were encouraged to share their opinions about the conservation of the historic areas. However, it was unclear whether the opinions expressed by the public were taken into consideration in devising the conservation plan for the historic areas.

At the end of November, the Municipal Planning Commission submitted the plan to the experts consulting group for review. This particular group consisted of nineteen academics and professionals in architecture and planning. They have considerable authority and their recommendations are often adopted as official policy. On November 30, the group announced their approval of the Conservation Plan of 25 Historic Areas by concluding that the principles stated in the plan were “reasonable and correct.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Beijing Municipal Planning Commission, 7.

A flowchart showing the planning hierarchy at the municipal level.



<sup>1</sup>There are 7 other Vice Mayors, each in charge of different sectors such as public safety, finance, education, science and technology, industrial issues, transportation.  
<sup>2</sup>Institutions include Tsinghua University School of Architecture, China Academy of Urban Planning and Design, Beijing Polytechnic.

After the plan was finalized in March 2001, the Municipal Planning Commission submitted the plan for approval by the Municipal Government. The Conservation Plan for the 25 Historic Areas would have been a project significant enough to warrant the attention of senior level Municipal Government officials, therefore the plan required approval at the mayoral level. The mayoral level officers consist of the Vice Mayors of Beijing is responsible for assessing and approving the plans for projects that are 1) larger than 50,000 square meters, 2) situated in important areas, or 3) exceed the limit stated in the regulations. At these meetings, six to eight officials in the mayoral offices would be in attendance. Depending on the nature of the project, there could be the Vice Mayor of Construction, Finance, Transportation, Environment, Government legislation to discuss their opinions on the Conservation Plan for Nanchizi and the other historic areas. The Municipal Government also appoints its own expert consulting group to assist the officials in the decision making process and it is not uncommon for members of the planning commission's expert consulting group to be appointed members of the Municipal Government's expert consulting group. In February 2002, the Municipal Government officially approved the Conservation Plan for the 25 Historic areas and specified Nanchizi as the pilot conservation area.

The following chapter explores this initial implementation project at Nanchizi and attempts to offer a comprehensive account of the Nanchizi conservation effort. The case will provide a lens to examine the conservation and urban planning processes of Beijing.

## Chapter Two The Pilot Conservation Project at Nanchizi

### The Historic District of Nanchizi

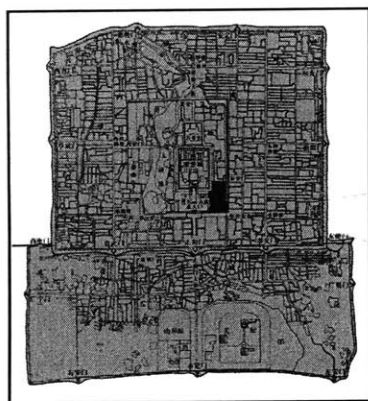


Figure 6. Location of Nanchizi conservation area.

The historic district of Nanchizi covers a 34.5 ha area east of the Forbidden City. It was formed during the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) and its central location between the Imperial Palace and the Imperial City gave the area much significance. Prior to the 1800s, the area was mainly a warehouse district for the Imperial Court, including royal storehouses of silk, meat and grain.<sup>41</sup> Several princes also lived in the area including Dourgun, regent and uncle of Emperor Shunzhi (1638-1661) whose palace became the Pu Du Temple.<sup>42</sup> As the emperor of the Qing dynasty gradually reduced the size of the Imperial properties outside the palace compound, the Nanchizi area opened up for ordinary citizens. By the early Republic era (1919-1949), Nanchizi had become a residential area comprised of a typical Beijing urban fabric of siheyuans (courtyard homes) and hutongs (narrow lanes).

The overall urban form of the Nanchizi area has essentially remained unaltered since the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) and because the serene residential character of the area complemented the monumental presence of the Forbidden City, Nanchizi was designated as one of the 25 historic conservation districts of Beijing in 1990.



Figure 7. Hutong in Nanchizi, 2002.

### The Conservation Plan for Nanchizi

In 2001, the Nanchizi historic conservation district was designated as the pilot project for the conservation planning program of Beijing that was approved by the Beijing Municipal Government a year earlier. The intention of this pilot project was to explore the implementation of a renewal and upgrading plan in a designated historic district and the

<sup>41</sup> Heping, Jia, "Renovation plan sparks heated debate," *China Daily*, July 10, 2002.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

potential strategy for the integration between preservation and the redevelopment of the Old City.<sup>43</sup> The government officials believed that if the city could successfully preserve and upgrade the Nanchizi historic conservation district, then Beijing's age-old dilemma between preservation and redevelopment could be resolved and the future of the Old City would no longer be in jeopardy.<sup>44</sup>

In accordance with the guiding principles for the Conservation Plan of 25 Historic Areas in Beijing Old City and the document "Regulations related to the Pilot Project for the Improvement and Redevelopment of Housing in a Designated Historic District," the Beijing Institute of Architectural Design and Research and the School of Architecture at Tsinghua University were responsible for the Historic Conservation Plan for Nanchizi.

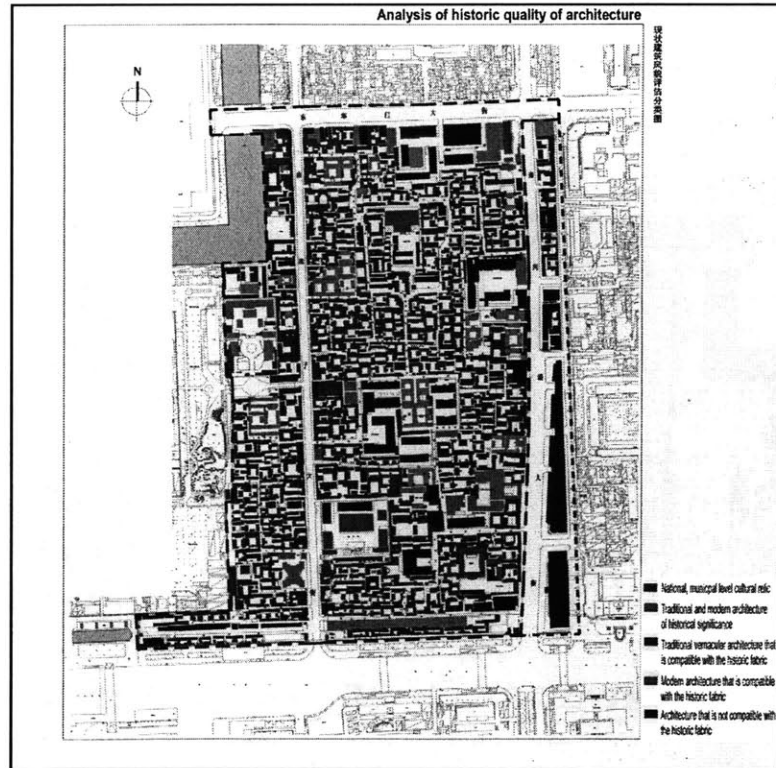


Figure 8. Part of the conservation plan: Analysis of the historic quality of the architecture.

The plan explored the history of the area and showed the existing conditions of the area while highlighting the historic and cultural characters of Nanchizi. Additional components of the plan included proposals for the infrastructure system, land use distribution, circulation and transportation, adjustment of population density, preservation and rehabilitation of traditional vernacular architecture.

### Which Buildings to Preserve, Which Buildings to Rehabilitate?

Each building in the Nanchizi conservation area was assessed according to its historical and cultural value as well as the building condition, therefore a building would receive one grade (1

<sup>43</sup> Wang, Guan Tao (2002) *Beijing Lishi Wenhua Mingcheng de Baohu yu Fazhan [The Preservation and Development of Beijing as a Historic and Culturally Significant City]*. Beijing: Xinhua Press, , 2.

<sup>44</sup> Zhu, Jianguang, Interview with the author and J. Goldman. April 1, 2003.

through 5) for its historical and cultural value and another grade (good, fair and poor) based on the condition of the building. While guidelines are offered for assessing the historical and cultural value and the building condition, the criteria are rather vague and can be freely interpreted. Grade two buildings, for example, are buildings that have not been placed on the list of historic heritage buildings but they “do have some historical and cultural worth.”<sup>45</sup>

Taking both of these grades into account, each building is then placed into one of six categories, each of which corresponds to a proposed measure for the building. The categories are 1) Heritage buildings, 2) Buildings to be preserved, 3) Buildings to be rehabilitated, 4) Buildings that can remain temporarily unchanged, 5) Buildings that need to be renovated, and 6) Buildings that require façade preservation. This assessment also appears quite arbitrary and how the two grades for historic and cultural value and the building condition are combined is not stated in the published planning document. The division of these categories is reliant upon the personal judgment of whoever is conducting the investigation at the time, most likely a member from one of the participating institutions.<sup>46</sup>

### **Type I: Heritage buildings**



Heritage buildings are monuments designated at the national, municipal or district level. They are to be preserved under the regulations stipulated by the Bureau of Cultural Relics.

### **Type II: Buildings to be preserved**



Buildings to be preserved are those that hold historic and cultural value so the architecture ought to be preserved while its interior could be renovated to suit the modern lifestyle.

### **Type III: Buildings to be rehabilitated**



Buildings to be rehabilitated are buildings that are typical traditional vernacular architecture but have been rated as “fair” in the current quality of construction. These buildings are in need of upgrade and improvement. The majority of courtyard homes fall under this category of preservation.

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<sup>45</sup> Beijing Municipal Planning Commission, 12.

<sup>46</sup> Zhu, Jianguang. Interview with author and J. Goldman. April 1, 2003.



#### Type IV: Buildings that can remain temporarily unchanged



The fourth type of buildings corresponds to modern buildings that complement the traditional architecture in appearance, scale, height, color and building material. Because these buildings look historic, they can remain unaltered temporarily.

#### Type V: Buildings that need to be renovated



The fifth type of buildings is buildings that do not complement the traditional architecture; they could be buildings that were recently renovated or renewed by work units and residents. The quality of these buildings tend to be quite good and they adhere to the basic architectural guidelines of the conservation districts, but they do not meet the more detailed stipulations of the conservation district plan such as spatial layout, style, color, building material and architectural detail. High rises built in the past decade are also placed under this category. Even though the quality of the architecture is high, they destroy the traditional urban fabric of the conservation district, therefore they could be demolished.

#### Type VI: Buildings that require façade preservation



The final category is designated to buildings that need preservation in façade only. These buildings are usually located along the main streets of the conservation districts and in need of a ‘face-lift’ to accentuate the traditional features of the area.

| Category Type | Percentage of total conservation area |
|---------------|---------------------------------------|
| I             | 5.4                                   |
| II            | 11.4                                  |
| III           | 65.4                                  |
| IV            | 3.6                                   |
| V             | 14.2                                  |
| VI            | 0                                     |

**Building types in Nanchizi**

The courtyard houses that are designated for renewal can be redeveloped in an integrated manner. In other words, they can be torn down and rebuilt, but the reconstruction must be carefully designed so that the new structure is “within the six meter height limit and is similar to the scale, color, building material, roof style, and architectural details as the original architecture of the conservation district.”<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, the plan permits the possibility of rebuilding a courtyard house suitable for the modern lifestyle as long as it adhered to the traditional scale and layout of the area.

An assessment of building types in Nanchizi revealed that the area consists mainly of traditional vernacular architecture (type III), the courtyard house. Thus in general, the area has retained the traditional urban fabric of Beijing, but the majority of these courtyard houses have undergone considerable physical and non-physical transformations that complicate the preservation and rehabilitation efforts.

## Transformation of residential organization of the Siheyuan

Many of these courtyard homes (siheyuan) in Nanchizi, however, have been renovated in the 1970s and 1980s so that they no longer conform to the spatial organization, structure and building material of the classic courtyard house. The courtyard houses constructed of brick and wood were originally intended for a single household, but the rapid population growth in Beijing resulted in a shortage of housing supply and without the finances to construct new housing, the government forced property owners to give up parts of their courtyard house. Consequently, a single family courtyard house could end up housing as many as ten families. Besides the lack of privacy, each family barely had living space, let alone a kitchen.

In order to tackle the problem of insufficient living space, the Beijing Municipal Government allowed the residents to build additions to their existing homes. The majority of

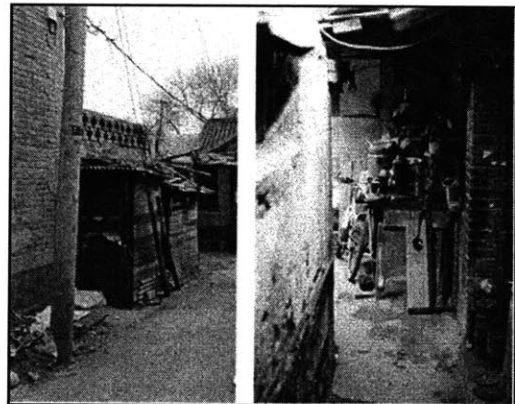


Figure 9. Informal additions to the courtyard homes.

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<sup>47</sup> Beijing Municipal Planning Commission, 22.

the residents used cheap modern materials to construct informal housing; needless to say, they were not compatible with the original architectural style. The residents or the work units would also repair the houses themselves but due to lack of funds and lack of knowledge about the proper methods for repairing historic architecture, these repairs have exacerbated the physical condition and reduced the historic value of these courtyard houses.<sup>48</sup>

These informal additions that have drastically altered the classic courtyard houses are typical features of the present day courtyard house, to the extent that they have garnered a new name, *da za yuan*. The phrase means large cluttered courtyard, an apt description for the chaotic and crowded living environment produced by the increase in population density and the addition of informal construction.<sup>49</sup> Some residents have also extended these informal constructions into the hutongs thus making an already narrow

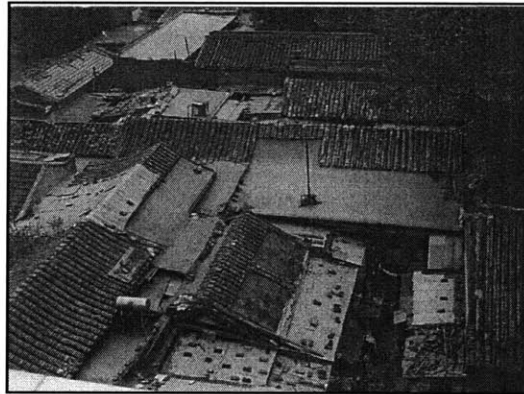


Figure 10. Bird's eye view of the *da za yuan*.

hutong almost impossible to get through. This not only damages the traditional layout of the hutongs but also causes a safety hazard as fire engines are unable to enter these lanes in the case of an emergency.

The conservation district plan of Nanchizi concluded that the addition of the informal construction and the residents' self-repair measures (or lack thereof) have ruined much of the original wooden frames of the courtyard houses so that the roof would leak when it rains, the interior walls are out of alignment and in some cases, the foundation of these homes are sinking further into the ground. "The poor and dilapidated conditions of these 'historic' courtyard houses have made them unsafe for living."<sup>50</sup>

In addition to the overcrowded and substandard living conditions, the lack of urban infrastructure has made hutong living inconvenient and backward. Throughout the Old City, there is no natural gas and heating network system, the sewage, electricity and communication networks have not been updated in years. Furthermore, the majority of the residents do not have their own lavatories and sewage pipes are regularly blocked.

A frequent complaint about the living conditions is the inconvenience of toilets. In an interview, an eleven year old boy said, "The worst part about living in the courtyard houses is

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<sup>48</sup> Zhu, Zixuan, Professor of Architecture at Tsinghua University. Interview with the author and J. Goldman. March 27, 2003.

<sup>49</sup> Zhang, Jie. "Informal Construction in Beijing's Old Neighborhoods," *Cities*, 14(2), 85.

<sup>50</sup> Beijing Municipal Planning Commission, 213.

that the toilets are outside. You have to go outside to reach the public toilets, it's even worse in the winter."<sup>51</sup> One female teacher said that the lack of space in the courtyard houses make it difficult to have guests over, and when the guests come, their first comment on entering the one meter walkway that run through the entire unit would always be, "your courtyard is so small!"<sup>52</sup> The standard of living in these hutongs is barely adequate for modern times.

### Socioeconomic Transformations

The physical changes to the houses in Nanchizi reveal only part of the story. The greatest transformation of the Nanchizi historic district since the founding of the Republic has been the socioeconomic level of the residents. As mentioned earlier, the classic courtyard house was built for the elites of the Qing dynasty who occupied the top echelons of Chinese society. They were well-educated, wealthy and held important positions in the Imperial City. Their descendents continued to dwell in these homes which are part of their personal private property, until the Communist era.

Very little new housing was built by the government during Mao Tse Tung's reign as he espoused the notion of "production first, livelihood second." After the Tangshan earthquake in 1976, Beijing suffered from a shortage of housing supply when many of the victims left homeless by the earthquake moved to the city. In order to combat the housing shortage, the Chinese authorities seized ownership of the land and forced private owners of courtyard houses to give up parts or all of their homes. The 'new' supply of housing became public housing or work unit housing, which allowed residents to pay as little as twelve yuan (US \$1.45) per month in rent in the 1980s.<sup>53</sup> Consequently, these courtyard homes became increasingly populated by low-income households. The average monthly household income of resident in Nanchizi in 2000 was 1608 yuan (US \$192) per month<sup>54</sup> compared with the average monthly income of households in Beijing of 6,909 yuan (US \$835) per month.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, the lack of proper infrastructure has compelled those who have the financial resources to move to large modern apartments elsewhere in the city.<sup>56</sup>

Besides the change in socioeconomic level of the residents, the population density of Nanchizi has increased dramatically. As the population of Beijing continued to grow throughout the latter part of the twentieth century, more and more families moved into the

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<sup>51</sup> Interview with the author. July 2003.

<sup>52</sup> Mrs Zhang, teacher. Interview with the author. July 2003.

<sup>53</sup> See McQuillan, D.A., *Urban Redevelopment, Housing and Conservation in China*. Toronto: Department of Geography, University of Toronto, 1985.

<sup>54</sup> Anon. Interview with the author and J. Goldman. January 2003.

<sup>55</sup> "Winners and Losers," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Dec 12, 2002.

<sup>56</sup> Beijing Municipal Planning Commission, 33.

courtyard homes so that it was not unusual for one courtyard house to serve as homes for ten or even twenty households. The average living space per person has been reduced to 5.7 square meters in the present day courtyard dwelling.<sup>57</sup> According to the Conservation Plan, the Nanchizi historic district consisted of 537 units of courtyard housing that were originally meant for 537 households but in 2000, there were 4351 households residing in Nanchizi.

As a result of the changes, the community and the environment of the hutongs are remarkably different from the often romanticized image of the traditional siheyuans and hutongs portrayed in literary works and paintings. Yet, it was precisely this elegant and orderly image of quadrangle dwellings laid out along tree-lined hutongs that enabled Beijing to achieve its status as a “historically and culturally significant capital.” The restoration of the historical cityscape of Beijing was critical to maintaining the magnificence of Beijing.

On an inspection tour of Beijing in January 2001, Premier Jiang Zemin noted that, “Beijing is a historically and culturally significant city. Its planning and construction must preserve the city’s historical appearance as well as reflect the modern image.”<sup>58</sup> Thus, the Conservation plan for the 25 historic areas was drawn up with the overarching goal in mind: equally critical to preserving the historical cityscape was the need to build a capital for a modern nation.<sup>59</sup>

An additional document containing more detailed objectives for the pilot historic conservation project was released by the Beijing Municipal Planning Commission, “Regulations related to the Improvement and Redevelopment of Housing in a designated historic district (Trial)”

The main objectives for the plan are as follows:

- 1) Using the lessons learnt from the Nanchizi and Beichizi historic district pilot projects as a basis for the future promotion of conservation policy
- 2) The upgrading of the housing must comply with the objective of preservation. The original form should be maintained as much as possible. Residents should be encouraged to relocate in order to de-densify the urban population.
- 3) Complete a plan and design of high quality with consideration for its feasibility. The plan should reveal the special characteristics of the historic district. The housing should be upgraded based on the original form of courtyard units and the district as a whole.
- 4) Increase support from the municipal and District Governments and be responsible for large scale infrastructure construction.

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<sup>57</sup> Wang, 9.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

- 5) Reorganize and clarify property rights. Encourage public housing residents to purchase their current residence. Housing redevelopment and upgrading plan will be determined by the property rights of the residents.

According to Beijing's Vice-Mayor of Construction, Wang Guan Tao, the resulting conservation plan for Nanchizi would comply with the major principles of the conservation planning for the 25 historic districts as well as the more detailed objectives for the pilot conservation project. The plan would preserve the traditional cityscape by using the existing pattern of hutongs and siheyuans as the departure point for the conservation efforts. The implementation plan would be based on the principle of "infrastructure first, then the courtyard homes; outer area first, then central area." Redevelopment would be done gradually, courtyard unit by courtyard unit. Informal structure would be torn down, green space will be increased and housing would be improved. In addition, residents' input will be sought. Through this redevelopment process, the standard of living and the environment for the residents would be improved. The plan also called for a thorough research of relevant regulations on housing renewal, relocation policy, property rights management. While the infrastructure construction would be invested mainly by the municipal and district level governments, the residents would be responsible for the expense of property renovation and the addition of small scale community amenities. The residents would then gain the property rights for the redeveloped and renovated housing in order to properly promote the organic renewal of the district in the future.

In collaboration with the School of Architecture at Tsinghua University and the Beijing Institute of Architecture Design and Research, the Municipal Planning Commission completed the district conservation plan for Nanchizi. The plan proposed to emphasize the traditional residential character of the area. In addition to the preservation and rehabilitation of the traditional vernacular architecture, the plan called for the restoration of the municipal level heritage site Pu Du Temple provided there was sufficient funding.

Regarding the population density problem, the plan stated that the meaning of historic conservation district would be lost unless some of the residents were adequately relocated. The current population density stood at 5.14 people per 100 square meters and in order to reduce it to the standard of four people per 100 square meters, about 2300 residents have to be relocated.<sup>60</sup> The plan specified a potential strategy that could slightly ameliorate the problem: tear down a five-storey training school that did not serve the community. Its height

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<sup>60</sup> Beijing Municipal Planning Commission, *Conservation Planning of 25 Historic Areas in Beijing Old City*, Beijing: Yan Shan Publishing Company (2002), 211.

and appearance were incompatible with the traditional cityscape of the Old City and if demolished, the area was large enough to house 300-500 people.<sup>61</sup>

The plan also proposed the expansion of the hutong network so there would be fewer dead-ends in the neighborhood to “inconvenience the residents.”<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, the width of the hutong should be at least 4 meters for emergencies and basic infrastructure construction. The plan emphasized the need to complete the infrastructure upgrading all at once. The main pipes could be installed under the three major streets in the area while the distribution pipes could be placed under the wider hutongs. Once other hutongs on the neighborhood were widened, every hutong could have access to electricity, water and sewage. As for gas heating, each courtyard unit could have a choice in the matter. Residents near the main streets and major hutongs could have access to natural gas pipes while the remaining residents would probably have to use electric heat.<sup>63</sup>

The widely publicized conservation plan for Nanchizi led the residents of Nanchizi, as well as the general public, to believe that Beijing had entered a new phase of redevelopment that was more sensitive to the history and culture of the Old City. They thought that their courtyard homes would not only be preserved but they would be upgraded with modern amenities.

### The Fate of Nanchizi

One day in May 2002, a demolition and relocation notice surreptitiously appeared in Nanchizi, the notice stated: “The East City District Housing and Land Management Bureau will be supervising the construction of the Nanchizi Historic Cultural Area Housing Renewal. Within the stated boundary, the housing will be demolished and the residents will be relocated. The relocation compensation for this area is 5950 yuan per square meter. (Compensation for affordable housing is 3500 yuan per square meter) Private homeowners will be compensated according to market price. Residents need to complete the relocation between May 16, 2002 and June 16, 2002.”<sup>64</sup>

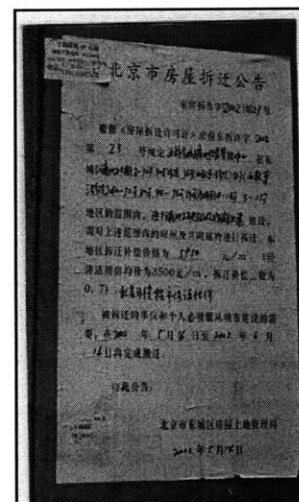


Figure 11. Relocation notice for Nanchizi residents.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>64</sup> Nan, Xianghong. (July 4, 2002) “The Theft of Nanchizi (Nanchizi zi Jie),” *Nangfang Choumou* [Nangfang Weekend].

Residents also received a public letter from the East City District Real Estate Operations and Management Center informing them that all but nine of the 240 courtyard houses in Nanchizi will be demolished to be replaced with “commercial two-storey housing to collect funds for historic zone protection.”<sup>65</sup> Soon, the Chinese character for demolition, ‘chai’ began to appear on the exterior walls of the houses.

Mr Xie, a resident of Nanchizi since 1947 said that because he owned his house, he would be compensated 1.5 million yuan for his 150 square meter private home and he was told that all the residents were welcomed to purchase the houses “at a discount rate of 3 million yuan (US\$361,450).”<sup>66</sup>

Like many of the residents at Nanchizi, Mr Xie believed that the designation of Nanchizi as a historic district meant that it would avoid the fate of wholesale destruction afflicted upon



Figure 12. The Chinese character for demolition, “chai,” painted on the wall of a courtyard home.

the redevelopment projects during the 1990s: “What’s intolerable is that our centuries-old houses will be replaced with newly built ancient-style two-storey buildings, which is a shame to the historic district.”<sup>67</sup> At the end of June, only one third of the residents had moved out; more than 600 households refused to leave.

The residents felt that the details given about the redevelopment of the district contradicted the plans proposed by the Beijing Municipal Government and the municipal regulation on historic and cultural protection areas that stipulated subsidies for residents refurbishing their

houses and those moving out.<sup>68</sup> Over one hundred residents signed a petition in protest of the demolition and relocation: “We weren’t asked if we wanted to move, or if we wanted to sell our home, we are being forced out.”<sup>69</sup> Private homeowners were especially disgruntled since they were prevented from refurbishing their own homes, even though some had sufficient funding to do so. The District Government responded by sending a curt notice, “Any resident failing to move out by June 16 will be fined 500 yuan per day.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Jia, Heping. (2002). “Renovation plan sparks heated debate”. *China Daily*, Beijing., July 10, 2002.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Xie quoted in Jia

<sup>68</sup> Jia.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.



In July 2002 demolition was halted when it was reported in the media that the area was being demolished and Mayor Liu Qi conducted an inspection tour of the site. At this stage, representatives of the Municipal Government opposed the way in which the District Government was redeveloping the area, they argued that the District Government were tearing down too many courtyard homes and that they were essentially rebuilding rather than conserving the area. However, Liu Qi ultimately sided with the District Government who proceeded with the redevelopment.

### **Implementation of the Conservation Plan for Nanchizi**

The conservation plan administered by the Beijing Municipal Planning Commission did not propose specific design and implementation schemes for Nanchizi. The plan for the preservation and rehabilitation of architecture merely showed the category of each courtyard unit in the area while the plan for infrastructure only showed the placement of the pipes. Nowhere in the plan did it say how and which houses should be renovated or how and when each of the pipes should be installed. The plan articulated the vision for Nanchizi but it only made suggestions on how to realize the vision. Further work was required before the plan could be properly implemented.

After Tsinghua University and the Beijing Institute of Architecture Design and Research completed the conservation plan, they along with another institution were asked to propose design schemes for Nanchizi. In line with the academic perspective on the Old City, both proposals sought to preserve as many of the existing courtyard houses as possible. The buildings that were categorized as type III, buildings that need to be rehabilitated, would be preserved and improved in a gradual fashion, courtyard by courtyard.<sup>71</sup> The schemes also promoted citizen participation during the conservation planning process. In other words, the schemes addressed all the principles of the Conservation Plan.

During the early part of 2001, the institutions presented their work regularly to the Municipal Planning Commission and the Municipal Government. Those in attendance included the Vice Mayors and the East City District officials. Initially, the academic schemes were well-received but in April 2001, the scheme proposed by Tsinghua University was no longer a contender. According to one participant, the group faulted the Tsinghua plan for failing to take into account infrastructure construction. The group contended that hutongs need to be at least seven meters wide to lay water and sewage pipes but the Tsinghua plan,

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<sup>71</sup> Yin Zhi's description of proposals submitted by Tsinghua University. Interview with author and J. Goldman. January 30, 2003.

with its emphasis on architectural and community preservation, retained the original hutong width of three meters. The general opinion of the government officials was that it was impossible to install utility pipes in a hutong as narrow as three meters.

There appeared to be growing disagreement over the extent of architectural preservation in Nanchizi as the political leadership expressed the need to prioritize the improvement of living standards over the preservation of historic architecture. At one of the meetings, the Vice Mayor of Construction, Wang Guan Tao, expressed his desire to improve the living conditions of Nanchizi so that the residents could stay comfortably warm in their homes during the winter: “I want the residents to be able to use just one comforter instead of three layers of comforter to keep warm in the winter.”<sup>72</sup> For Wang, this improvement of living conditions could only be achieved through the upgrading of infrastructure, a goal that was secondary to architectural and community preservation in the Tsinghua proposal. Similarly, the schemes proposed by the other two institutions were also rejected. At the time of this writing, government officials have yet to disclose the identity of the company who designed the new Nanchizi.

### The New Nanchizi

The newly reconstructed Nanchizi consists of a park in the south and a residential district in the north. The Chuang Pu He Park is a revival of the old royal garden and the Chang Pu river that were destroyed after 1949. It takes on the appearance of an ancient villa complex. The park serves as a historical and cultural center that houses a theater that will stage major operas, a VIP club with an exhibition center, a teahouse, a bar and cigar room, and Belgian and Chinese restaurants.



**Figure 13** The Chang Pu river park in front of the restored Pu Du Temple.. The park design

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<sup>72</sup> Interview with an observer at the planning meetings. January 2003

The newly designed residential development attempts to retain a historic ambience through uniformly low development – two stories – and historic facades. Before the construction, the party in charge of redevelopment claimed that the redeveloped Nanchizi



Figure 14. The new houses at Nanchizi.

would retain 96% of its original atmosphere and appearance. However, none of the new design was based on courtyards, and the previous street pattern was not respected. The number of authentic courtyard homes has been reduced to twenty and the resident retention rate stands at 40%. Even at a discounted rate, the cost to buy back their home is still too much for the majority of the residents, thus leaving them with no choice but to move to the distant suburbs of Beijing.

## Chapter Three Competing Visions of Conservation

Prior to the pilot implementation of the Conservation Plan of the 25 Historic Areas in Nanchizi, Beijing's Vice Mayor of Construction Wang Guan Tao announced at a Municipal conference in September 2001 that "the Nanchizi historic area would not undergo wholesale demolition and the pattern of hutongs and courtyards will be retained. The architectural style of the courtyard homes will also be maintained while the infrastructure to supply water, electricity, gas and heat will be installed. By preserving the organization of the existing courtyard units, the property rights of the residents in the courtyard units will rearrange."<sup>73</sup> Wang went on to say that, "Only when progress is made on the rehabilitation and the redevelopment of the 25 historic areas will we improve the residents' standard of living and renew the old and dilapidated housing."<sup>74</sup>

The conservation of the Nanchizi historic area was supposed to be "the paradigm for a new era of development for Beijing that would strike a balance between redevelopment and conservation of Beijing's Old City."<sup>75</sup> Yet in May 2002, the residents of Nanchizi were informed via a notice that 231 of the 240 courtyard homes on the site will be demolished and replaced with a new type of two-storey unit buildings. The residents had the option of returning by purchasing a house on site at a slightly discounted price while the remaining units would be sold at market price. The notice offered three compensation options for the residents: the residents could return by purchasing a house on site at a discounted price, they could be relocated elsewhere or receive monetary compensation and gave them one month to move out.<sup>76</sup>

On realizing the conflict between the *Details* notice and the plans announced by the Municipal Government, two-thirds of the residents protested by refusing to move out. The Municipal Government attempted to appease the public by holding a session to reformulate the plan for Nanchizi. The only change to the plan, however, was the addition of eleven more

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<sup>73</sup> Wang, Guan Tao, "The Preservation and Development of Beijing as a Historic and Culturally Significant City," lecture (Beijing, China, 11 September, 2001), *Beijing Chengshi Guihua Zixun [Beijing Planning Information]*, 87 (January 2002).

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Zhu, Jiaguang. Interview with the author and J. Goldman. April 1, 2003.

<sup>76</sup> Wang, M. and Hsu X., "Beijing's Cultural Protection Project: How do you put on a thirteen hundred million show? [Beijing Wen Bao Gong Chun: Xixan Yu de Da Shi ZHEME Chiang?]," *Jinji GuanCha Bao [Economic Observer]*, September 2, 2002.

courtyard homes to the original nine units that were to be preserved.<sup>77</sup>

Along with the destruction of traditional vernacular architecture was the disappearance of a traditional neighborhood community. The residents, many of whom have been neighbors for almost fifty years, have created a tight-knit community rooted in the residential organization of the courtyard homes.

This chapter argues that the competing visions of those involved in the planning process caused the Nanchizi project to fall short of achieving the objectives stated in the conservation plan and examines why certain visions are valued over others.

## Conserving the Physical and the Human Environment

The Nanchizi project failed to satisfy the original principles of the plan because each stage of the planning process is carried out by a different group of actors; there is one group who makes the plan, one who assesses the plan, and another group who implements the plan. Furthermore, each of these groups is motivated by different interests.

The production of the plans for the conservation districts was undertaken by the Beijing Municipal Planning Commission which delegated the work to twelve additional academic and research institutions of architecture and planning, including the China Academy of Urban Planning and Design and Tsinghua University.<sup>78</sup> Throughout the plan making process, the Beijing Municipal Planning Commission sought the advice and critique of a group of nineteen experts in architecture, urban planning and historic preservation.

Since the Beijing Municipal Planning Commission, the academic institutions and the experts composed primarily of planning professionals and academics, their vision for the plan was characterized by a pro-preservation approach dominant in the intellectual circles. For the plan on Nanchizi, for example, they ultimately intended to retain the majority of the homes and the current population. While this vision is clearly illustrated in the conservation plans, how this vision can be realized is nebulous. In spite of this ambiguity in the plan, the conservation plans for the 25 historic plans were quickly approved.

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<sup>77</sup> Nan, Xianghong. (July 4, 2002) "The Theft of Nanchizi (Nanchizi zi Jie)," *Nangfang Choumou [Nangfang Weekend]*.

<sup>78</sup> Beijing Municipal Planning Commission, 21.

## Hastily Assessed Plan

Planning decisions for large scale projects are made by the Mayor's Office of the Municipal Government, typically with the Vice Mayor of Construction at the helm. The plan review meetings are also attended by other senior officials in the Municipal Government.<sup>79</sup> Depending on the nature of the plan, those present may include the Vice Mayor of Finance, Transportation, Environment and Government legislation. Together these government officials, rather than planning professionals, would decide whether the plan is acceptable. Just as the Municipal Planning Commission solicits the advice of experts, the Municipal Government officials also seek the opinion of experts before making the final decision about the plan.

Despite access to experts, the plan approval process only allows the decision makers to make a quick and hence general critique of the plan. Usually, a plan for a project as significant as the conservation plan is up for review, it will be presented to the Municipal Government by the Municipal Planning Commission. Then a meeting of the Experts Consulting Group will be organized to allow the Municipal Government officials to hear the experts' comments and suggestions about the plan.

While the experts often receive a copy of the plan prior to the meeting, they often do not spend much time reviewing it until the meeting. By the time the meeting is held, they will only have one day to come up with an assessment for the plan. At the following meeting, the Municipal Government officials will have to make a decision about the plan.<sup>80</sup>

The short amount of time spent on learning and reviewing the proposed plans tend to leave the government officials, the key decision makers, with limited knowledge about the plan. Considering the scope of the conservation plans for the 25 Historic Areas, it would have been unlikely for the Municipal Government officials to make a thorough assessment of the plan. Moreover, since the plan is not legally binding, there is no incentive for the Municipal Government officials to carefully assess the plan. The unregulated and rushed planning process also gives no incentive for the Municipal Planning Commission to produce quality detailed plans. Not surprisingly, the approved conservation plans for the 25 Historic Areas are

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<sup>79</sup> Yin, Zhi, Interview with the author and J. Goldman. January 30, 2003.

<sup>80</sup> Wang, Jinhui, Chief Planner of China Academy of Urban Planning and Design. Interview with the author and J. Goldman. March 25, 2003.

missing critical characteristics that facilitate their implementation or ensure the compliance of their principles.

Consequently, this set of published plans merely provides guiding principles to the conservation of the historic districts. Therefore the Municipal Government had to call upon the urban planners to conduct further planning and design work when Nanchizi was designated as the pilot site for the conservation planning of the 25 historic areas. Usually, once a plan has been approved by the Municipal Government, it is passed on to the District Government for implementation; the Municipal Planning Commission's planning responsibilities effectively end at the implementation stage.<sup>81</sup> The District Government is responsible for developing an implementation plan as well as financing the project. While the District Government's proposed strategy needs to be approved by the Municipal Government, the municipal level officials tend not to be actively involved in the daily operation of the plan.

With the Nanchizi conservation project, however, the Municipal Government took an active interest and closely monitored the process, at least in the early stages. The Municipal Government, with the assistance of the Municipal Planning Commission selected the teams to produce design schemes and the Vice Mayor of Construction, Wang Guan Tao, presided over the implementation planning meetings that would ordinarily have been organized and attended only by the East City District Government.<sup>82</sup> Since a planning legal system does not exist in China and the decision making process comes from the top down, the Municipal Government is able to take advantage of its status in the power hierarchy and become involved on its own accord. Along with the ability to decide on the extent of its involvement in district level affairs, the Nanchizi project also highlights the Municipal Government's ability to assume the greatest authority in these affairs.

## **People First, Housing Second**

The teams selected to create design schemes for Nanchizi included the Beijing Infrastructure Design Research Institute, Tsinghua University School of Architecture and Beijing Planning and Design Research Institute. Each team would present their schemes at

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<sup>81</sup> Zhu, Jianguang. Interview with the author and J. Goldman. April 1, 2003.

<sup>82</sup> Yin, Zhi. Interview with the author and J. Goldman. January 30, 2003.

these implementation planning meetings held in early 2001 and the schemes would be discussed by the Municipal Government officials with the District Government officials in attendance. The primary purpose of these presentations seems to be to generate ideas for this pilot conservation project rather than to select a specific scheme. Since this had never been done before, nobody was sure how to proceed.<sup>83</sup>

At the beginning, the government and the designers agreed on the principle that the design of Nanchizi should be based on the courtyards. At the beginning, Wang did not intend to demolish and redevelop the district; he wanted to “improve the infrastructure and the living conditions of the site as well as preserve the historic form and appearance” in a manner that

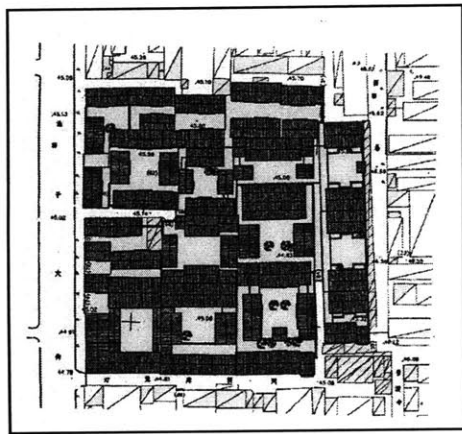


Figure 15. One of the proposed plans for housing in Nanchizi that preserved the existing courtyard units.

would “promote organic renewal.”<sup>84</sup> This vision coincided with Premier Jiang Zemin’s appeal for the planning of Beijing to “preserve the city’s historical appearance as well as reflect its modern image.”<sup>85</sup> Thus if Wang could successfully accomplish this goal and gain the attention of the Central Government officials who appoints the officials<sup>86</sup>, it could lead to a promotion. Wang’s subsequent rejection of the schemes proposed by the academic institutions reveal that his outlook on conservation is politically motivated.

The major contention between the government officials and the planning professionals was the degree of conservation, specifically, the number of courtyard houses to preserve. The planners’ schemes proposed the rehabilitation of the majority of the houses in Nanchizi and recommended a gradual implementation method so that the courtyard homes would be renovated one at a time.<sup>87</sup> Their schemes aligned with the principles espoused in the

<sup>83</sup> Interview with an observer at the planning meetings. January 2003.

<sup>84</sup> Wang, 127.

<sup>85</sup> Wang, 2.

<sup>86</sup> Zhang, 72.

<sup>87</sup> Yin Zhi. Interview with the author and J. Goldman. January 30, 2003, and Chu, R., “Nanchizi Lishi Wenhua Baohu Chu Weigai Shi Dian Pian Baohu yu Gengshin de Tanshuo [A Study of the Conservation and Renewal of the Nanchizi Historic Area],” *Beijing Cheng Shi Guihua Jianshe [Beijing City Planning and Construction Review]*, June 2001.



published conservation plans for the 25 historic districts. Wang, however, thought it was impossible to preserve the number of homes proposed by the schemes and improve the residents' standard of living.<sup>88</sup>

According to Wang, the improvement of living standards entailed the upgrading of infrastructure and the renovation of the existing houses. He argued that people come first in the conservation effort therefore the top priority ought to be the upgrading of the houses and the infrastructure. He pointed out that in Nanchizi, the area urgently needed to be upgraded: "There is no natural gas and heating network system, the sewage, electricity and communication networks have not been fixed in years. Furthermore, the majority of the residents do not have their own lavatories."<sup>89</sup>

Upgrading the physical infrastructure means that utility pipes for water, electricity, natural gas and sewage must be added underground. However, current regulations stipulate that each pipe must be at least 2 meters apart, which means that the majority of the hutongs have to be widened: "The existing hutongs were too narrow for

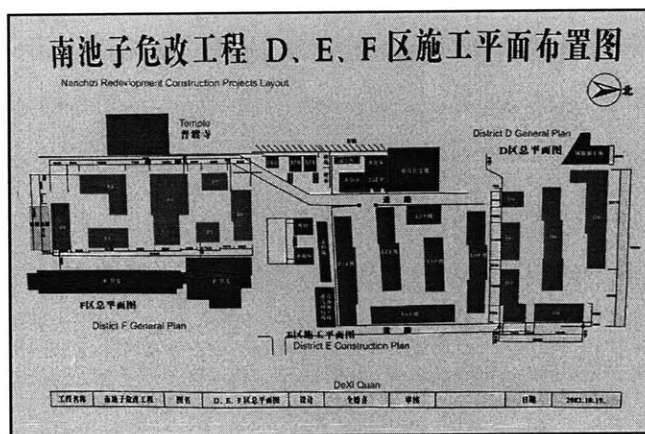


Figure 16. Site plan of the new housing posted at the construction site in Nanchizi, March 2003.

the construction of the basic infrastructure. In order to put down a water pipe, you need at least 3m on either side and you need to leave at least another meter to place the sewage pipe, therefore you need a 7 m hutong for this to work, but there are very few hutongs that are wide enough for this."<sup>90</sup> Before the hutongs can be widened, the housing alongside had to be demolished. In addition, since one cannot simply demolish one side of the courtyard house, the courtyard houses have to be demolished in their entirety. Furthermore, Wang pointed out that according to the assessment of the houses in Nanchizi completed during the

<sup>88</sup> Interview with an observer at the planning meetings. January 2003.

<sup>89</sup> Wang, 127.

<sup>90</sup> Interview with an observer at the planning meetings. January 2003.

conservation planning process, “only six percent of the courtyard homes were of a quality worthy of preservation.”<sup>91</sup>

For Wang, the courtyard homes worth preserving belonged to the top two categories of the housing stock assessment in the conservation plan: the heritage buildings and the buildings to be preserved. He excluded the type III housing stock, buildings to be rehabilitated, that occupied 65.4% of the total conservation area of Nanchizi.<sup>92</sup> In the conservation planning guidelines, type III buildings are defined as “buildings that have typical and distinct traditional spatial layout and forms, and have been rated as ‘fair’ in quality evaluation, rehabilitation can be done to adapt them to today’s life style. But their original spatial layout and traditional forms must be maintained.”<sup>93</sup> The planners abided by the guidelines and proposed the gradual renovation of these courtyard houses.

The gradual method of conservation proposed was not only costly, but it also meant that it would take a long time before any visible results could be achieved. For the politician eager to advance his political career, this type of small scale and gradual conservation measure seems too insignificant and too difficult to impress the superior officials, therefore it does not hold as much appeal as a lower cost alternative that achieves visible results in a comparatively short time. As a government official, he also had to evaluate the feasibility of the proposals. The planners’ schemes were costly to implement; the government had to finance the installation of the infrastructure and due to the lack of private property ownership in the government was also responsible for renovating the courtyard houses.

The inability for the planners to produce an effective and affordable scheme propelled Wang to prioritize certain objectives of the conservation plan over others. Since the upgrading of infrastructure to improve the living conditions in the Old City has been part of the political agenda since the previous decade, it wasn’t surprising that Wang chose to prioritize the installation of infrastructure. This effectively took the planners’ schemes out of the running as their schemes prioritized the preservation and rehabilitation of the courtyard houses. However, Wang did not appear to have a definitive vision for Nanchizi, but he clearly objected to the approaches adopted by the planners. Since the existing system of governance gives political

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<sup>91</sup> Wang Guan Tao, “The Preservation and Development of Beijing as a Historic and Culturally Significant City,” lecture (Beijing, China, 11 September, 2001), *Beijing Chengshi Guihua Zixun [Beijing Planning Information]*, 87 (January 2002).

<sup>92</sup> Beijing Municipal Planning Commission, 210.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 12.

leaders ultimate decision making authority, he was able to simply reject the Nanchizi proposals and give the District Government the right to decide on a plan of their own.<sup>94</sup> If Wang had a clear idea about the future of Nanchizi, he would have had the power to steer the design towards one that fitted his vision.

### **Conservation: An Obstacle to Economic Development**

While the Municipal Government officials strives for results that improves the image of Beijing, the District Government officials are anxiously attempting to promote economic growth of the district. The District Government's agenda fuels yet another vision for Nanchizi that exacerbates the conservation objectives proposed by the plan makers in the Beijing Municipal Planning Commissions and the academic institutions.

By this stage of the conservation planning process, it is clear that the schemes for Nanchizi that could achieve the objectives proposed by the Municipal Planning Commission in the conservation plan would be costly. This places a great financial burden on the East City District Government who has to bear at least half of the expense of the implementation while working toward annual economic targets set by the Municipal Government. For projects such as the conservation of historic residential districts that rarely breaks even, let alone makes a profit, the investment seems unwise politically and economically.

In a system where economic performance and political loyalty are the two criteria for assessing job performance<sup>95</sup>, the District Government officials are left in a bind where they have to meet the economic targets but they also have to listen to the Municipal Government who has ordered them to carry out the conservation project. Thus the East City District Government had to find a way to implement the Nanchizi conservation project that may reap financial benefits in order to help them achieve the economic targets. The district did have one advantage; it was given jurisdiction over the design of Nanchizi.

Unable to come up with a conservation plan that balances the costs, the District Government resorts to development companies. The development companies provide an attractive option because they can offer the funds to implement the conservation project.

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<sup>94</sup> Huang, Yan, Deputy Director, Beijing Municipal Planning Commission. Interview with the author and J. Goldman. January 15, 2003.

<sup>95</sup> Zhang, 72.

Once the development companies become involved, conservation is no longer the objective. The development companies strive to, at the very least, break even. To adopt the gradual method of rehabilitating courtyard homes one unit at a time and installing the infrastructure without widening the hutongs would be a costly and time-consuming endeavor. They find that the most efficient and cost-effective method of treating the historic district is to relocate the original residents, destroy the existing urban fabric and build new development from scratch. Furthermore, they are likely to put a small percentage of the housing on the market in order to balance the cost;<sup>96</sup> the land values in the city center are simply too high for the development companies to ignore.<sup>97</sup>

Because the development companies have the money to put their ideas into practice, they are in a stronger bargaining position than the District and Municipal Government, even though they tend to destroy the traditional urban fabric. Besides, the District Government is likely to welcome this additional potential for economic gain (through taxes and lease fees) at minimal cost to them. In the case of Nanchizi, the District Government left the design and implementation of the historic area in the hands of a state-owned development company. Once in the hands of the developer, the conservation objectives were thoroughly forgotten.

### **Successful Conservation?**

Those responsible for the result of Nanchizi claim that conservation has been achieved through the continuity of the visual qualities, however, the demolition and relocation that necessitated from this disregarded the principles stated in the conservation plan. It did not preserve the traditional cityscape and hutongs or ensure the authenticity of the preserved heritage, nor was the implementation method gradual and measured. The living conditions and the infrastructure may have improved, but not for the local residents since many of them were forced to relocate.<sup>98</sup> Finally, the public did not have any influence over the Nanchizi project. In other words, the original vision for Nanchizi was never achieved.

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<sup>96</sup> Huang, Yan, Interview with the author and J. Goldman, January 15, 2003.

<sup>97</sup> Bie, Lanchun, Associate Professor of Architecture, Tsinghua University. Interview with the author and J. Goldman. January 14, 2003.

<sup>98</sup> According to Huang Yan, the return rate is 40%.

The Nanchizi project reveals that the planning process in Beijing still remains fragmented and unregulated so that outcomes are unpredictable. Each stage of the planning process involved a different interest group driven by different motivations that led to divergent interpretations of conservation. These interpretations resulted in competing visions motivated by political, economic and social agendas that eliminate the notion of conservation from the equation.

| <b>Actors</b>                    | <b>Academic Planners and Professional Planners</b>       | <b>Municipal Government</b>   | <b>District Government</b>                        | <b>Development Company</b> |
|----------------------------------|--|---|---|----------------------------|
| <b>Priority</b>                  | Preserve the existing architecture and the community     | Improve the standard of living by upgrading infrastructure and quality of housing       | Quickest results at lowest cost                   | Profit                     |
| <b>Roles in Planning Process</b> | Define overall principles<br>Generate planning documents | Approve plans   | Implement plans<br>Finance project                | Execute plans              |
| <b>Limitations</b>               | Time<br>Little decision making power                     | Goal set by Central Government<br>Feasibility<br>Little knowledge of technical planning | Finance<br>Economic targets set by Municipal Gov. |                            |

A chart summarizing the roles and priorities of the actors involved in the conservation planning process of Nanchizi.

Since a legal system for planning does not exist, the plans are unable to provide legally binding regulations which means that the Municipal Planning Commission cannot force the District Government to abide by the objectives stated in the plan. In fact, the unregulated planning system allows political leadership to overrule existing plans. Professional planners become technicians who produce the plans rather than decision makers in the planning process.<sup>99</sup> In Nanchizi, the Municipal Government overruled the plans drawn up by the Municipal Planning Commission and gave the District Government the decision making power to realize its vision for Nanchizi. Lacking adequate financial resource to implement the

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<sup>99</sup> Zhang, 69.

Nanchizi project, the District Government transferred the design and implementation rights to the development company who had no incentive to comply by the principles of the conservation plan. The urban planners at the Municipal Planning Commission were given very little authority in the planning process and could not achieve conservation on their terms.

The realization of one vision for Nanchizi over the others reinforces the need to acquire political commitment in order for proposed strategies to be adopted and thus far, the most persuasive rationale seems to be financial resource. How can political support be generated for conservation? How can the competing visions for the conservation of Beijing's historic districts be resolved? The following chapter offers some recommendations to ensure that the fate of Nanchizi will not be repeated in the other conservation districts.

## Chapter Four Planning Process and Planning Function: From competing visions to coordinated visions

The dramatic departure from the original intent of the urban planners to retain the courtyard houses in the conservation of the Nanchizi historic district reveals the degree of flexibility or limitation, depending on your position in the decision making power, of the planning process in present day China. Those with the power to make decisions possess a great deal of latitude and those who have the financial resource have a substantial degree of influence on the decisions. As the Nanchizi case illustrates, the conservation decisions (or lack thereof) are motivated by political and economic benefits. Even government officials who ought to act in the public's interest seek personal gain in the process and are in the habit of "using the simplest possible technique and the lowest cost to solve the problems."<sup>100</sup> The Municipal Government officials objected to the schemes for the rehabilitation of individual courtyard homes in Nanchizi because they were financially unfeasible.<sup>101</sup> If conservation was the primary goal for Nanchizi, costs should not be a deterrent in the conservation effort. Yet the government officials were able and willing to accept the costs of destruction to the traditional urban fabric, because they were outweighed by the political benefits of improving the area's living standards within the quickest possible time frame. Furthermore, the government officials claimed that they have not only improved the standard of living in Nanchizi but they have also been sensitive to the traditional form and appearance of the hutongs.<sup>102</sup> The lack of a planning legal system meant they were not held accountable for disregarding the principles proposed in the conservation plan. The widely held view on the result of Nanchizi has been that it is a case of redevelopment rather than conservation.

This chapter posits that the conservation planning of Nanchizi reflects characteristics of the urban planning process in Beijing and points out that the consequences of the competing visions for conserving Nanchizi were exacerbated by the inability of the planning process to respond to the political and economic transitions of China in the past decade. Entrenched in this process, however, is a discourse on planning and governance that is defining the framework for conservation. The chapter concludes by proposing that reform in the planning

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<sup>100</sup> Yin Zhi, Dean of School of Architecture, Tsinghua University. Interview with the author and J. Goldman, January 30, 2003.

<sup>101</sup> Interview with an observer of the planning process. January 2003.

<sup>102</sup> UN Radio (2003) "UNESCO's concern for Beijing's Demolition of Historic Districts." Transcript posted on UN radio web site ([www.un.org](http://www.un.org)).

process may be a necessary precondition to the long-term success of conservation in Beijing.

Nanchizi failed as a planning exercise and this is not the first for Beijing. The Old and Dilapidated Housing Renewal Program was also supposed to preserve the historic atmosphere of the Old City but the majority of the renewal areas have been replaced by modern high rises. The transformation of Nanchizi reinforces the inadequacy of the existing planning institutions and processes to adapt to the changing conditions and constraints of development in Beijing. Ironically, for all of Beijing's changes in the name of progress, the institutional framework for planning has not changed with the times and this rigid and outdated planning process has rendered planning ineffective in today's Beijing.

### **Not Whether to Conserve, but What should be Conserved?**

If the planning of Nanchizi had been effective, Nanchizi would have met its planning goals and hence been a successful case for conservation. The Municipal Government's disregard for the conservation principles set forth by the Municipal Planning Commission revealed that unless a plan receives political support from the top, it would never turn into reality. Ultimately, the conservation plan that most closely followed the conservation principles approved by the Municipal Government did not gain political support. How could the conservation plan have been improved so it became "politically acceptable"<sup>103</sup> and hence feasible for implementation? The answers call for the need to reconsider the function of planning and the planning process within the context of conservation.

The major contention between the Municipal Government and the Municipal Planning Commission over the conservation of Nanchizi was not whether to conserve but to what extent should Nanchizi be conserved. More specifically, the professional planners presented schemes produced by academic planners that recommended the preservation of the majority of the houses in Nanchizi (the type I, II and III housing that comprised 71.4% of the total area of housing in Nanchizi), while the Municipal Government officials thought that only the top 6% of the existing housing stock was worth keeping intact.<sup>104</sup> The Municipal

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<sup>103</sup> Altschuler, Alan. *The City Planning Process*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1965,

<sup>104</sup> Wang Guan Tao, "The Preservation and Development of Beijing as a Historic and Culturally Significant City," lecture (Beijing, China, 11 September, 2001), *Beijing Chengshi Guihua Zixun [Beijing Planning Information]*: 87 (January 2002).



Government was unwilling to accept the plan because from its perspective, the implementation would be a slow and costly process without visible results. The Municipal Planning Commission was unable to produce a plan that persuaded the Municipal Government of the significance of conserving the majority of the courtyard houses in Nanchizi.

However, was it true that the conservation of the majority of the houses in Nanchizi would be a costly and slow endeavor? Was it merely an excuse on the part of the Municipal Government? According to the plans, it is difficult to tell because nowhere in any of the proposed plans does it mention the cost of implementing the plan or potential sources of funding. Arguably, this is the most important item on any government official's agenda when they consider whether a plan should be implemented. Without the real world considerations, it is difficult for the Municipal Government to see the legitimacy of the conservation plans. In the decision making process, the Municipal Government has to consider the political and economic constraints of realizing the plan. The officials weigh the costs and benefits of implementing the proposed plan against the plan's impact on Nanchizi and the city.

## **Potential Role of Professional Planners**

One Beijing planner said that the Nanchizi project revealed that “planning doesn't solve everything,”<sup>105</sup> but I would argue that the professional planners have yet to fulfill their potential in shaping the planning decisions. Firstly, the professional planners are still unable to justify their planning decisions and secondly, they do not act as mediators or regulators of planning policy.

In order to ensure effective planning, the professional planners need to find ways to produce plans that generate political commitment from the decision makers at the top of the power hierarchy. From the collection of journal collections, there doesn't appear to be a shortage of ideas on ways to conserve the historic districts of Beijing. The concepts for the preservation of the historic significance have been around for a long time. In fact, one of the principles of the Old and Dilapidated Housing Redevelopment Program had been “to improve the appearance of the city as well as carrying out better preservation of the Old

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<sup>105</sup> Huang, Yan, Interview with the author and J. Goldman, March 2003.

City,”<sup>106</sup> therefore plans for redevelopment with an eye on conservation have been proposed throughout the past decade. Yet, the government has failed to be convinced of the value of conservation. As a result, cases of demolition and reconstruction are repeated over and over again, each time destroying a part of the traditional urban fabric. The structure of governance is an obvious factor that needs to be re-examined but the role of professional planners also needs to be reconsidered.

Despite the professional planners’ knowledge on the politics and the technical aspects of planning, their excessive reliance on the academic planners in the conservation planning of Nanchizi diminished the persuasiveness of their proposal. Understandably, the academic planners treated the exercise as an intellectual pursuit, consequently the schemes tend to be more idealistic and do not necessarily conform to real world planning issues. The proposals included site plans that pointed out which houses were to be rehabilitated and which ones were to be demolished, as well as architectural schemes for the individual rehabilitated courtyard houses. However, there was no mention of how these new designs could be realized and what rehabilitation entails. The so-called implementation guidelines provided were equally vague. The plan for Nanchizi provides three options for the treatment of the Pu Du Temple that currently houses a primary school. Each option represents a different degree of conservation: “If financially feasible, the school will vacate Pu Du Temple and the temple will be preserved as a cultural relic. The front hall of the temple will be converted into a community center and the remaining area currently occupied by the school will be turned into green space.” The second option retains the school on temple grounds and recommends the small scale rehabilitation of the school so it fits in more with the environment while the third option merely reinforces the need to relocate the school as a priority.<sup>107</sup> For government officials who are particularly concerned about the cost, it seems likely that they will opt for the cheapest choice. The ambiguity also makes it easier for officials to ignore or renegotiate the guidelines.

It is the responsibility of the planners at the planning authority to ensure that the plans when presented to the Municipal Government officials are well presented and persuasive. Therefore, once the academic planners generate the concept for the plan, the professional

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<sup>106</sup> Tan, Ying. “Social Aspects of Beijing’s Old and Dilapidated Housing Renewal.” China City Planning Review (English edition) 10.4 (1994): 50.

<sup>107</sup> Beijing Municipal Planning Commission, 211.

planners should work toward making it possible to implement. This includes showing how the plan can be achieved financially, potential sources of funding, the methodology for executing the plan, reasonable time frame for implementation and monitoring and evaluation procedures. If the professional planners had worked out a financial balance sheet for Nanchizi, the Municipal Government officials may not have been so quick to dismiss the possibility of retaining the majority of the courtyard houses.

The Nanchizi case shows that professional planners did not take part in the design and implementation stages. In fact, these critical stages of planning were largely orchestrated by bureaucratic officials who are not planners by training. Once the planners at the Beijing Municipal Planning Commission finish the plans, their job is effectively complete and they are no longer responsible for the plan. The Municipal Planning Commission is thus unable to oversee the implementation process and ensure that their proposals come into fruition.<sup>108</sup> Since there is no regulatory control over the planning guidelines, the District Government officials have the autonomy to recast the plan according to their interests.

Professional planners therefore should be involved in the design and implementation stages of the planning process or ensure that the development of the plan responds to issues that may come up during the design and implementation stages. They should assess whether the plans proposed by the academic planners are feasible. Perhaps if they worked out how much the plan would cost, they would not have presented it to the Municipal Government officials because they are knowledgeable enough about the government bureaucracy to gauge the likelihood of a plan's potential for implementation. On the other hand, if they had designed a cost-effective method then they would have a strong argument for implementing the proposed plan. Moreover, more time should be allocated for planning to allow for careful investigation of the site and rigorous testing of alternatives. The conservation planning for the 25 historic districts was under a tight schedule that those involved felt there was not enough time to complete the plans, let alone test the feasibility of the proposal.<sup>109</sup>

Planning is not simply about generating planning documents, it is also about transferring the ideas on paper into reality. Planners possess the technical and the political knowledge to make planning more effective and this is made easier now that "urban planning has been

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<sup>108</sup> Fong Fei Fei, Planner at Beijing Municipal Planning Commission. Interview with the author and J. Goldman, January 27, 2003.

<sup>109</sup> Interview with an observer of the planning process. January 2003.

assigned a more prominent position in the administrative hierarchy.”<sup>110</sup> In order to break this vicious cycle of demolition and reconstruction, the planners need to find innovative approaches of working with constraints in the real world. By producing more persuasive and feasible plans, the professional planners could gain greater influence over the decision making process. The promotion of this “middle-out” approach may be more efficient in gathering momentum than the “bottom-up” approach of community participatory development that would be much more difficult to organize in an authoritarian regime. Furthermore, many planners have shown “more interest in sharing power with the top rather than sharing power with the bottom.”<sup>111</sup>

Empowering this “middle-out” approach by the Municipal planners are the expert group consultants who advise on the formulation of the plans. These consultants are appointed by the Municipal Planning Commission for their technical expertise so their recommendations tend to be politically neutral, but because “they receive more attention from the government due to their social and professional reputation; their decisions are often adopted by the government.”<sup>112</sup> The expert group consultants can reshape the concept of conservation while the professional planners can reshape the conservation planning process.

Yet, the discretion given to those empowered in the planning process to reshape the conservation plan reinforces the need to establish a regulatory framework for planning. If planning policy cannot be enforced then planning becomes a useless exercise. The conservation plan produced by the planners was not legally binding and therefore could be easily manipulated to suit the interests of the decision makers.

## **Establishing Planning Legislation**

Currently, only two types of plans are legally enforceable under the City Planning Act enacted in 1984: the master plan and the detailed plans. The master plan “should include the designated functions of the city, the development goal and target planning size of the city and the land use structure, functional land use differentiation and the general layout for various

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<sup>110</sup> Zhang, Tingwei, (2003), “Challenges Facing Planners in Transitional China.” Journal of Planning Education and Research 22 75.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>112</sup> Zhang, Tingwei (2002). “Decentralization, Localization, and the Emergence of A Quasi-Participatory Decision-Making Structure in Urban Development in Shanghai.” International Planning Studies 7(4): 321.

types of constructions, comprehensive transport system, water space and green space system, sectoral planning and planning for short term constructions.”<sup>113</sup> Compared to the long range planning horizon of the master plan (20 years), the detailed plan stipulates the short term development of the city. According to the Act, “the urban detailed planning should include the boundaries of each construction project within the planned plot, control indices such as the building density and building height, general layout plan, utility engineering plan and three dimensional site plan”<sup>114</sup> The detailed plan is further divided into two types: the detailed development control plan (DDCP) and the detailed construction plan (DCP). “The DDCP is prepared in urban planning districts where future development projects are uncertain, while the DCP is prepared in areas that are facing immediate construction.”<sup>115</sup>

The conservation plan for the 25 historic areas prepared by the Beijing Municipal Planning Commission, however, is a new type of plan that according to the City Planning Act, “is not compulsory and belongs to the master planning stage.”<sup>116</sup> Therefore, the conservation plans do not have legal status. This results in flexible plans that can be easily manipulated based on the interests of those who execute the plan. Even though Nanchizi failed as a planning exercise, nobody could be held accountable for breaking the law because no law exists to be broken.

As long as the plans are not legally binding, the planners are restricted to a research and advisory role in the planning process. Furthermore, “We can’t control urban development, we manage the preservation of the Old city and propose spatial distribution of land uses but we don’t have jurisdiction over economic development strategies. We can propose ideas but cannot tell you how it should be done and often the economic planning bureau and other bureaus have different ideas about urban development.”<sup>117</sup> Therefore, as long as long as planning decisions are subordinate to economic development strategies, planners will remain as developers of the economy rather than mediators of urban development.

## Market Forces

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<sup>113</sup> Yeh , Anthony Gar-on and Wu, Fulong (1989). “The transformation of the urban planning system in China from a centrally-planned to transitional economy.” *Progress in Planning*, 51(3): 189.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Dong Guanqi. Interview with the author and J. Goldman. April 2, 2003..

In their quest for their respective agendas, the various groups of actors involved in the planning process underestimated the impact of the transition to a market economy. Each group of players involved believed that the transition to a market economy would serve to their advantage and therefore allowed the market to take its course.<sup>118</sup> The existing relocation policy, for example, failed to anticipate the effects of the emergence of a land market so “the power of the market appropriated the central location as soon as its environmental quality is improved.”<sup>119</sup> In Nanchizi, the new housing increased the land value so some of the original residents were unable to return to Nanchizi because they could not afford to purchase the new houses. In other words, the plan failed to stipulate provisions for potential changes to the economic conditions of Nanchizi brought about by its implementation under market forces. If the government had taken into account the market principles that govern real estate, it would have anticipated the increase in land and property values after upgrading the Nanchizi historic district. If the government had acted in the public interest, it should have subsidized the cost of the housing so current residents could move back; the fact that the role of the government is to intervene and regulate market failures is lost on the officials. However, the government apparently did prepare a policy document specifically for relocation of residents in historic district, presumably one that gave preferential treatment to the residents, but like the published conservation plan for Nanchizi, it was never adopted.

The relocation compensation policy for Nanchizi was similar to those of previous redevelopment in the Old City. Currently, the relocation policy favors those who relocate elsewhere: “you would benefit the most by relocating elsewhere while it would be more costly to remain in your original neighborhood near the city center. People who want to return are not given any discount because otherwise, everyone would opt to come back. In Nanchizi, some residents already have homes elsewhere so they could pocket the relocation compensation.”<sup>120</sup> Also, the relocation compensation amount depends on the type of property ownership and the area of the house.

Instituting the relocation policy is complicated, particularly with the mixed distribution of property ownership within one multi-family courtyard house. One unit of courtyard house could be divided among households who own their accommodations, households who are

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<sup>118</sup> Zhang, 72.

<sup>119</sup> Abramson, Daniel. “Marketization’ and institutions in Chinese inner-city redevelopment: a commentary of Lu Junhua’s Beijing’s Old and Dilapidated Housing Renewal,” *Cities*, 14, no. 2 (1997): 74.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

renting from private owners, households whose quarters are owned by a work unit and the government.<sup>121</sup> As of last year, private owners had a choice in whether to participate in the renewal of their homes.<sup>122</sup> A courtyard unit thus runs the risk of having one private owner who may hold up the renewal process because he or she refuses to move out and participate in the renewal program.

For private owners, the monetary value for land use rights is included with the compensation, which means, “If you already have housing elsewhere and do not want to move back, then you would be compensated for the value of your current house at market rate and the land use rights. But, if you live in public housing, then you won’t get compensated for the value of the house because it belongs to the state.”<sup>123</sup> In other words, for public housing tenants, they will only receive compensation only for relocation. At the same time, the value of the current courtyard house is quite low (500-1000RMB per square meter)<sup>124</sup> so in either case, the current residents do not benefit from the government’s relocation policy. These low values appear to be arbitrarily set by the Municipal Government and do not reflect the real conditions: “If the house is 1000 square meters and has a value of 10 million yuan, the compensation according to the government policy would only be one million yuan. There’s a huge discrepancy between the two values. The government is basically robbing the home owner’s money and not giving these owners the right kind of relocation package.”<sup>125</sup> Furthermore, a different policy exists when developers are responsible for the relocation.

If the relocation policy was already complicated because of the mixture of home ownership within a courtyard house unit, deciding who should stay and who should move out of a rehabilitated courtyard house are fraught with even greater difficulties. By demolishing the existing housing, the relocation issue is simplified because everyone moves out, they are compensated according to their home ownership status and those who can afford to can move back. Despite the government’s earlier promise for a 99% return relocation, over 50% of the residents were unable to move back because they could not afford to purchase the new homes. Once again, the government of Beijing chose to use “the simplest possible technique

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<sup>121</sup> Tan, Ying, “Social Aspects of Beijing’s Old and Dilapidated Housing Renewal.” China City Planning Review (December 1994), 48.

<sup>122</sup> Xie Jing Rong, Beijing Municipal Land Management Bureau. Personal interview. January 23, 2003.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Deng Qing, Real estate developer. Interview with the author and J. Goldman. January 19, 2003.

and the lowest cost to solve the problems.”<sup>126</sup>

The Nanchizi case suggests that planning can no longer be limited to physical development planning, because a planning decision will also have political, economic and social implications. Judging from the diagrams on infrastructure, road networks, housing and green space in the conservation plans, China currently seems to prioritize an aspect endorsed by the central administration: physical spatial planning, especially one that will increase economic growth. The conservation plans include existing physical conditions but lack the existing social conditions of the residents. This neglect of social implications of planning has destroyed the traditional social fabric of Nanchizi – the “way of life” in the hutongs most valued by the residents has been lost permanently.

Much of the vitality of urban heritage stems from the people and their activities therefore the social character of the place is a critical part of conservation planning. Addressing the socio-cultural impact of conservation would require an additional dimension to the interpretation of conservation in Beijing. However, the Chinese government’s single-minded pursuit for economic development poses a continual challenge for conservation advocates. The following chapter considers the possibility of reframing the discourse on conservation that would incorporate a social agenda and cultivate a culture of conservation.

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<sup>126</sup> Yin, Zhi. Interview with the author and J. Goldman. January 30, 2003.



## Chapter Five. A Better Understanding of Conservation Planning?

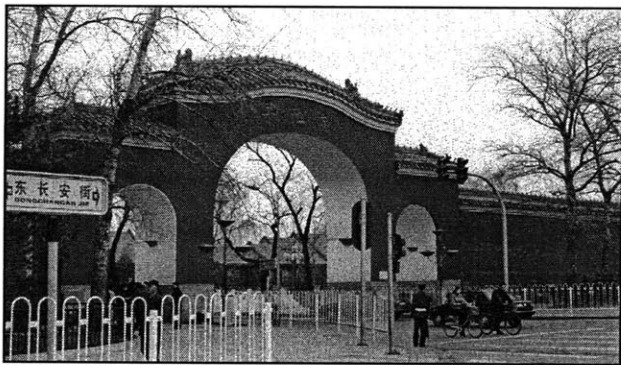


Figure 17. New gateway to the Nanchizi historic district.

The analysis of the actors involved and their motivations for the pilot conservation project at Nanchizi suggests the need to reform the planning process and planning function of China. Their motivations suggest that more powerful forces are driving the institutional process and framework for planning: an emphasis on economic development and cultivation

of a “New Beijing” that prohibits an equitable conservation agenda. In order to instigate a thorough and sustainable reform of the planning process and planning function specific to conservation, a simultaneous change in the discourse on conservation and planning must also be established.

Since the current decision making structure is a top-down process, the necessary precondition for sustainable conservation planning is to alter the discourse on conservation. Without compelling the decision makers to willingly change their ideas on conservation and planning, the ethic for effective planning would not exist and no matter how diligent the planners are it will be difficult to implement their plans and avoid a repetition of Nanchizi. Just imagine how different Nanchizi might have become if a conservation-minded official had been the mayor of Beijing.

### Conserving for whom?

The Nanchizi project failed to achieve the conservation planning objectives defined by the professionals at the Planning Commission but, the Municipal Government officials claim that the conservation effort at Nanchizi was successful because the new Nanchizi has achieved the kind of visual continuity that previous redevelopment efforts failed to consider. The new homes look ‘historic’, the park from the Qing dynasty that made Nanchizi significant at the time has been restored. Also, they maintain that the demolition of the existing housing was justifiable since many of the houses were dilapidated and unfit for living. Some experts have

actually cast doubt on the historic significance of the courtyard houses at Nanchizi. by suggesting that many of the courtyard houses were built after the Qing dynasty and therefore not particularly worthy of preservation.<sup>127</sup>

The Nanchizi case suggests that the image conscious government officials are interested in shaping Old Beijing into a particular period of time, the Qing dynasty. Their vision of conservation thus becomes one that echoes the majesty of the Chinese civilization, not one that acknowledges the dilapidation brought about by decades of neglect after Liberation. They are not interested in preserving the historic districts as they appear now. The new but historic looking facades flanking a clean well-paved street give “face” to the District Government officials. It shows that the district is modern yet sensitive to its historical context. The new design of Nanchizi incorporated a park that existed in the Qing dynasty, if that doesn’t count conservation then what does? Furthermore, the cultivation of this modern image for the district attracts additional financial investments urgently needed by the District Government. Potential buyers are expressing interest in purchasing these “new” courtyard houses at the heart of the city and are willing to pay the asking price. To the District Government officials, they have achieved that harmonic balance between modernization and preservation.

The conservation of Nanchizi, however, was carried out at the expense of a group at the lower stratum of society. By preventing residents from returning and not providing enough compensation, the government has failed to conserve the community of Nanchizi. In order to keep the area alive, the government may need to infuse new life but that doesn’t mean that the residents can be neglected in the process. The relocation policy adopted does not provide sufficient assistance for the residents to purchase their new homes in Nanchizi so they are forced to find affordable accommodations elsewhere. While the conservation principles for Nanchizi promoted equity and social inclusion, the realities presumed the opposite. It is as if the government’s vision of a “New Beijing” does not include the “local residents” in historic districts that are better suited for the elites of Beijing.

In particular, one of the conservation principles was to “improve the living standards of the local residents.”<sup>128</sup> If the residents are to be relocated and unable to move back, then what would be the purpose of planning to improve the residents’ living standards? Even if the

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<sup>127</sup> Wang, Jinhui citing recent discussions with academics and professionals. Interview with the author and J. Goldman. March 2003.

<sup>128</sup> Beijing Municipal Planning Commission, 7.

improvement occurs through their relocation to modern apartments, it's doubtful that they would consider their three hour commute to work an improvement of living standards. The Beijing government's attitude and behavior suggest that ingrained in the government's discourse on conservation is a notion of social control that is inter-related to the image of Old Beijing. The small proportion of restored courtyard houses have been turned into luxury housing, thus establishing a new community of "local residents" in the traditional hutong neighborhoods. This new community is much more private and since "these houses are often not the primary residence of their wealthy owners,"<sup>129</sup> the hutongs become devoid of the human activities characteristic of the traditional neighborhood community. The low income households do not benefit from the government's conservation projects. Does the government want to create a historic center that comprises only of the upper class? In the long run, this trend of gentrification will only increase the gap between the poor and the wealthy and is likely to drain the social diversity from the historic center.<sup>130</sup> The development of these luxury courtyard houses also stagnates the economy of the area since it "essentially places a moratorium on their further development"<sup>131</sup> so the district looks more like a museum than a neighborhood.

Can conservation planning ever be equitable and effective? By briefly examining how conservation planning is governed and interpreted in three conservation cases in Asia, I hope to highlight potential approaches to thinking about conservation planning in Beijing.

## **Models of Conservation?**

### **I. Japan's People-centered Approach**

In contrast to the absence of conservation laws in China, conservation districts in Japan are considered national monuments and rigorous zoning controls are instituted to preserve the character of the area and these controls require strict supervision of height and materials and the preservation of wood facades. The design of new buildings also has to "relate appropriately to historic streetscapes."<sup>132</sup> While there is strict supervision, there is flexibility in the designs so that the buildings in these historic districts do not have to conform exactly to particular historic architectural features. The municipal officials in Kyoto asked the

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<sup>129</sup> Abramson, Dan (2001). "Beijing's Preservation Policy and the Fate of the Siheyuan," *TDSR* 13 (1), 15.

<sup>130</sup> Zhang, Jie. Interview with the author and J. Goldman. June 2002.

<sup>131</sup> Abramson, 20.

<sup>132</sup> Tung, 380.

Department of Architecture at University of Kyoto to develop a set of prototypical design solutions for the wood facades of historic buildings so that multiple options would be available to the property owners when they rehabilitate their homes.<sup>133</sup> As long as the property owners choose one of the prototypical designs, they are complying with the law. Therefore, the municipality in Kyoto is reassured a certain outcome of the conservation plan. In comparison, Beijing's lack of legislation concerning conservation yields unpredictable results.

Also, Japan's historic districts are smaller in area, sometimes no larger than a street with a cluster of 25 houses. Since the implementation falls on the individual households, their support for conservation is crucial: "Without the residents' support, the system won't

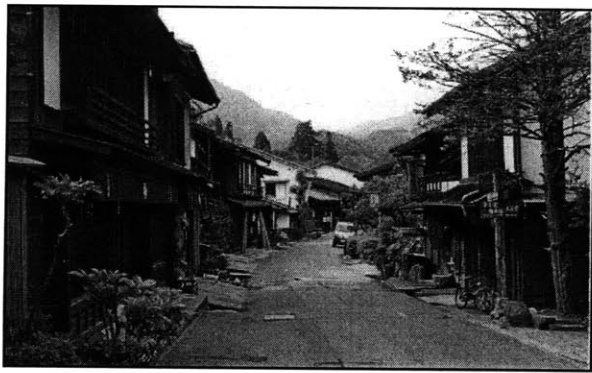


Figure 18. Wooden lattice windows are a prominent feature of the homes in Japanese conservation

work."<sup>134</sup> Therefore, in matters concerning the conservation of historic districts, the government has designated the residents as the main component of a historic district because "a historic district is the living narrative composed by the ancestors of the residents and the product of their hard work."<sup>135</sup> This people-oriented discourse of conservation has cultivated a movement driven by the residents themselves to

conserve their communities, not because they have to but because they want to.

At the same time, the Japanese government recognizes the need for "a better coordination of all concerned people, offices and departments"<sup>136</sup> to make conservation effective. The existing national laws related to conservation are regulated by two different ministries; while the Agency of Cultural Affairs under the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture handles the Ancient Capital Law and the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties, the Ministry of Construction is responsible for the Building Code and the

<sup>133</sup> Tung, 381.

<sup>134</sup> Inaba, Nobuko (1999) "Zoning and Land Use Codes for Historic Preservation: A Case Study of Kyoto" Conference Proceedings from The Economic of Heritage: UNESCO Conference on Adaptive Re-use of Historic Properties in Asia and the Pacific, 2.

<sup>135</sup> *Lishi dushi wenhua yichan baochun zi xiang guan xian chang yu chuan ming canyu [The Charter of Heritage Preservation and Community Participation]*, Proceedings from the Conference on The Preservation of Heritage and Historic Architecture, Taipei, Taiwan, 2001.

<sup>136</sup> Inaba, 3.

City Planning Law.<sup>137</sup> Since the Ministry of Construction receives more funding in the state budget than the Agency of Cultural Affairs, the local government tends to be more receptive to projects proposed by the Ministry of Construction rather than the more conservation-oriented projects of the Agency of Cultural Affairs.<sup>138</sup> While the Ministry of Construction and the Agency of Cultural Affairs ought to collaborate in conservation projects, the Ministry of Construction would sometimes carry out the project without prior consultation with the Agency of Cultural Affairs thus leading to the destruction of urban heritage.<sup>139</sup> In an effort to ensure proper communication between the two ministries, cooperative projects between the two offices have been initiated such as one that provides municipalities with financial support for the conservation of municipal-level properties.<sup>140</sup>

The Japanese government recognizes the potential of utilizing cultural heritage for the future development of cities, particularly those efforts carried out by the citizens: “We believe that from the residents’ perspective they feel that they can claim the town they make as their own which may allow them to feel inspired to continue their efforts for the future. We are promoting conservation of cultural heritage to instill hope for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”<sup>141</sup> As a result, the government has continued to seek further funding to support urban conservation efforts.

## II. Singapore’s Tourism-centered Approach



Figure 19. Restored facades of shop houses.

While the Japanese government promoted a people-centered approach to conservation, the Singapore government advanced a tourism-centered approach to conservation. The national planning authority for Singapore, the Urban Redevelopment Authority, became involved in conservation activities as early as the 1970s with the rehabilitation of state-owned properties.<sup>142</sup> The conservation of

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Proceedings from the Conference on The Preservation of Heritage and Historic Architecture, Taipei, Taiwan, 2001, 45.

<sup>142</sup> Urban Redevelopment Authority, *Conservation of Built Heritage*, <http://www.ura.gov.sg>.

historic districts was a response to the decline in the tourism industry in the mid-1980s. Based on market research conducted by the government, officials concluded that “in our effort to build up a modern metropolis, we have removed aspects of our Oriental mystique and charm best symbolized in old buildings.”<sup>143</sup> The government recognized that heritage is “a valuable tourism asset” and thus reconsidered the role of urban conservation.

The authoritarian regime of Singapore enacted a comprehensive conservation program that included studies of conservation programs and legislations abroad, the establishment of a professional conservation department, increased budget for the revitalization of historic districts, a program to upgrade the infrastructure, financial incentives for property owners and extensive literature on conservation for public education.<sup>144</sup>



Figure 20. Interior of a restored shop house, now used as a restaurant.

The government’s main objective for conservation was to restore historic buildings, especially the old shop houses which also created “a sense of human scale, rhythm and charm not found in much of our modern architecture.”<sup>145</sup> In the report on the historic districts, Singapore’s national planning authority, the Urban Redevelopment Authority pointed out the following problems faced by the historic districts: “fragmented land ownership, dilapidated structures of good architectural value, tenanted properties under rent control and declining traditional trades.”<sup>146</sup> Therefore, the conservation effort should not only retain the architecture but also “retain and enhance ethnic-based activities while consolidating the area with new and compatible industries.”<sup>147</sup>

In practice, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) provided detailed guidelines on the architectural restoration while the private sector would implement the guidelines. Furthermore, the URA promoted traditional trades in the core areas and retail establishments on the ground level of historic buildings. However, it purposely did not specify land use and

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<sup>143</sup> Tung, 185.

<sup>144</sup> Tung, 186.

<sup>145</sup> Lee, Sim Ho (1996) “Urban Conservation Policy and the Preservation of Historical and Cultural Heritage: The Case of Singapore,” *Cities*, 13(6), 400.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 401.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

allowed market forces to decide the appropriate uses of the historic buildings.<sup>148</sup>

Analysis on the areas' pre and post conservation uses reveal that "most of the shop houses have turned from wholly or partially residential use to commercial use."<sup>149</sup> In fact, Tanjong Pagar (Chinatown), one of the first conservation areas that had originally been a mix of residential and commercial zones barely contains any residential use.<sup>150</sup> However, not all the restored shop houses have succeeded in attracting tenants. A survey in 1994 revealed that Kampong Glam, a Muslim area consisting mainly of two and three storey shop houses had a 40% vacancy rate on the third storey level.<sup>151</sup> Businesses, particularly in the retail sector, simply do not want to locate on the third floor. Since the Singapore government has chosen not to intervene in dictating the uses of these buildings, appropriate long term uses for these spaces have yet to be determined.

Nevertheless, the URA has largely succeeded in retaining the "traditional trades and ethnic-based activities in the core areas."<sup>152</sup> Today's Kampong Glam remains well-known for its bazaar-style shopping of traditional trades and ethnic goods, such as fabrics, silks and basketry.

The Singapore government believed in the value of urban conservation and was able to mobilize the institutions and people of Singapore in the conservation efforts. The government supported conservation because it foresaw the potential economic benefits and therefore conservation was not seen as incompatible to economic development. By incorporating conservation into economic and urban plans, the Singapore government was able to save pockets of Old Singapore from demolition and increase local revenues. In 1994, income from tourism represented 10.3 percent of Singapore's gross national product.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 402.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 408.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 406.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 407.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 408.

<sup>153</sup> Tung, 186.

### III. Adaptive Re-use in Shanghai

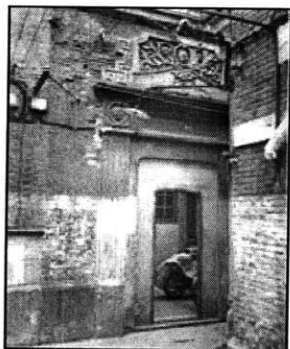


Figure 21. An old shikumen house.

Since conservation for tourism development has a direct economic impact, it provides further incentive for conservation. Shanghai emulated this model of conservation by creating the historic cultural district of Xintiandi (“New Heaven and Earth”). Xintiandi was originally a historic residential district slated for renewal but instead of demolition and rebuilding, the Hong Kong developer Shui On decided to restore the traditional houses and adapt them for new uses.<sup>154</sup> Now, Xintiandi is a 30,000 square meters of attraction featuring retail, entertainment, cultural, recreational and residential facilities<sup>155</sup> in beautifully restored historic buildings with modern amenities.

While the developer does not tout Xintiandi as a conservation project: “it is something more than preservation, it is yesterday meets tomorrow in Shanghai today.” The planners and officials in Beijing seemed to admire this effort that precludes wholesale demolition of historic houses; plans for a similar project in the West City District were apparently under discussion as of 2003.<sup>156</sup> The conservation of Xintiandi, however, is cosmetic. The historic buildings are preserved in façade only while the interiors are gutted and reconfigured. Similar to the case in Singapore, the historic residential district is transformed into a predominantly commercial district and the little housing there is left is targeted towards the wealthy.

### The Outlook

Few cases of conservation in developing countries has successfully rehabilitated and retained the predominantly low income residents who occupy the historic districts. With the assistance of international non-profit organizations and the Inter-American Development Bank, Quito, Ecuador has made progress towards building affordable housing for low-income communities in its historic center.<sup>157</sup> The Singapore government funded the relocation of

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<sup>154</sup> Chinanow.com

<sup>155</sup> Shuion.com

<sup>156</sup> Zhu Zixuan. Interview with the author and J. Goldman. March 27, 2003.

<sup>157</sup> See Young, T. L. (2000) *Low-Income Communities in World Heritage Cities: Revitalizing Neighborhoods in Tunis and Quito*, Masters Thesis. Cambridge: MIT and F. Steinberg, “Conservation and Rehabilitation of Urban Heritage in Developing Countries,” *Habitat International*, 20(3).



Kampong Glam residents to modern housing estates.

The cases of Japan and Singapore reinforce the central role of economic and finance in conservation activities. For a developing nation such as China, it could become a burden, particularly when economic development remains a priority. The Nanchizi case reveals that conservation planning in Beijing is much more complex than the conservation of the built heritage but it also involves upgrading the infrastructure, the rehabilitation of dilapidated historic architecture and the improvement of overcrowded living conditions.

Before the physical conservation aspect can begin, however, the government must set the social policy agenda, in particular, how to handle the predominately low-income residents of the hutong neighborhoods and what kind of relocation policy should be implemented. The complexities of planning and implementing conservation in Beijing make demolition and reconstruction an appealing alternative to upgrading the historic district. The situation is unlike that in Japan where homeowners can afford to pick and choose a housing design prototype so that the historic houses remain as residential in use; nor is it like Singapore where the government has enough resources to institute a conservation program practically overnight.

If Nanchizi were currently occupied by mostly middle class or upper class households who could buy back the houses at market price or had the resources to move elsewhere, then the method of rehabilitating the courtyard houses would not seem so unfeasible. Since the area is comprised mainly of lower income residents, they are unable to afford the new houses sold at market price. The government should provide subsidies but officials say that they do not have adequate funding. Logically, if the government cannot afford to retain the current residents, it should wait and secure enough funding before taking action. However, the housing is overcrowded, dilapidated and lacks infrastructure; there is an urgent need for upgrading so the image of Beijing's Old City is not associated with dilapidation.

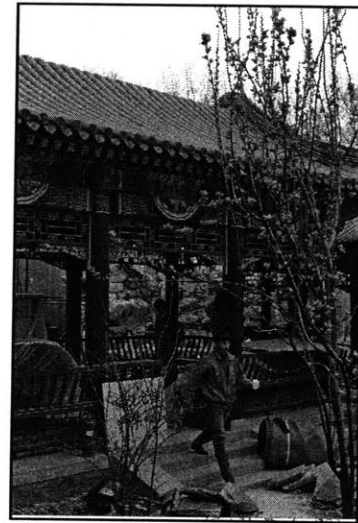


Figure 22. The new courtyard house.

A sense of urgency and the single-minded pursuit for economic development seems to underlie the activities in Beijing – speed and money equal success, regardless of the consequences. Conservation cannot produce profit overnight. Nanchizi is the result of a

rushed process where those responsible for the planning were not given the time to plan carefully and test the outcomes. Furthermore, those directly impacted by the conservation of Nanchizi, the residents, were rarely heard during the planning process and since the government was unable to deliver its promises, the residents protested by refusing to move out. Perhaps if the residents were given the opportunity to voice their opinions, they would better appreciate the government's work in this complex environment. Given the crowded conditions of neighborhoods like Nanchizi, a significant number of residents do have a desire to relocate: "During the 60s and the 70s, everyone was really poor, so the communal lifestyle of the da za yuan was suitable because the neighbors could support each other in their hardship. But now, many of these residents have become reasonably well-off so logically, they want more private space and therefore no longer find the current hutong lifestyle appealing."<sup>158</sup> The residents' refusal to move out, I believe, can also be attributed to the residents' distrust and dissatisfaction toward the government's failure to deliver on their promise of protecting the Nanchizi neighborhood.

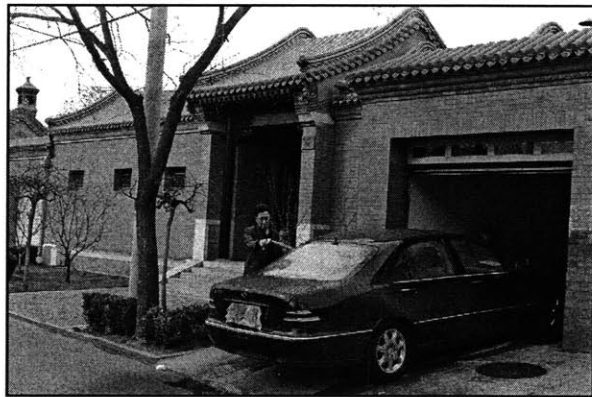


Figure 23. A courtyard house with modern amenities.

Thus, conservation in Beijing entails physical, social and economic planning but in the existing planning system, these three components are devised independently of each other. As is the case in Japan where conservation-related laws are regulated by two different institutional departments (the Ministry of Construction and the Agency of Cultural Affairs) separate institutions manage the physical, social and economic planning of Beijing with little communication between them during the planning process. Since conservation involves all three aspects, an integrated approach to conservation planning seems logical if Beijing is to avoid the divergent paths of conservation and economic development.

The Nanchizi case suggests that conservation is perceived as a burden to Beijing's development potential but the cases of Japan, Singapore and Shanghai reveal that conservation is not necessarily incompatible with economic growth. Those involved in

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<sup>158</sup> Ren, Zichiang. Real estate developer. Interview with the author and J. Goldman. April 2, 2003.

conservation planning should interpret conservation as a function of the development process rather than a limitation to the development process. Conservation is a dynamic force to the city, it does not stagnate the society rather it could be defined as “infusing new life to the city” therefore it holds a degree of flexibility that may benefit society. Furthermore, conservation of a historic district should be considered in relation to the conservation of other historic districts as well as to the development of the city.

In the current political, economic and social context of Beijing, perhaps tourism development offers the most incentive for conservation. Therefore, the most viable solution may be to change the land use of a historic district from predominantly residential to commercial, but the state must be responsible for providing adequate compensation for the displaced residents. The funding for this could come from the revenues generated from the businesses in the district so as to ameliorate the government’s financial burden on compensation.

While the conservation processes of Japan and Singapore are far from perfect, the conservation movement in both countries resulted from the government’s change in attitude towards conservation. Once the government recognized the potential role of conservation, it made a commitment to conservation and made efforts to control the development. This change of attitude and perception of conservation needs to be instilled in all the actors involved in the planning process, therefore a framework for an integrated and inclusionary planning process needs to be established.

The media coverage of this Nanchizi project informed the public about the realities of planning in Beijing that have often been shrouded in secrecy and triggered a rare open dialogue on the dilemma of conservation and development between the officials, the experts, the professionals and the citizens. Through this dialogue, the public was given the opportunity to learn about conservation and think about how conservation could be effective in Beijing. Even though the dialogue occurred in the aftermath of Nanchizi’s demolition, there was general consensus that wholesale demolition should not occur in a historic district. The outlook is that officials will think twice before bringing in the bulldozers for the “conservation” of a designated historic district – a small but meaningful victory in reframing the discourse of conservation in Beijing.

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