

Silvia Lanteri

Eventful Hutong.
Incremental Regeneration Processes for Dashilar and Baitasi
within Beijing Design Week.

abstract

Spending several months living and walking through the narrow alleys in Beijing city centre revealed certain signs regarding the deep transformations that have taken place in the Chinese capital in recent years. Indeed, during the last decades, the *hutongs* system is experiencing change as Beijing is also changing around it within its social, economic and political dimension (Gu and Ryan, 2008).

The appointment of the Olympic Games (2008) and the identification as ‘City of Design’ by UNESCO (2012), two crucial moments in the recent debate on the future of the Chinese capital (the inner city in particular) stimulated a reflection upon the way in which the historical city is changing, positioning itself within a wider frame of urban policies coming from different levels – from national to municipal, through to district level – and going in the direction of a “cultural” conversion of the city’s image and economy.

Observing Beijing from within, this research explores the relationship between the Beijing Design Week (BJDW) temporary event and long-term urban transformations, oscillating between the physical dimension of the city and its representation. The aim of the work is to reflect on the reciprocal intersection between culture – considered as a means of urban narration and images production, managed by different stakeholders, with a focus on the role of the temporary event – and processes of city regeneration, dealing both with political and social phenomena of *gentrification*, and space and architectural production. Indeed, in a complex reality like the one I observed, it is almost impossible to split spatial transformations from political and social processes, and from the influence these transformations have on the city image. So, my research tried to describe and dismantled these hybrid urban strategies situated in a middle field, collocating them inside a wider context of urban regeneration processes.

The work focused mainly on two neighbourhoods, Dashilar and Baitasi, recognised as significant for the role played by Beijing Design Week (BJDW) over the last decade. Here, I tried to understand the event's relationship with a broader network of stakeholders, underlining its role within the reconstruction of two incremental processes of urban regeneration. It was interesting to select and observe, at different times, the traces – or small archipunctures – that it has left on the city surface, interpreting them as tools capable of working both on the transformation of the physical space and on the construction of narratives. These two case studies are not just fragments of the historical centre, but mirrors of some of the directions taken by Beijing in recent years and certain changes within the temporary event itself, opening up to a reflection on exchanges with other realities at national and international level.

Multiple sources were used to carry out this research – some of which I had to create myself – to fill a series of gaps that are always present when carrying out research in China: photography, drawing and interviews are the main tools adopted in this work.

The operations moved mainly through the direct observation of some fragments of the city: a series of cyclic returns to the field, lasting from some weeks to a few months, gave me the chance to delve deeply into the places and observe them in different situations, in different seasons, with and without the event, through the years. This operation was intertwined with the redrawing of some spaces, where the drawing is intended as an instrument not only of rendering and graphic visualisation, but as an investigative tool too, supplemented by photography. It focuses the attention on certain traces of urban transformation impressed on the ancient fabric and allowed me to do what could be described as “architectural ethnography”.

Many themes were touched: the role assumed by Beijing inner city in the debate about the relationship between preservation and modernisation; the recent experimental transformations occurring in some hutongs ancient districts; the role of temporary events in these mechanisms; the relationship between branding operations and physical traces left by the event on the urban surface.

The assumption of a micro-scale observation of specific places is based on the belief that these small fragments may be considered as clues able to reveal wider phenomena proper of a global dimension, readable in Beijing as elsewhere. By observing the case studies of Dashilar and Baitasi, it is even possible to read not only their continuities and parallelisms, but also some political turning points, some changes that are occurring in recent years.

Then – moving from the single case studies, following the thick lines of the net of stakeholders – it is interesting to open the reflection on some exchanges in between various realities: some areas in Beijing where the administration is trying to repropose the approach explored by Dashilar and Baitasi; other medium-sized cities in China adopting BJDW format like Suzhou; some international exchanges with Italy, concentrated in particular in Venice Biennale and Milan Fuorisalone.

In conclusion, these processes are not only means to understand aspects proper of other realities, but they are also windows to look through, open on phenomena that in China – because of its dimension of unpredictable fast transformation, sometimes with a few regulations – can still assume a dimension of innovation and experimentation that in our reality, sometimes, is almost vanished. This aspect could even open new reflections and prospectives on our reality.