People's Wall:
Reconstructing a New City Wall for the Modern City of Beijing

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Abstract

"If the Warsaw community is to be born, if its core is to be constituted by former Warsawians, then they have to be given back, their old rebuilt Warsaw to some extent, so that they can see in it the same city, though considerably altered, and not a different town on the same spot. One must take into consideration the fact that individual attachment to old forms is a factor of social unity."

— A writer's Comments Warsaw’s post WWII reconstruction project for The Warsaw Escarpment, 1946

The notion of “Wall” is intrinsic to how Chinese people understand and define a city; in fact, the very character “City” in an ancient Chinese pictogram depicts a wall with two gates preventing an attacker from invading. The People's Republic of China came into power with an overwhelming sentiment of restart and revolution following the trauma of World War II and the Chinese Civil War. In the early period of modern China, the critical relics of the wall were quickly dismissed in favor of expansion and modernization. It was dismantled under Mao Zedong's regime in only a decade. The sentiment to resurrect the wall has long been present; people wish for its resurrection in part because many places in Beijing are still named accordingly. It is apparent that the wall and its gates are still instrumental to the local inhabitants' psycho-geographic maps.

However, the few reconstruction projects that were actually realized by the government have not only disrupted the life of current inhabitants, but also done more harm to the surviving courtyard house fabric than good. Therefore, this project proposes an alternative method of reconstruction which enriches, rather than damages, the old city center. The new wall is imagined as a continuous landscape infrastructure; the design systematically investigates the original footprint and existing context. A set of interventions, ranging from constructions of new wall structures to minimal marking of the original footprint, aim to actualize a much-missed coherency in a fragmented reality.

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City Wall in History

the conception, the construction, and the deconstruction
The notion of wall is intrinsic to how Chinese people understand and define a city. So much so, in fact the very character “city” in ancient Chinese pictogram depicts a wall with two gates preventing the barbarians from invading.

According to Chinese astrology, the constellations are astral cities built and inhabited by gods. The emperors planned Beijing according to the coordinates of these constellations to establish their divine authority and social hierarchy.
Surrounded by the first layer of wall, the Forbidden City, home of emperor, sits at the center. While high officials and the rich live in the second layer of wall, normal civilians live under the outer wall, the big wall.

Over centuries, the shape and overall footprint of the wall changes with the succession of different rulers, but it has always been there to watch over people's life.
Kublai Khan (1285--1406, Yuan Dynasty) 

Though not the original form for the city, this layout became the prototype for future expansion of the wall for Beijing as the capital city.

YongLe Emperor (1406--1420, Ming Dynasty) 

When Ming Dynasty comes into power, in order to better defend the city against the nomadics’ invasion, the north wall is moved south.

MingXuan Emperor (1420--1439, Ming Dynasty) 

The South Wall is demolished and moved further south to accommodate the expansion of the inner city wall.

QianLong Emperor (1552--1564, Qing Dynasty) 

During Qing Dynasty to accommodate the accumulating civilians living outside the original outer wall, a new layer of outer wall is constructed.
As life accumulates around it, beside serving fortification functions, the city wall has also become important cultural artifacts for the domestic life scene. While markets happen along its length, important ceremonial and royal events are also held along axis defined by the gates.

The old city fabric of Beijing spread as the extension of the city wall. They come together into alleys with a modular system and integrate with that of the city blocks.
Looking at the QianMen area during the Qing Dynasty as a sample of the old Beijing, it is not hard to recognize that the dwelling units that make up the general urban fabric is actually the same typology as the monumental urban artifacts that are the walls.

Even though the courtyard house is commonly known as the basic dwelling typology of Beijing, in fact it is itself composed of elongated rooms that enclose and define the courtyard.
Its construction started as simple rammed earth structure and was later improved upon with an outer brick layer. The bricks used to construct the wall is four times the size of a normal brick and the mortar also adopts a special recipe of ash and sticky rice.
This old photo shows a scene filled with domestic life along the wall and the moat. However, nowadays, such activities are no longer possible with the wall dismantled and the moat buried.
After a traumatizing second world war which is ensued by another civil war, the new party finally came into power, under an overwhelming sentiment of restart and revolution, in early period of modern China, these critical urban relics were easily dismissed in favor of expansion and modernization. The wall was dismantled under Mao's campaign over just a decade.
The beginning of Modern China, the city inherits its structure from the ancient capital. But a much bigger footprint is proposed for its future.

The city already expanded outside of the original wall and the wall is in the process of being demolished. One also witnesses the gradual disappearance of the old city fabric.

With the wall completed gone, the old hutong areas of Beijing continue to be conquered by development. However, instead of housing expansions, the protagonist now becomes the commercial project as the nation opened its economy.

Only 20% of the old city is left and this number includes significant monuments. The 2008 Olympic game helped the city fulfilled its original boundary and a new region is imagined. Within the completely urbanized city fragmented hubs accommodate various public programs.

Beijing the city begins to seem increasingly like a series of isolated islands. While the number of fragments keeps increasing, the islands occupied by the old buildings are disappearing. By 2003, 80% of the original city is gone, and the wall is left with only 3% of its original lengths.
Dense low quality housing and commercial structures erode the once coherent urban fabric. New urban infrastructure such as the second ring road now occupies where the wall and river used to be.
The winning of the Beijing Olympic bidding further exacerbated this destruction process.
The Culture City Project

*issues of contemporary reconstruction strategies in China*
In recent years, there seems to be an increasing interest in resurrecting the already disappeared cultural relics among local governments in China. Some of them are even creating structures that appear historical but have never actually existed. This in part is answering the central government's call for a reform that transforms the country's economy from a construction focused model into one that centers around cultural productions. Therefore, when the local administrative bodies are not willing to give up their real estate models either due to corruption or indolence, the surge of monument fabrication became the sugarcoat that allow them to continue the old way. As the result, while all the adverse effects of excessive large scale constructions such as mass population reallocation are retained, these cultural projects often exacerbate the destruction of true relics since they often locate in the historical districts of cities.
This documentary follows the Mayor of Datong, whom has initiated one of the biggest reconstruction projects in China. Though in the film he seemed to genuinely believe the resurrection of the city wall will make Datong a cultural city, the realization of the project was more akin to a theme park that was built on a tableau rasa created on the expense of life that's already taken roots in the city center.
While creating fierce conflict between the civilians and the government, Mayor Deng’s project has also alienated himself from his own administrative body. Naturally, not everyone shares his passion for the massive project, and for the few officials who do their interests are also in their own benefits. As a result, as Deng left his position in Datong to become the Mayor of Taiyuan, the city wall reconstruction project came to a screeching halt and was never finished until today. His successor was thrown into prison for the charge of corruption after being in the mayor position for two years.
Beijing, as the capital, was not spared from this plague. In order to promote the city's image as the ancient capital for the upcoming Olympic Game, the government initiated four major wall reconstruction projects along the city's central axis.
The QianMen project, which's site used to be the best preserved old city region, brought with it a boulevard of international commercial chain stores. It took only a decade for the vibrant neighborhood to become a generic shopping district.
The Ming City Wall Relic Park was celebrated as a model project for the bricks of its reconstructions were the originals collected from low-rise structures built with them. However, a park was built around the wall and its construction demolished many courtyard houses that used to surround the old wall.
The Yong Ding Men project transform a large parcel of land into an urban park at the expense of a huge area of surviving courtyard house fabric. However, only the gate was reconstructed, which's construction area is only 5% of that of the park.
Finally, the Zuo An Men corner tower project, though carries with it a park as well, does not come in the sacrifice of the old city. Interesting in a report, the manager of the project expressed that they have decided to move it a few meters away from the original footprint to avoid conflict with the existing city.
A comparison between these four reconstruction projects reveal that most of them carries a heavy landscape component and a small amount of civil program, with the exception of Qian Men which's largely commercial development. Except for the fourth Zuo An Men project, the rest all greatly damaged the surviving old city fabric. Additionally, a set of cost data demonstrates that the relocation compensation is usually half of the total cost.
While it is clear that these projects' construction and functions are detrimental to the surviving old city, another critic is that they, including the surviving walls and gates, are also treated as singular artifacts that not only fail to respond to the current urban reality, but also powerless in conjuring the continuity so essential to the original wall.

The voice of resurrecting the wall has always existed, but many people wish for its resurrection because many places in Beijing are still named after the walls and gates. They are still instrumental in the local inhabitants' psychogeographic map.
The Alternative

*a context sensitive strategy to reconstruct the city wall of Beijing*
this project shall propose an alternative method of reconstruction which’s realization does not damage but enrich the old city center. The new wall is imaged as a continuous landscape infrastructure which’s goal would be to re-actualize a much missed coherency in a fragmented reality and create a new domestic-life-centered city experience.

The new wall shall follow the footprint of the old, so that it may exist in constant dialogue with the original both urbanistically and culturally, as a continuous construction people would be able to access the new wall anywhere along its trail and then traverse its entire length either by foot or bike.
To formulate the design strategies, the different urban conditions were studied and categorized into ten types according to the arrangement of wall, the second ring road (the highway), the surviving moat, and finally the building density of the surrounding area (point to big model). Four typical wall reconstruction strategies were created for the most prevalent of these ten urban typologies.
The first strategy deals with where a hutong (courtyard house) area is flanked by the second ring road. A wall is erected to shield the area from the heavy traffic. Though significantly thinner, its inclined sectional profile and materiality will help people formulate the reference to the original. The green belt areas that used to divide the highway and the community are now included inside the wall to create a larger street in front of the hutong region.
Along the wall, terraces of varying height (maximum 2m) are introduced so that they created a constantly changing landscape of brick and provide some much needed open spaces for different domestic activities. For example, here one sees a platform acting literally as a stage for a community show, and there outdoor furniture is provided so that hutong inhabitants might sit down and engage in conversations or simply enjoy a chess game.
The Dam
Wherever you have the moat surviving, the new wall transforms into a dam like structure that brings people from the street to the water level, which is always 7m to 8m below grade. Along its length, ramps are provided for people and bikes to navigate the elevation changes. Moments of enlarged platforms together with the top of this new wall provide open space for rest or larger events such as Guang Chang Wu.
Voids are carved out either at an intermediary level or at the water level for either vegetation or programs such as café and boat and skate rental to inhabit. The structure will allow some of the most beloved water activities to happen again with modern facilities' support, and recreate the city's lost affinity with its water system.
When the wall's footprint finds itself in the more developed areas, it will attempt to claim the isolated green islands that always exist along the second ring road and connect them with underground passage.
Pavement will be introduced in these parks to facilitate bike traffic while underground plazas are inserted in these tunnels to act as more private gathering hubs. Activities such as outdoor art show or small performance are imagined but these areas are intended as more liberal and thus left for the city dwellers to define.
The Gate
Finally, the new gates will be points where more program heavy interventions and visual anchors are needed along the line. This example I choose to design sits right in front of a partially surviving gate. Thus its insertion will complete the original twin gates configuration and create a civil plaza in-between. Program-wise, the new gate is imagined to be a library and museum mix. It is left intentionally vague so that this design may be treated as a prototype.
Architecturally, compared to its total timber structured predecessor, the new gate has a solid core with larger spaces carved out of its section. The outside structures are timber and of smaller scale to form a contrasting spatial experience. The roof of the original gate which is so essential to its façade expression is now literally transformed into facades with brick louvres. While controlling light penetration, this façade's most important function is to allow visitors to see, through the material of the wall, the city they live in with a new light and ultimately resurrect the lost sense of coherency with the experience supplied by the new city wall of Beijing.
Typical Floor Plan 1
Typical Floor Plan 2
Other
models, boards, and presentation
Bibliography


