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The hutongs of Beijing – between past and present

The architects and sociologists conducting research on human residential environment wonder what that habitat should be, what affects the comfort of life in this fragment of urban space namely the residential district or the building itself. The research regards the architecture of different civilizations and the lifestyle of various social groups.

It is interesting in this context to study China and especially Beijing – the second most populated city of the Middle Kingdom (after Shanghai) as an agglomeration with over 17 million inhabitants which until the middle of the 20th century had preserved its traditional urban design whose space has been undergoing a quick transformation recently.

For centuries China was a state impermeable to the influences from outside and for a long time it remained resistant to the invasion of ideas and achievements of Western civilization. The fall of feudalism the subsequent ten-year-long revolution which broke out in 1966 brought many changes, brutally transforming a living culture into a relic of the past¹. In 1976, after Mao Zedong, the founder of the People's Republic of China died, the country entered a path of reforms which were supposed to lead the way to a market economy and consequently to a policy of opening the former empire to the world.

In his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* Samuel Huntington describes the world after the cold war, proving that now it faces a clash of eight great civilizations and their numerous contacts unprecedented in the history of the world [2]. It also affects the realm of architecture, making its mark in urban planning developments. The Chinese civilization, which for centuries was hermetic and whose one of the fundamental features was the

permanent character of the principles that were assumed and considered sufficient [3, p. 19], which was connected among others with slow changes in the style of building after the cultural revolution and entering the road to creating a modern world power, had to catch up with the Western world also in the field of new architecture.



Fig. 1. Precinct of hutongs in Beijing – view from the Drum Tower to the north-west (photo: J. Krajewska)

Il. 1. Dzielnica hutongów w Pekinie – widok z Wieży Bębnów w kierunku północno-zachodnim (fot. J. Krajewska)

The influx of foreign capital, the opening of branch offices of foreign companies in China and the wish to change the image of the state resulted in the redevelopment of the capital city which was even faster because of the organization of the Olympic Games there in 2008. The problem of demolishing old precincts of hutongs which for centuries created the basic urban tissue of Beijing became evident (Fig. 1).

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¹ The Mao Zedong Revolution was looking for an enemy in the form of Four Olds: old culture, old customs, old ideas and old habits [1, p. 39].

The urban space in Beijing before the Cultural Revolution

The pre-revolution Beijing was architecturally a uniform city. Only some buildings, sometimes groups of buildings, were erected according to the European design². It was a space of specific nature for visitors from outside which due to its Chinese architecture was strikingly different from the architecture in the West. The one-story precincts of most often residential houses were dominated by imperial buildings and temples with magnificent parks as well as towers and gates³. None of the buildings in the city could be taller than the imperial Hall of Supreme Harmony, reaching the altitude where good spirits were still present (this level was determined by the masters of *feng shui*⁴).

The historical center of Beijing dates back to the times of the Yuan Dynasty when it was designed as a rectangle [11]. The very heart of the city was occupied by the Forbidden City – the imperial palace compound comprising 32 hectares which was the residence of the rulers from the Ming and Qing Dynasties whose construction began in 1406. The compound, similar to the whole network of the streets, was located along the north-south axis in compliance with *feng shui* principles. The area to the east and west of the palace was usually inhabited by high-ranking citizens – mostly kinsmen of the emperor, aristocrats, whereas, the remaining inhabitants of the capital city lived far from the walls of the Forbidden City, usually to the north and

south. These were the emperors who would care for the plan of the city, laying out the residential districts according to the guidelines from the times of the longest ruling Chinese Zhou Dynasty (1045–256 B.C.) [8].

Beijing seemed to resemble a gray carpet of buildings⁵, a monotonous puzzle of one-story pavilions.

The fundamental difference in the city planning was that there was no façade type building along the streets. Some buildings have their façades facing the pedestrian alleys with stores and workshops, however, there are no town houses in the European sense – representative rows of buildings, and consequently the city life went on according to a different pattern than in Europe.

The main unit of Beijing space was a *hutong* – alley⁶. The word derives from the Mongol term ‘*hottog*’ meaning *water well*⁷. A *hutong*, that is a passageway, can have a different width of 40 cm to 10 m [6]. Precincts of *hutongs* surrounding the Forbidden City were developed in the Yuan (1206–1341), Ming (1368–1628) and Qing (1644–1908) Dynasties.

The *hutongs* which created a network of narrow passageways and alleys were separated from one another by the *siheyuan* – residential complexes surrounded by a wall blocking the view inside. Understanding the significance of the wall makes it possible to understand the Chinese civilization better because it has been present in this culture since the late neolith (Longshan period) and separating became its basic function, prevailing over the defensive function [3, p. 23]. Consequently, walking along an alley one can sometimes move simply along a plastered wall.

² The Old Summer Palace would be an interesting example of this – a complex of 200 stylized buildings from the 18th century which was destroyed in 1860 during the Second Opium War [1, p. 79].

³ Among others existing today the Drum Tower and Bell Tower to the north of the Forbidden City or Front Gate at the southern end of the Tiananmen Square, remains of old city walls.

⁴ *Feng shui* is an ancient Taoistic art and science of design aiming at achieving harmony with the natural environment; its primary principle is the concept of yin-yang – two opposing and complementary forces which have always been present in the universe. This practice has been appreciated not only in China.

⁵ Ordinary inhabitants could use only gray roof tiles.

⁶ During the Yuan dynasty this term was used to describe a 9-meter-wide alley.

⁷ The name comes from the times when villagers first bought a water well and then built houses around it.

The traditional residential unit and life in old Beijing

A single *siheyuan* (Fig. 2) – the traditional Chinese building unit dates back to the times of the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.– 220 A.D.)⁸ [3, p. 322]. It is characteristic of the northern part of the country where it was supposed to protect the inhabitants against the specific climate – winds in winter and dust storms in spring [7]. *Siheyuans* are created by a small size usually one-story buildings surrounding a rectangular courtyard into which they open from three sides (Fig. 3). The buildings are usually geographically oriented. Before the Cultural Revolution each *siheyuan* belonged to one family and its size, height of the buildings as well as the decorations testified to the social and material status of the inhabitants [8].

Small pavilions that compose a *siheyuan* were built from dried bricks and a mixture of clay with plant components [3, p. 255]. The walls, usually thin, could be plastered and painted gray. Wooden details such as doors or porch balustrades were covered with red⁹ and green paint. It had a gable roof covered with gray tiles with slightly upturned eaves. The southern façade of the main pavilion had an arcade with wooden columns supporting the roof.

From the south of the courtyard which was behind a wall there was an entrance (usually located in the southeast corner of the design) and windows because according to the old Chinese beliefs good forces would come from

⁸ According to some sources the oldest buildings of this kind were constructed over 3000 years ago at the beginning of the existence of the city.

⁹ Red is the color of joy in China [3, p. 269]; it can be often found in architecture (columns, walls, doors).

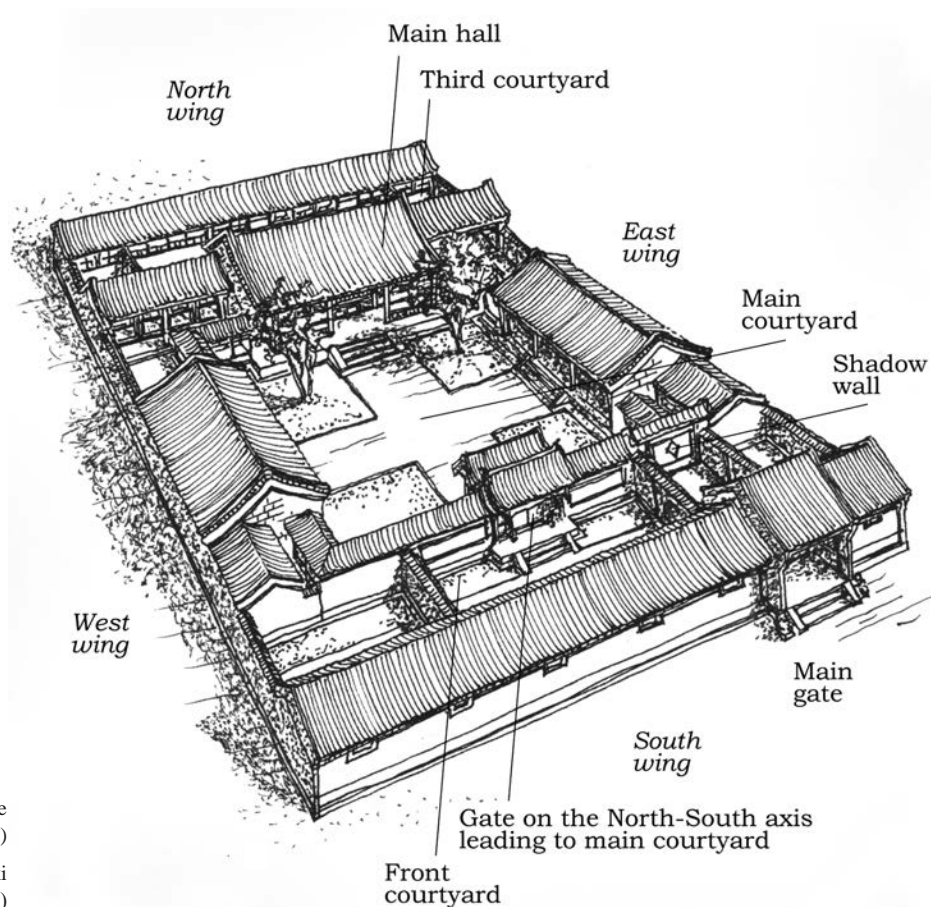


Fig. 2. Siheyuan (prepared by the author based on: [9])

Il. 2. Siheyuan (opracowanie autorki według: [9])

that direction, whereas the north was the realm of evil spirits [3, p. 299]. Right opposite the gate behind the entrance – on the other side of the small courtyard – there was the so called Wall of Shade decorated with an ornament [7]. Located right behind the entrance the Wall of Spirits – a screen called *yingbi* or *zhaobi* [7] – was supposed to protect against evil spirits that, as it was believed, would move only along straight lines and could not get around obstacles. It could be built of brick, stone or wood [7] and sometimes it was richly decorated. Most often by the

southern wall of the residence there were utility rooms. The central part of the compound was entered across one or two entrance courtyards through a representative gate from the south. The biggest courtyard was filled with plants creating a home garden; sometimes a vegetable garden.

The main building was built on a north-south axis, opening to the south. This is where there was a living room with most light and where the host would reside [6]. The side pavilions were occupied by the servants. The *yin-yang* principles would apply here, determining the space for men (from the east) and for women (from the west.) Interestingly, the house never had a basement or a base course [3, p. 255]. Living in such a household and with the inhabitants in individual pavilions reflected the patriarchal model of the family based on Confucian patterns [10]. Behind the pavilion of the head of the family there was another courtyard with pathways leading to it located on both sides of the main building. Next generations with their families would live in the pavilions on the eastern and western side of the courtyard [6]. Sometimes it happened that one man had a few wives who would occupy the western (north-west) wing of the residence. In traditional Chinese society a woman would have a much worse position than a man¹⁰. It was rare that unmarried women were allowed to leave the siheyuan. They spent the time behind the house wall surrounded by cages with birds hanging in front of the pavilions.



Fig. 3. Siheyuan – view of the main pavilion; museum at present, Houhai Lake region (photo: J. Krajewska)

Il. 3. Siheyuan – widok na główny pawilon; obecnie muzeum, rejon jeziora Houhai (fot. J. Krajewska)

¹⁰ Only the mother of the family had a high position.



Fig. 4. Men spending their leisure time playing a board game
(photo: J. Krajewska)

Il. 4. Mężczyźni spędzają czas wolny nad grą planszową
(fot. J. Krajewska)

The advance of changes

At the beginning of the 20th century, at the end of the period of the Qing Dynasty, the Middle Kingdom became weaker and influenced by foreign powers. This directly reflected in architecture – at that time the Chinese started to build new houses with irregular shapes and remodel old ones, changing them for the worse. The decline of the feudal system resulted in a change of the social status of the inhabitants [8]. Poorer people were quartered in a place occupied by one family. In 1949, after the People's Republic of China was established, the living conditions in the precincts of hutongs slightly improved [8] but still a lot of their area was demolished and multi-story residential blocks were built where former inhabitants of the siheyuan moved. After 1949, some complexes were also taken over by the government and turned into offices, then demolished and new office buildings

The hutongs separating the courtyard compounds from one another would often run from east to west, whereas the smaller ones run along the side walls of the Beijing households to provide a better communication [8]. The life of the inhabitants of Beijing was spent then in the courtyards and in the network of alleys which was as thick and tangled as a labyrinth. The names of hutongs were connected with their history, location or use, e.g. Roasted Beans, Rice Granaries, Scented Baits [1, p. 66]. The interpretation of these names that were more and more sophisticated can provide information on how the society developed [6].

Although a single family was separated from the outside world by a wall, the world of neighboring contacts, doing business and men's games began right behind it (Fig. 4). The inhabitants of the capital city call the hutongs an "encyclopedia of Beijing" [6] because they are a great source of knowledge about their lifestyle and about themselves.

were built in their place. Other siheyuans suffered when air-raid shelters were built in the whole of Beijing during the Cultural Revolution [5].

Since 1990, the residential building in Beijing, just like in other cities in China, has been developing according to the Weigai system [11] – traditional buildings are demolished and the recovered area is used for roads and new architecture. A lot of old complexes have lost their historical character and have become neglected. Sometimes the inhabitants build annexes to the courtyards with kitchens and other rooms. Consequently, it is difficult to see the original layout of individual complexes.

This is how the traditional residential environment which has been developed by generations and which has developed the generations is disappearing from the landscape of the city and is becoming its heritage park operating on the border between life and theater.

Present and future

The historical residential districts that still exist on the total area of 62 km² occupy two main sections – 38 km² of the former "Inner City" surrounded once by the city walls which were replaced by the second ring of Beijing in the 1960s, and the area of less significance – the "Outer City"¹¹ comprising 24 km² located to the south of Tian'anmen Square which once was a separate city. The "Outer City" was not established on a rectangular network layout and the houses were smaller and built in the styles of the regions from which their inhabitants came from. Traditionally it was a commercial area [12].



Fig. 5. One-story shops along an alley; in the direction of Houhai Lake
(photo: J. Krajewska)

Il. 5. Parterowe sklepy wzdłuż alejki; w kierunku jeziora Houhai
(fot. J. Krajewska)

¹¹ In 1648, the emperor from the Qing dynasty assigned the quarters around the square to the settlers coming from his region; the adjacent areas within the "Inner City" were occupied by Mongols and the "Outer City" was occupied by Han Chinese [12] who constitute 92% of China's population and are the biggest nation in the world.

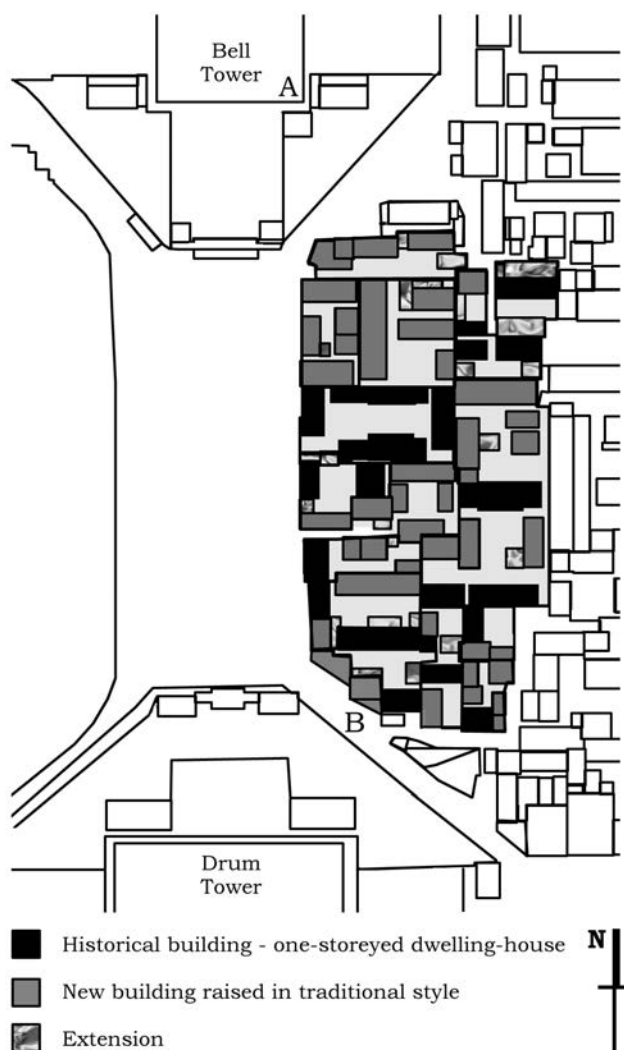


Fig. 6. Traditional buildings on the east side of the square between the Bell Tower and the Drum Tower (prepared by author based on: [12])

Il. 6. Tradycyjna zabudowa po wschodniej stronie placu między Wieżą Dzwonów a Wieżą Bębnow (opracowanie autorki na podstawie: [12])

The region around Houhai and Shi Cha Hai Lakes, the area near the Drum Tower and the Bell Tower (Zhong-Gulou area) are attractive among tourists; there is a hotel, a Chinese language school for foreigners as well as offices and shops (Fig. 5). This area is in the northern part of the capital on the axis of the Forbidden City, within the “Inner City.” It is a special place where the past with its historical monuments¹² combines with everyday life of the inhabitants who often live in very modest conditions (Figs 6–8). There were plans to demolish some hutongs around the towers and build a local parking lot there, however, they were abandoned as this region’s attractiveness would suffer greatly and it would lose its magic of authenticity [11].

It is impossible to retract the changes or force the multi-million population to live only in one-story buildings which spread endlessly. However, the Chinese are aware of

¹² The towers, originally built in the 13th century, are open for tourists, e.g. as viewing towers, whereas the restored siheyuans function as museums and the main sight-seeing attractions for tourists in rickshaws.



Fig. 7. The Bell Tower with the square preceding it from the south (photo: J. Krajewska)

Il. 7. Wieża Dzwonów wraz z poprzedzającym ją placem od południa (fot. J. Krajewska)



Fig. 8. Buildings on the east side of the square located between the towers (photo: J. Krajewska)

Il. 8. Zabudowa po wschodniej stronie placu leżącego między wieżami (fot. J. Krajewska)

the necessity to preserve the remaining old precincts; 25 historical areas were included in the protection program in 1993; later other areas were added too (Fig. 9) [11].

It is worth mentioning that the modern society does not live according to the traditional model. The position of the woman, who now can learn and work and is no longer locked up in the house, has changed. The model of a three-member family imposed by the state (with married couples preferring having a male descendant¹³) and the change of the material status of an average inhabitant,

¹³ In the past the father also wanted to have a son because only a man could celebrate some religious rites after a parent’s death.

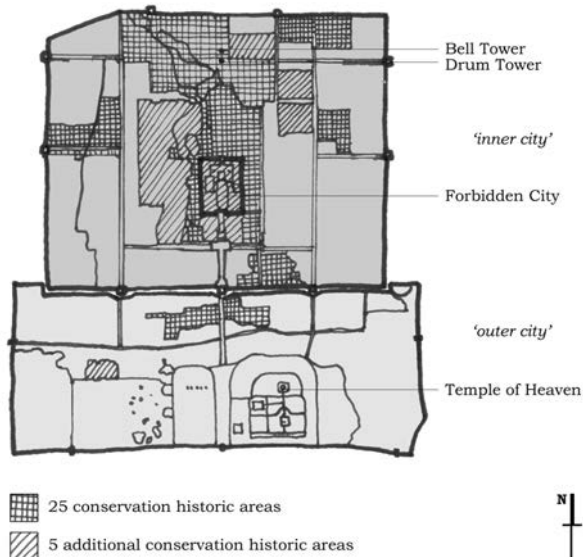


Fig. 9. Areas of hutongs protected by law within the historical part of Beijing – “Inner City” and “Outer City” (prepared by the author based on: [12])

Il. 9. Chronione obszary hutongów w obrębie historycznej części Pekinu – miasta „wewnętrznego” i miasta „zewnętrznego” (opracowanie autorki według: [12])

living rather modestly, force the reduction of living space for practical reasons – such as population growth. The traditional siheyuan, which in fact is difficult to come across today in its original form because a lot of houses have been remodeled, has consequently become a relic. The ideological aspects have disappeared, which forced the inhabitants to fence in and isolate as well as separate the life space for men and women.

Furthermore, the social conditions in the precincts of hutongs leave much to be desired. The alleys are often too narrow for cars. Many inhabitants get around on bicycles, however, ambulances or fire engines have a problem getting to the patients through the labyrinth of



Fig. 10. Modern blocks of flats where the inhabitants of hutongs move (photo: J. Krajewska)

Il. 10. Współczesne bloki mieszkalne, do których przenoszą się rezydenci hutongów (fot. J. Krajewska)

narrow streets. The apartments often do not have bathrooms, the walls are thin and the rooms have no heating. The Chinese are practical and they value amenities more than sentiments and as such they do consider the possibility of changing an apartment in a precinct of hutongs to an air-conditioned apartment with all sanitary facilities in a residential block (Fig. 10) as an evident improvement of their living conditions.

Another issue is the disintegration of the groups of neighbors which formed easily in the one-story buildings and the space of a familiar labyrinth tamed by the locals – the space where nothing is identical, repetitive or schematic. The hutongs of Beijing are the place for improvisation, spontaneity and sharing the life of adversity. It happens that while sneaking through a narrow passage or opening a door one can get to a small yard and it is impossible to tell if it is still a semi-public space or already somebody’s open-air “hallway.”

Deliberations of contemporary architects

After the introduction of the open door policy in China the biggest cities of this country started to attract newcomers from the whole world. Some, fascinated by the oriental culture and interested in the possibilities offered by the new labor market, decided to stay there longer. Architects could carry out their bold projects and create a new urban space again, which at present is possible to such an extent in few places in the world.

Sebastian Linack¹⁴ is one of the Europeans who decided to stay in China. Already during his studies he dealt with a project regarding hutongs. He considers this type

of architecture especially inspiring by being an interesting opposite of the traditional European architecture. In his opinion it is interesting how the courtyard structure can be used in today’s reality and how its features affect the modern structure of urban buildings.

He claims that the Chinese are slowly beginning to rethink the traditional courtyard architecture (despite so many new buildings erected in connection with the Olympic Games – including office buildings and residential complexes.) On the one hand, there are fewer and fewer examples of this type of architecture because in a sense it is necessary to replace it with modern buildings. On the other hand, however, people need more and more social structures and a platform for emotional contacts as well as personal bonds which were much stronger when they lived in the precincts of hutongs than now that they live in modern “enclosed communities” – similar to American housing projects. Just like other Europeans living in China, in the

¹⁴ German architect born in 1979 who has been living in Beijing for three years. He graduated from architecture at Technische Universität München, studied at the Illinois Institute of Technology and the National University of Singapore. For 2.5 years he has been one of the organizers of interdisciplinary series of discussions called Pecha Kucha Night Beijing. Currently he works for GMP Architekten.

opinion of Sebastian Linack, if possible, the old structures should be preserved or connected with modern architectural context (that would depend on the quality of the existing structures.) However, personally, he would prefer the preservation of the existing traditional buildings at least within the second ring surrounding the city as well as the areas of hutongs of special significance which still exist within the fourth ring where he would suggest introducing only such modern architecture which would harmonize with the existing urban and architectural context.

The project of multi-family courtyard type buildings from 1992 at Ju'er Hutong designed by Liangyong Wu in Beijing is a good example of modern architecture

developed from the reinterpretation of the traditional structures. The buildings in the complex have 2–3 stories, however, due to the density and tight layout of these buildings the parameters can be compared with the intensity achieved by multi-story buildings [4]. On the other hand, the limited height and the shape of the buildings create a residential environment which facilitates the development of the communities of neighbors. It was also possible to design green areas and provide individual features for the buildings. With the details the architect alluded to the Chinese tradition, however, it is completely justified and it does not hurt the whole picture as might be the case with the blocks decorated with stylized roofs.

From the author

When civilizations clash and ideas diffuse between them it is important for the nations to preserve their identity. Since the best way to define what man is by knowing what he is not [2, p. 96], after a temporary and selective fascination with the West, different cultures turn to their roots and appreciate the achievements of the generations as well as their own heritage on which they draw and grow.

Attempts are made at revitalizing the protected areas of hutongs. Their passing beauty remains in the memory

of the visitors and their special uniqueness should inspire the young generation of architects.

Although today this architecture demonstrates makeshift characteristics, it was developed on the basis of regular designs of historical buildings erected according to strict rules and that is why it is difficult to compare it to any other architecture in the world. During my stay in the capital city of China a few months before the Olympic Games I had an opportunity to visit the precincts of hutongs and see the changes which take place there.

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Hutongi Pekinu – na granicy epok

W ciągu ostatnich kilkudziesięciu lat doszło w Chinach do drastycznych przemian politycznych i społeczno-kulturalnych. Upadek systemu feudalnego, rewolucja kulturalna, a w końcu wprowadzenie polityki otwartych drzwi spowodowały najpierw odcięcie się od przeszłości, następnie nagłe działania w kierunku unowocześnienia państwa. Konieczna była modernizacja stolicy, której architekturę przez wieki kształtował sztywny system reguł budowlanych oraz zasady filozofii feng-shui. Organizacja Igrzysk Olimpijskich w 2008 r. jeszcze przyspieszyła tempo tych zmian.

Historyczny Pekin rozwijał się na planie centralnym w układzie ortogonalnym. W środku miasta znajdowała się rezydencja władców z dynastii Ming i Qing – Zakazane Miasto, otoczone dzielnicami hutongów – wąskimi alejkami oddzielającymi parterowe zespoły zabudowy. Tradycyjną jednostkę mieszkalną stanowił *siheyuan*, utworzony przez niewielkie pawilony, usytuowany na osi północ-południe, otoczony murem. Model chińskiej rodziny opierał się na wzorach konfu-

cjańskich, a życie mieszkańców toczyło się w labiryncie uliczek i dziedzińców.

Zmiany po zniesieniu władzy cesarskiej oraz podczas Rewolucji Kulturalnej miały swoje odbicie w architekturze. Gdy dawny system reguł przestał obowiązywać, tradycyjne domostwa zaczęły podupadać. Potrzeba rozwoju stolicy kłóciła się z koniecznością zachowania starej zabudowy. Uchwalano nowe plany zagospodarowania miasta, kilkadziesiąt obszarów historycznej zabudowy objęto programem ochrony. Pozostałe dzielnice hutongów zaczęły znikać, planowo wyburzane zgodnie z systemem Weigai. Na powstałych w ten sposób działkach stawia się nową architekturę stolicy, a lokatorzy parterowych pawilonów przenoszą się do bloków mieszkalnych.

Trwają dyskusje, jak należy chronić i rewaloryzować tradycyjną zabudowę Pekinu. Stanowi ona źródło inspiracji dla młodych architektów, będąc jednocześnie przedmiotem troski historyków oraz wszystkich, którzy poznali jej niezwykłą odrębność.

Key words: cultural revolution, Hutong, Siheyuan

Słowa kluczowe: rewolucja kulturalna, hutong, siheyuan