Beijing, Bed, and Breakfast: Unpacking Transient Identities

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Submitted to the Department of Architecture on May 23, 2008 in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Architecture

Abstract

Modernity requires people to appreciate cultural relativism, and to understand the contextual legitimacy of other people’s way of life and values. This thesis explores the nature and use of physical spaces to increase the relativistic understanding of culture.

Two notions of interior domesticity, represented by the bed and breakfast, serve as a narrative for this new typology: Bed refers to the physical and rhetorical image of the private realm, the loci of the unseeable and unspeakable. Breakfast represents the semi-private realm of domesticity: its interactions, negotiations, and rituals.

Exploring identity-making through interior architecture, the proposed bed and breakfast in Beijing will bring together two private spaces: One of transience (identity without consciousness of place) and one of domesticity (place without consciousness of identity).

Thesis Supervisor: Yung Ho Chang
Title: Professor of Architecture
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My family, whose unconditional support enabled me to go as far as I wanted, even if it was away from home.
I dedicate this thesis to the city that inspired my own search for identity.
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In Peter Rowe and Seng Kuan's *Architectural Encounters with Essence and Form in Modern China*, a conversation between three young Chinese architects is recounted. One argues for traditionalism, the second argues for modernism, and the third believes in striving to be both Chinese and modern. This is essentially the core of cultural debate in China since its opening up to Western powers in 1840; many architectural styles have since come and gone yet what remains is still the question of identity. If identity is an equality that holds regardless of the values of its variables, then any rapidly evolving city will struggle to find a stationary datum by which to judge and reflect on itself. Add to this the homogenizing influences of globalization, and China quickly becomes the subject of cultural identity crisis.
But is this really so? In actuality, the above argument is flawed and rather misleading. The problem lies in the relative nature of the definitions of "Chinese," "modern," and "identity," as well as in common misconceptions of globalization's influence on local identity. Being Chinese does not necessarily correspond with traditionalism; being modern does not necessarily signify Western or anti-Chinese tendencies; and social, cultural, and individual identities are no longer considered stationary values. In the modern world, identity is not fixed nor inherited; it is highly unstable, symbolically constructed, and constantly reinvented. Furthermore, globalization may foster cultural diversity by renewing interest in local distinctiveness.

China's identity crisis is deeply involved with her search for modernity itself. The difficulties in this quest originate from her long and continuous history. China developed relatively independently, and, immune from Western influences until the 19th century, its basic patterns of life, cultural identity and state organization had continued almost uninterrupted since the archaic period. Because of this, the notion of self-identity and the desire to insist on this identity are hard to abandon, and cultural changes are particularly sensitive and difficult.
Ethnocentrism is deeply ingrained in every traditional people, yet to enter into the modern world, one invariably has to relativize one's own culture. Ideally, modernity requires people to appreciate cultural relativism, and to understand the contextual legitimacy of other people's way of life and values. The sense of one's own culture is only comparative, temporary and sectional. This understanding can be facilitated in many ways; the scope of this masters of architecture thesis explores the nature and use of physical spaces to increase the relativistic understanding of culture.

The discussion I henceforth engage in stems from the fundamental questions of what it means to be modern and Chinese but it must be stressed that I do not seek to divine what Chinese identity is or should be, nor how architecture should embody this. Rather, the notions of identity-making, encounter, and negotiation are my primary interests, and the architectural modes by which these experiences can be accentuated.
Space of Politics, Politics of Space

China’s capital city, Beijing, displays many symptoms of identity crisis. Since the end of the 20th century, its policy makers have been preoccupied with image- and identity-building in preparation for the international stage. The desire to impress the foreign gaze and to announce the nation’s emergence into modernity is felt by all its citizens, through various ways of which urban change is one of the strongest indicators.
However, this process has been less of a collective participatory engagement than a centralized staging of essentialized cultural identity for underscoring the government’s power and for attracting foreign investment. Additionally, the gradual interiorization of urban life to facilitate commercial activity by powerful developers has created a new urban experience: one that promotes social and cultural homogeneity by economically excluding those who can not afford the new. Contemporary Beijing is the battlefield of the clash between two visions of the city: an abstract construct catered towards the social elite, and the lived space experienced on daily basis by the masses. The former vision is referred to by Lefebvre as the *rhetorical* image of the city; the latter corresponds to his definition of the *physical* image of city. All cities to some extent suffer such identity crisis, with multiple urban identities existing simultaneously.

In Beijing’s central districts, the *rhetorical* image dominates. If peoples’ awareness of their position in space and society is fundamental to their self-definition, then does an urban environment controlled by a small handful of policy makers and developers provide enough space for personal expressions of identity?
I propose that it is not. In the past few decades, Beijing’s visible (public and centralized) spaces for everyday life have been systematically and forcibly eradicated for the sake of the “greater good” - modernization and national image for the international gaze. Implicit in this process is that the emerging city does not accommodate for representation of individuals’ identity. In fact, it can be argued that it purposefully excludes and marginalizes certain identities. As one’s proximity to the Forbidden City (the rhetorical city center) increases, inequalities are further exasperated by projections of a unifying Chineseness. However, there are many indicators of a common will to counter the hegemony of state image-building. The tactic has been primarily one of subversion and resistance, witnessed in artists’ work, organized protests, and by individuals’ refusing to be displaced by developers.

This thesis posits that public spaces in central Beijing do not adequately provide for inclusive expression of individuals’ identities. Perhaps instead, new ways of accommodating encounter and exchange should be explored in the private sector - to serve both permanent and transient residents in ways which the present city has failed. The goal is to explore methods of reinserting the experience of identity-making into social consciousness through the design of a new type of (privately-owned) private space. To this end, I will focus on two notions of interior domesticity, represented by bed, and breakfast. Bed refers to the physical and rhetorical image of the private realm, the loci of the unseeable and unspeakable. Breakfast represents the semi-private realm of domesticity: its interactions, negotiations, and rituals.
Wudaokou

The site selected was determined by two conflicting forces: it has to be close enough to the city center to be convenient and attractive for foreigners, yet far away enough from the city center to be economically viable for Beijing residents. Wudaokou is around 10 kilometers from the center of Beijing, between the fourth and fifth ring roads. It became a commercial center during the 1950’s following the establishment of schools including Peiking University and Tsinghua University. Until as recently as 2001 the area consisted mainly of hutong neighborhoods and late 1960’s apartment blocks, but major development has erased many of these old structures, replacing them with luxury apartments and science parks. Today it is known for its large student population, especially language students and foreign students from Korea.
major surrounding institutions

1. Yuan Ming Yuan, Old Summer Palace
   Constructed 1707, 1722
   Destroyed by Jesuit missionaries
   Destroyed by Anglo-Franco forces in 1860, 1900
   A. 3.30 km²

2. Tsinghua University
   Established 1908
   Designed by T. C. Chang
   F. 3,207 U, 15,796 G, 17,968
   A. 4.00 km²

3. Peking University
   Established 1898
   F. 4,204 U, 15,129
   G. 15,039
   A. 2.75 km²

Rhetorical Intersection
Intersection for Exchange

The chosen site is located literally and rhetorically at the intersection of three major cultural institutions.

Tsinghua University, popularly known as the Chinese equivalent of MIT, has a more “modern” campus than its Harvard-like counterpart, Peking University, which is known for its well-preserved traditional architecture.

The site is situated at the south-east corner of Yuan Ming Yuan, once the most magnificent imperial garden in China. It now lies in ruins, and is a reminder of China’s past (good and bad) relationships with the West.
### Intersections

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Pedestrian Flow</th>
<th>Bus Routes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Site</td>
<td>Intersection Traffic Flow</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **South**
  - Zhongguancun high-tech commercial district
  - Skilled workforce residential areas

- **East**
  - Summer palace
  - Blue + white collar neighborhoods
Site Location
Site Strategies
OBJECTIVES

- possibility of future development
- activate areas of the sidewalk as site of exchange
- improve pedestrian experience
- creation of a new wall-street-scape
- seasonal inhabitation of gardens
- venue for special events
- access from existing historical sites
- predominant access from intersection
- relationship to the Tsinghua west gate
The domestic interior and individuals' identities are closely related. However, the paradox is that in the domestic sphere, identity often disappears when there is no mirror of the self in the other. While the inhabitant who shapes the interior gradually becomes blind to the space which he or she has just created, the onlooker can detect a multitude of signals about the inhabitant's personality - in the arrangement of furniture and objects, color and lighting, personal affects, and even perceived value of the property. These signals have been suggested by Malcolm Gladwell to be more telling about a person's attributes than a 15 minute interview with them. This may be because interactions in formal settings imply certain codes of behavior and spatial use, whereas in private, informal settings, normalizing rules are less applicable – enabling the true self to emerge.
On occasion, one is subjected to a gaze in one's own personal space. However, if the gaze were constant or orchestrated, what are the psychological effects on the inhabitant? In Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler's piece for the 1988 Contemporary Arts Forum, they stripped the interior of a house of all its doors, creating an uncomfortable sense of voyeurism.

"Like the classic dream of appearing nude before clothed audience, life in spaces wide open to the gaze of non-intimates is fraught with frightening vulnerability. Yet reality of self-exposure became only moderately unsettling. We were more stimulated than embarrassed, more delighted than inconvenienced."

Thus, by undoing the habitual perception of space, the domestic interior becomes uncomfortably private (or public) again. After the initial discomfort, the gaze lends to a pleasant, even productive outcome: identity becomes legible in the space to both the observer and the observed. Indeed, as Georges Teyssott claims, "If one were... without a room of one's own, one could not belong to this world of reflection."

Within the bedroom, the bed is the object most "blind" to self-reflection because it is where one literally sees nothing, while sleeping. Chinese beds in the 19th century were rooms in themselves, separated visually from the rest of the bedroom by lattice screens and curtains. In some respects, the bed is the only truly private element within the domestic realm, that the gaze can never penetrate. The (dis)integration of furniture and the room itself is considered the central node of architectural intervention in this thesis.
Breakfast

The dining room or kitchen is often the heart of the domicile, and in many ways this is where the identity of the family within coagulates. Family of course, is a culturally specific construct that continually contends with growth, fragmentation and decay, but for the purposes of this thesis, is defined as a group of individuals that share a common breakfast table. Around the physical and figurative breakfast table, particular interactions occur. The first meal of the day is generally more informal than meals taken towards the end of the day. As the day progresses, the table's role as a boundary - demarcating social status and identity - also evolves. The position of family members around the table corresponds to social structures and hierarchies. The position of food and other objects on the surface of the table are produced by different modes of occupying personal space within a social context.
Thus the interior can be thought of as a “spatialized” table surface; a receptacle for objects, a demarcator of modes of use, a surface for imprinting trace, and the physical and rhetorical repository of identity. It is also the inducer of the gaze, including the *detective* look and the *voyeuristic* look. The manipulation of this surface can thus manipulate the gaze, this being one of the primary design challenges of this thesis.
The Breakfast Table

The “spatialized” table surface is a receptacle for objects, a demarcator of modes of use, a surface for imprinting trace, and the physical and rhetorical repository of identity.

In the following diagrams (pages 30-34), breakfast tables from different cultures including the tableware necessary to conduct the meal are drawn and analyzed in plan. My reading of personal space consumption in relation to social space consumption is represented in the rightmost column.

It is interesting to note that many complex and nuanced relationships can be generated with only a limited set of utensils or “components”. Each person can not only personalize the method of using their own set of components, but start to read differences between self and other through different configurations of the components.
BREAKFAST FOR 4
NORTH AMERICA

MEAL FOR 2
KOREA/JAPAN

BREAKFAST FOR 9
EUROPE

RECTANGULAR
Zone of personal space
Trace-less zone
Communal zone assimilated by individuals (by dominance or proximity)
Public edge
Communal zone

Trace-less zone

Lateral space requirement determined by mode of service as defined by customs
Implied (prescribed) division negates need for negotiation except at site of shared dishes

Pinwheel interlocking zones
Centerspiece (ornament, condiment, or void
Undefined zones
BREAKFAST FOR 3
UNITED KINGDOM

BREAKFAST FOR 4
UNITED KINGDOM

PLACE SETTING
Round edge allows oblique views
Casual relationship
More contact points
Void counterpoint personal space
Efficient use of voids for public use
Tighter space requirement
More solid definition of personal space
Physical negotiation zones

Salt + Pepper shaker
Jam jar
Coffee mug
Plate
Knife + fork
Napkin
Butter container

Paper cup
Paper plate
Knife + fork

Paper cup
Paper plate
Knife + fork
Precedents  Existing Typologies

Housing typologies previously considered as western imports, are no longer inappropriate nor foreign to the Chinese populace any longer. A common misconception is that in Beijing, traditional homes such as the siheyuan typology, are the predominant type of housing. In fact most people live in high-rise modern housing blocks. Thus to assume that hosting a bed and breakfast in the most “traditional” type of housing creates the most authentic experience would be again ascribing notions of “Chineseness” onto architecture – a problematic and naive mentality.
Temporary housing (hospitality) typologies in China blur their original western connotations. For example, the PKU Hostel is officially a hostel, but it is partly owned by a university and hosts exchange students as well as regular travellers. The rates are determined by whether the room has a window or not. Thus rooms by the building perimeter with windows can be rented at higher rates for tourists whereas rooms on the interior are kept inexpensive for longer term residents (students).
Bed & Breakfast

Hotels are interesting spaces of identity because of their simultaneous assertion and negation of it. Most commercial hotels systematically remove traces of inhabitants’ lives on a daily basis in order to maintain a constant false identity. International hotels provide “instant identity,” recognizable to all globetrotters. Travelers (or anyone in transit) often have a displaced sense of place; without a sense of place, the sense of identity is also displaced. However, the bed & breakfast typology stands out because of its ability to accommodate another entity within the compound of a permanent residence. The notional bed and breakfast mentioned previously are thus introduced into the transient person’s space, providing a means to encounter identity of the self and other.
Bed and breakfasts have sprung up all over China as tourism flourished. Incidences of medium-term hosting of foreigners in local homes are also noted, such as the Chinese language-home-exchange program. Another precedence of a centrally-organized local hosting scheme is the “Incredible India Bed and Breakfast Scheme.” The Delhi B&B is being introduced in anticipation of an accommodation shortage that would be caused by the large influx of tourists during the 2010 Commonwealth games. Under the scheme, house owners can offer “up to 5 rooms or 10 beds with good comfortable beds, working space, air-conditioning facilities as well as attached western toilets and... Indian/Continental breakfast to the guests.” Unfortunately, this inventive and sensible scheme would not work in Beijing for the 2008 Olympics for several reasons related to governance and existing migrant housing problems. However, the existing Chinese language-home-exchange program has been implemented quite successfully at various levels of governance, especially in Shanghai and Beijing. The scheme caters to visiting students or workers (not short term visitors or tourists), who signs a contract with the homeowners promising free English-language tutoring in exchange for free lodging. It is this demand for medium-term hosting that will be addressed with the Beijing Bed and Breakfast.
Pre-existing Buildings

As bed and breakfasts in the traditional *hutongs* already exist, it is appropriate to now consider other housing typologies as possible sites of hosting B&Bs.

The typology which I am adapting is the low-rise bar building. This is appropriate for the site since there is a 9 meter height restriction in the historically preserved area. The existing long and monotonous perimeter wall invites a design which can break the boundary between street and site.
Beijing Breakfast

Beijing has a nomadic entrepreneurial population that thrives off of the pedestrian consumption of small foodstuffs. These delicacies are unique to Beijing and are often prepared by the local vendor from their vehicles. In effect, these modified ad hoc bicycles become mobile restaurants. The Bed and Breakfast provides the bed, but lets the vendors provide the breakfast by allowing them to plug into the building on the ground level. This completes the fluid transition from streetscape to interiorscape.
Program

The program is a new housing typology that functions as bed & breakfast, dormitory, and hostel. This includes space for commercial activity from the street to plug into the building on the ground level, and social space and amenities in the interior.

The blurring of public-private is an opportunity for negotiation and interaction to occur. Through programmatic changes, this arrangement will bring together two private spaces: one of transience (identity without consciousness of place) and one of domesticity (place without consciousness of identity).

As an experimental prototype, the proposed building’s goal is to generate the maximum response and discourse in the short term. The long-term goal is to render the prototype suitable for adaptation and replication, elsewhere in China and the world.
Strategy: Overlapping Interfaces to Increase Negotiation

- Regular Clustered Modules
- Minimal Interface

- Irregular Clustered Modules
- Variable Interface

- Overlapping Modules
- Expanded Interface

Strategy: Informal Separation of Space Allowing for Adaptability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Space Allocation</th>
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<tr>
<td>187 units</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>semi-private</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reconfigurable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>space</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24-hour cafe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>classrooms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recreation space</td>
<td></td>
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Total: 100% = 1,600 sq.m. = 16,145 sq.f.
The typical exchange student will stay for a few weeks up to a semester or more - enough time to settle into the city, more so than the average tourist. As there are defined breaks in these programs, they people are likely to travel before or after their stay in Beijing. Thus their lifestyle is one of domesticated itinerancy.
timeline

INHERENT INTERACTIONS

stanford - pku
yale - pku
pku international
singhua

bku

cafa

olympics
Despite being marketed at different rates, essentially all international standard hotel rooms share the same interior layout. The relationship between the furniture pieces are predictable, resulting in the desensitization of the inhabitant towards their environment. By maintaining these functions yet allowing the relationships between the components of the interior to be restructured, the proposed bed and breakfast allows identity (or at least preference) to be read though spatial configuration.
1. Bed _ side table

2. Basin _ toilet _ bath

3. Bed _ tv

4. Chair _ desk

5. Settee _ view

6. Closet _ door

7. Sofa _ coffee table

---

basic relationships
Analysis

The Domestic Surface
socio-spatial construction

- spatial compositions reduced to their surface components.
- form the beak cells of architectural montage; when reconstituted, different carnars for social interaction are activated.

- minimum design for functionality are the predominant organization system: figures in shown in previous interactive roles.

- SUITCASE HOUSE (EDGE Design Institute) demonstrates the integration of the programmed pane below an artificial plane, challenging conventional notions of served and service space; loose programming allows latent potential to uplift physical hegemony of domestic tasks.
Unpacking Identity

Furniture allows us to utilize space in both prescribed and ambiguous ways. The act of unpacking personal belongings and laying them out on various domestic surfaces is a form of identity-making. Furthermore, those staying at the Bed and Breakfast will bring a piece of their own furniture: their luggage. The components that make up the room become active in the unpacking of identity by allowing personal artefacts to be mapped out onto surfaces visible to those on the inside and outside.
Furnitectures

Each room consists of movable partition walls that slide on tracks imbedded in the ceiling and floor. Each wall has an imbedded function. The longer partitions consist of a steel frame holding 3 double hung window sashes. By using the ready-made in unconventional ways, the inhabitant is encouraged to reasses her environment and to interact with it.
component

furniture

architecture

= privacy + bed + table + chair + storage
Design

Room configurations
dematerialize surface
adjust privacy environment
flexible activity semi-private domestic
flexible activity semi-public social
maximum utility minimum furnishing
enclosure
no room access

minimal floor space
storage position
public use

room access
private use
closet

receptive surfaces
unpacking
Floor Plans
interaction space
collective

- roof level +9.0m

- third level +6.0m
Floor Plans
second level +3.0m

ground level +0.0m
Sectional Diagrams
Elevational Variation
partial plan
Interior Sectional Perspective
Exploded Axonometric
The question of exterior form is an obvious one since it gives identity to the project even though the project is driven from the interior. Finding an alternative to the ubiquitous high-rise apartment could help to minimize exterior projections of identity.

The focus on exterior expression and form in architecture is exemplified by all of the high profile projects currently under construction in Beijing. The National Opera House, in its unmistakable curvilinear profile has given it a variety of monikers, including the “egg” and “UFO.” Similarly, Herzog and de Meuron’s Beijing National Stadium has been donned the “bird’s nest,” to curry favor from the public. Both these projects are still incomplete, but their identity has been definitively etched into the city’s memory. Chinese architectural history presents a strong argument against externalized architecture, instead tending towards “introverted” architecture.

Beijing is filled with many such examples of facadeless, predominantly interior spaces, especially within the traditional fabric of hutong neighborhoods. The Beijing Bed and Breakfast, being an interior-driven project, brings back to the city a critical commentary on the nature and politics of image-building and the narration of identity.

The Bed and Breakfast has a distinctive facade, but it is one that is designed through process and interaction, rather than stipulation. In addition, the existing trees on the site will be preserved, masking the facade and rendering the experience of the building one of interiors and interactions.
Endnotes

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furnishing interaction
components

step 0

step 1

step 2
variable configurations depending on change in use over time, external economic forces, and internal programmatic desires.