

**Protecting the Spirit of Hutong:  
*A Case Study of Nanchizi Precinct, Beijing*<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract.** This paper uses a case study of Nanchizi precinct to assess the impact of the spirit of hutongs in Beijing. The renewal of historic precincts rejuvenates old quarters on the one hand, on the other, it may pose threats not only to the built fabric but also to the spirit of historic precincts. Hutong is a living cultural landscape in Beijing representing of unique characteristics, complex historical layers as well as the way of life of its citizens. The recent decade witnesses the renewal of historic precincts in Beijing, which has greatly changed the historic vernacular landscape. How to accommodate changes while retain the spirit of Beijing's traditional habitat is a question facing the heritage management. This paper argues that continuity and change of the landscape are inter-related, and that an effective conservation regime needs the enhanced awareness of the history of interaction between people and place.

## **Introduction**

The spirit of a place can be regarded as the sum of cultures manifested through both tangible and intangible elements of a place, from the architecture, the natural settings, to daily activities, as well as the traditions and customs, and the way of life, of the owning community. The task of protecting the spirit of a place, therefore, encompasses not only individual structures and their settings, but also the way that people interact with their place.

This paper focuses on the conservation of hutongs. Here the term hutong refers to the courtyard compounds in Beijing. As a unique built form of vernacular Beijing, hutong is symbolic to the life and culture of local people (Wang 1997). Over decades, in particular after 1980s, many of Beijing's hutongs have disappeared in urban modernisation, and the demolition is now continuing. Although some hutongs have been listed and

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retained, the spirit of these places is being lost due to the unsympathetic renovation and the dislocation of communities. However, with current economic, politic and social imperatives, it is unrealistic to stop the landscape from changing, and to keep hutongs in a frozen, museum like condition. The question is how to manage the impact of changes on the characteristics of historic precincts.

This paper assesses the impact of urban renewal on the spirit of hutong, through a case study of the Nanchize renewal project. The paper begins with contextual overview of the hutong housing in Beijing, followed by the Nanchizi case study, and the discussion about the impact of the project on the spirit of the neighbourhood.

The case study is approached from the cultural landscape perspective, thus the Nanchizi precinct is regarded as an integrated entity formed by tangible and intangible elements. Emphasis is placed on the associative values. The current conservation regime is assessed, followed by the discussion of the better management of the spirit of the hutong landscape, in the context of change.

### **Hutong: the built icon of Beijing**

The term hutong is believed to be originated from the Mongol word ‘Hottog’, meaning ‘well’, and the word was introduced to Beijing in the Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1206-1271) (Weng 2003:6). Hutongs forms the grid-like network of the historic Beijing, where residential neighbourhoods are defined by a fish-bone-shaped borders. The hutong network has a particularly close relationship with the planned layout of irrigation channels, settlements, markets, and traffic corridors. Wu Liangyong, Professor in architecture of Beijing’s Tsinghua University, observes that this type of urban layout, combined with the characteristic low, undulating, and tree-dominated roofscape, is what most distinguishes Beijing from the cities of the West (Wu 1999: 66). According to Wu, a typical hutong block has three characteristics: the accessibility to both main streets and to individual dwellings; the mixed land use by ordinary houses as well as shops, temples, offices and mansions, and the integrated system of alleys and courtyard houses. With these characteristics, hutong offers its residents a quiet and safe living environment and yet a close knitted social network. Embodying the traditional dwelling type of Beijing, hutong is regarded as the primary tissue of the built and social fabrics of the imperial capital (Wang 1997, Wu 1999, Weng 2003). In Wu’s opinion, hutongs form the core of Beijing’s urban environment, linking the public space to the individual household through a highly hierarchical access system (Wu 1999:75).

The basic cell of the hutong fabric is the courtyard house. The courtyard house is an enclosure of building complex, with the courtyard in the middle. The courtyard house is the most typical residential form in

China, which can be traced back to Han Dynasty (206 BC-220). Its layout and building materials vary from region to region. The courtyard building follows a strict code of hierarchy in the arrangement of space. A typical courtyard house normally consists of living space, master bedroom, kids' bedrooms, servants' rooms and kitchen area, with master bedroom locating in the commanding position at the back overlooking the courtyard. The courtyard house can either be used by a single family, or shared by a few families. The courtyard is an outdoor living space as well as the meeting place for neighbours. In Beijing, a typical courtyard house is usually a timber and brick structure, with the exterior in plain grey colour. In contrast to the plain exteriors, the interior of the courtyard house is normally painted in rich colours, with elaborated patterns of birds and flowers symbolising peaceful and harmonious life. The courtyard is highly modularised, can be expand whenever needed by adding more courtyards in front or at the back, or on either of the two wings (Wu 1999:80), and the rectangular layout is considered the most economical in land use. The number of courtyards of the courtyard house, and thus the size of it, depends on the status and the wealth of its owner. A modest courtyard house may have one courtyard, while a prince's mansion may contain a number of courtyards connecting a number of hutongs. In fact, the Forbidden City itself is a gigantic courtyard compound. The courtyard house invariably has trees, flower beds and fish tanks as a reminder of nature, trees in the courtyard are of special types, such as pomegranate, date, magnolia and Chinese crabapple, with symbolic meanings of family prosperity.

Inseparable with the material fabric is the 'hutong culture'. This is the repository of beliefs, value, ritual, order, social code and so forth, of the community. In one way or another, hutong culture represents the unique spirit and identity of Beijing inhabitants. From a micro point of view, each hutong block has its own identity that is distinctive from others, evolving from the demographical, geographical, political, economic and social factors. Life in hutongs have been a major resource for Chinese literary works as well as paintings, movies, dramas and other art forms. People grown up in hutongs and those grown up in apartment buildings are believed to have different identities, with different behaviours and different world views and even speak with different accents.

### **The impact of urban renewal on the spirit of the Hutong landscape: the Nanchizi case study**

Nanchizi precinct is located in the inner city of Beijing, with Nanchizi Dajie to its west, Nanheyan Dajie to its east, the Chang'an Avenue to its south and Donghuamen Dajie to its north. Its grid-like layout could be traced back to the Yuan Dynasty (12<sup>th</sup> –13<sup>th</sup> centuries) and was inherited through the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Adjacent to the Forbidden City, this area originally was part of the Forbidden City, home to major royal depositories in the Qing

Dynasty (1644-1911), including the royal storehouses for silk, chinaware and so forth (Duan and Wang 2005). Names of alleys in Nanchizi, such as silk lane and chinaware lane, are highly indicative of the precinct's past function. One of the important monuments in this neighbourhood is Pudu Temple, originally named as Chonghua Palace, where Emperor Yingzong (1427-1464) of the Ming Dynasty was once imprisoned by his brother. Before its restoration in 2000, the Temple's site was occupied by a primary school for many decades, and now the renovated compound is the Taxation Museum. No.136 Nanchizi Dajie, a compound covering an area of 8 000m<sup>2</sup>, was built in 1536 A.D as the Royal Archive of the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Nanchizi was burnt down in 1917 as a result of an unsuccessful attempt to restore the monarchical system. After that the area was no longer exclusive to the privileged and became accessible to people from lower classes, many of whom began to build their homes there.

The hutong landscape is flat but full of aesthetic beauty. Integrated with the glorious landscape of imperial architecture, hutong is expressive of the classic Chinese aesthetics of 'harmony with diversity, and contrast without chaos' (Wu, 1999:65). Being adjacent to the Forbidden City, Nanchizi enjoys the vista of the imperial palace, including not only the buildings, but also the trees and the watercourse circulating the Palace compound, its plain and flat hutong landscape in turn complimentarily highlights the rich and magnificent roofscape of the Imperial Palace, as well as that of the monuments within its borders.

Most of the residences at Nanchizi are the traditional courtyard houses. Most courtyards here are shared by a number of families. Outside the courtyard compound, the mixed land use pattern provides space school, shops, restaurants and markets. The narrow alleys linking up courtyard houses and connecting them to main thoroughfares serve not only as traffic corridors but also as public meeting places. Due to historical reasons mentioned above, most residents at Nanchizi are of low income background, having smaller living space and tending to interact more freely with each other, which means a closer knitted social network. Being in the vicinity of the Forbidden City is regarded by its residents as a privilege to be highly proud of which adds a special dimension to the emotional attachment of the residents to their neighbourhood.

During the period between the 1950s to the 1980s, the ownership of the majority of residential properties in Beijing belonged to the state. There was little fund available for the maintenance, and residents were reluctant to pay for the repair work out of their own pockets. As a result, Nanchize, like most historic neighbourhoods in Beijing, degraded to slums. There was no separate kitchen, no bathroom or toilet in the courtyard, some courtyards were below the street level so they were flooded in the wet weather and many were filled with makeshift structures.

However, the cultural significance of Nanchizi has long been officially recognised. In 1987 Nanchizi was designated by the municipal

government as a heritage quarter, later in 1998 it was listed as one of Beijing's 25 historically and culturally significant precincts. In 2001 the renewal project took place as a pilot project for the treatment of Beijing's dilapidated hutong precincts (China Daily 2003). Also the project is incorporated to the treatment of settings of the Forbidden City, which is part of Beijing's Olympic action plan.

The project covers an area of 6.40ha. at the western end of the Nanchizi neighbourhood. The strategy of the project was that the hutong layout would be retained, with newly built alleys, 40% broader than the original ones, following the grid of the original layout. Original alley names were to be retained and used. Of 240 courtyards in the project area, 31 were listed for protection, but only 20 survived (Nan, 2003), the rest were demolished and new courtyard houses were built on their sites. Some of the new buildings are double-storey courtyard apartments - a modern prototype of quadrangles created in the late 1980s - others remain to be single storey houses. Some traditional hutong features, such as trees, grape vines, fish tanks, survived, or have been put in place as a gesture of continuing the hutong legacy. All courtyard buildings, old and new, have used the traditional grey colour on their exteriors.

The project relocated 1,076 households, of which 300 returned when the project completed. Apart from a few whose courtyard house were preserved and renovated at their own expenses, most of those who managed to return to their old neighbourhood were settled in the double-storey courtyard apartments, with 6 households sharing a courtyard compound. While most of the original residents of Nanchizi have moved elsewhere, some wealthy outsiders have moved in and became owners of the new courtyard houses which are priced staggeringly high at the market.

### **The impact of the renovation on the spirit of Nanchizi: a discussion**

The idea of designating heritage precincts in Beijing means these listed areas should be protected in an inclusive and holistic manner (Beijing Municipal Government 2004, 2005). In other words, instead of merely preserving individual structures, the conservation process should treat the designated precinct as an integrated entity of many composing element, and safeguard the spirit of the historic landscape of these precincts. A historic landscape, as is defined by UNESCO World Heritage Centre in 2005, refers to

ensembles of any group of buildings, structures and open spaces, in their natural and ecological context . . . constituting human settlements in an urban environment over a relevant period of time, the cohesion and values of which are recognized from the archaeological, architectural, prehistoric, historic, scientific points of view. This landscape has shaped modern society and has great value for our understanding of how we live today (UNESCO 2005).

The renovated Nanchizi has obviously retained a number of elements of the original landscape. Firstly, the layout of hutong network has been retained, with courtyard houses as the primary element of the built fabric, some natural elements, such as trees, also have survived. Special attentions have been paid to the exterior colour and motifs, to assure the traditional colour tone dominating the landscape. Secondly, the project has retained the original function of the neighbourhood as a residential precinct. Compared with some other city renewal projects, for instance Xin Tian Di in Shanghai, which converted a former residential area into a shopping street, Nanchizi still belongs to its residents and thus the living culture of hutong has largely survived. Thirdly, The double-storey quadrangle apartment, although causing a great deal of controversy, has retained the social network of its residents, here neighbours are sharing the courtyard, which serves as the common living room. This layout is the key feature of traditional courtyard house, where neighbours may see each other as their extended families. They share not only the communal space, but also their experiences, thinking and emotions, they also keep traditions and custom unique of the hutong environment, and thus the hutong legacy continues. Hutong residents enjoy much more social life than those living in ordinary high-rise apartments, whose lives are somewhat isolated. Here it is useful to refer to the US National Park Service 2005 Preservation Brief 36, which defines the historic vernacular landscape as the one that

. . . evolved through use by the people whose activities or occupancy shaped that landscape. Through social or cultural attitudes of an individual, family or a community, the landscape reflects the physical, biological, and cultural character of those everyday lives (Birnbaum 1994).

The spirit of a historic vernacular landscape is, therefore, related to the physical appearance, as well as to the function, of the landscape. The latter, according to the above mentioned definition, plays a significant role in vernacular landscapes. The spirit of the original Nanchizi evolved from the unique layout of hutong. Not less importantly, it evolved from the way of life of its inhabitants. Prof Wu Liangyong identified five characteristics of hutongs in Beijing, namely, the clear distinction between private and common space, the interrelation between interior and exterior, the natural beauty in a human-made environment, the residents' sense of identity and belonging to a local culture, hierarchical structure of the road network (Wu, 1999:100-101). In this sense, it is arguable that Nanchizi has retained much of the neighbourhood culture which, although less tangible, is central to the spirit of the vernacular old Beijing.

However, it is controversial as to whether the Nanchizi model should be followed by the future renovation work in other historic quarters in Beijing. The following discussion attempts to assess the impact of the

changes on the cultural significance of the traditional landscape of Nanchizi, from a number of perspectives.

Firstly, the physical change of Nanchizi is drastic. The dilapidated courtyard houses have been demolished and replaced by new courtyard houses whose scales are much bigger than the original ones; the surviving courtyards have undergone a facelift so that all have a very fresh appearance; some hutongs have been built up and thus disappeared, those have survived have been rebuilt, straightened and widened. The double storey courtyard apartment, although having retained the traditional quadrangle layout, has changed the conventional ratio of the building and the open space, thus posing another visual disturbance of the overall landscape. As a result, Nanchizi precinct now looks brand new, and the visual impact on the historical landscape of Nanchizi is quite striking.

The core idea of cultural landscape is the interaction of people with their environment over time. Pierce Lewis observes that a cultural landscape is our autobiography (Lewis 1979), it is therefore to be examined in the historic, cultural and social contexts. Unfortunately, the drastic demolition and rebuilding of the old Nanchizi has, in many ways, erased its history. It has changed so much that one would feel confused and disoriented walking in Nanchizi nowadays, because it looks too young therefore is found unreal, 'I feel like looking at a stage setting', a former resident reportedly says so (Nan, 2003).

Secondly, the new buildings lack the fine craftsmanship, compared with the original ones. The site visit in 2006 revealed that, less than three years after the renovation, the exteriors of the double storey quadrangles are already stained with the rust from poor-quality metal parts in the building. Decorative components are another area of concern, for some of them are either misused, or installed in the wrong place, which indicates a lack of careful research into their origin, meaning and the association with the place.

Thirdly, the relocation of the former residents has caused a great demographic change. After the renovation, only less than one third of the original households returned, with the rest being relocated, and the new courtyard houses were put onto the market at such a staggeringly high price that now the address has become a synonym of the rich. Lifestyle in the neighbourhood has thus changed a lot, with private cars symbolising the wealth and status of the new owners of Nanchizi. Unlike the old days, now hutongs in Nanchizi have become much quieter because of, firstly, the much smaller community and, secondly, the much greater privacy in daily life that the enclosed mansions offer to the owners. Although the renovated Nanchizi has retained almost all the above mentioned characteristics of a typical hutong block, thus has arguably kept the hutong spirit in general terms, it now appears to be a 'standard' hutong block with standard elements – courtyards, alleys, symbolic trees and plants, fish ponds, wood painting and so forth. Nevertheless, with the drastic facelift, the missing of fine materials

and original craftsmanship, as well as the relocation of the most of its original inhabitants, Nanchizi has lost its personality.

The debate over the ‘gain’ and the ‘loss’ of the Nanchizi project is still underway, and the judgement can never be a black-and-white one. However, there are certainly lessons to be learnt by planning and heritage managers from the Nanchizi project. From the management point of view, a more workable conservation regime is yet to be established. At present, the conservation regime includes the national heritage law, the municipal regulations, as well as the municipal planning scheme. However, it is apparent that none of the above has prevented the comprehensive demolition in a listed historic neighbourhood like Nanchizi. Both heritage legislations and planning scheme appear ambiguous in terms of the demolition and rebuilding in the listed precincts. Apart from the heritage legislative framework, professional guidelines are also available, the most authoritative being the China Principles. Although dedicated to monuments and sites, the philosophy and basic laws of the China Principles are relevant to historic precincts. But the Nanchizi project did not comply with the China Principles, instead it went very far from the China Principle’s position of ‘minimal intervention’.

The ‘minimal intervention’ rule is promoted by the China Principles as the response to the unsympathetic treatment of monuments and sites. Given the complexity of the protection of urban cultural landscape, and the high pressure for urban modernisation and demand for upgrading living standard, it is concerning how the ‘minimal intervention’ rule applies to the renewal of historic precincts which, in many cases, are in dilapidated condition, and professionals seems to be stuck between choices to keep all or to flatten all.

We have to accept that, being inherited from generation to generation, cultural landscapes are by no means static; they keep changing all the time. The protection of cultural landscapes requires holistic and inclusive approaches; it calls for practices that accommodate changes on the one hand and maintain the heritage values on the other. The idea of retaining the spirit of the place involves the care of the meanings, characteristics and the association of people with their environment. It is vital for heritage managers to nurture the awareness of the spirit of the place, to encourage inter-disciplinary research and to give associative values due priority in heritage planning schemes and interpretation.

## **Conclusion**

The designated historic precincts are all located in the inner circle of Beijing. Pressure for their redevelopment is enormous, due to the growing demand for land, as well as the image-making process that accelerated before the Beijing Olympics. In fact, the redevelopment of these historic precincts is incorporated with Beijing’s Olympic action plan. While the



Beijing Olympic games are closed, the redevelopment of historic precincts is still going on and many dilapidated hutongs awaiting renovation. As was discussed previously, hutongs in Beijing are the repository of traditional architecture and lifestyle, with multiple complex historic layers. It is a landscape with unique characteristics that evolved out of the long time interaction between people and the physical environment. However, each hutong block tends to have its own spirit and personality due to particular geographic, economic, cultural and demographic factors. To conserve the spirit of hutongs is to safeguard their spirit, while allowing for proper changes and upgrading living standard. The current conservation regime places much emphasis on the physical aspects of heritage places, it is time that conservation process be established, where the historic layers, as well as the inter-relationship between all components of the hutong landscape are taken into full account, thus the spirit of hutong can be have an effective safeguard.

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