

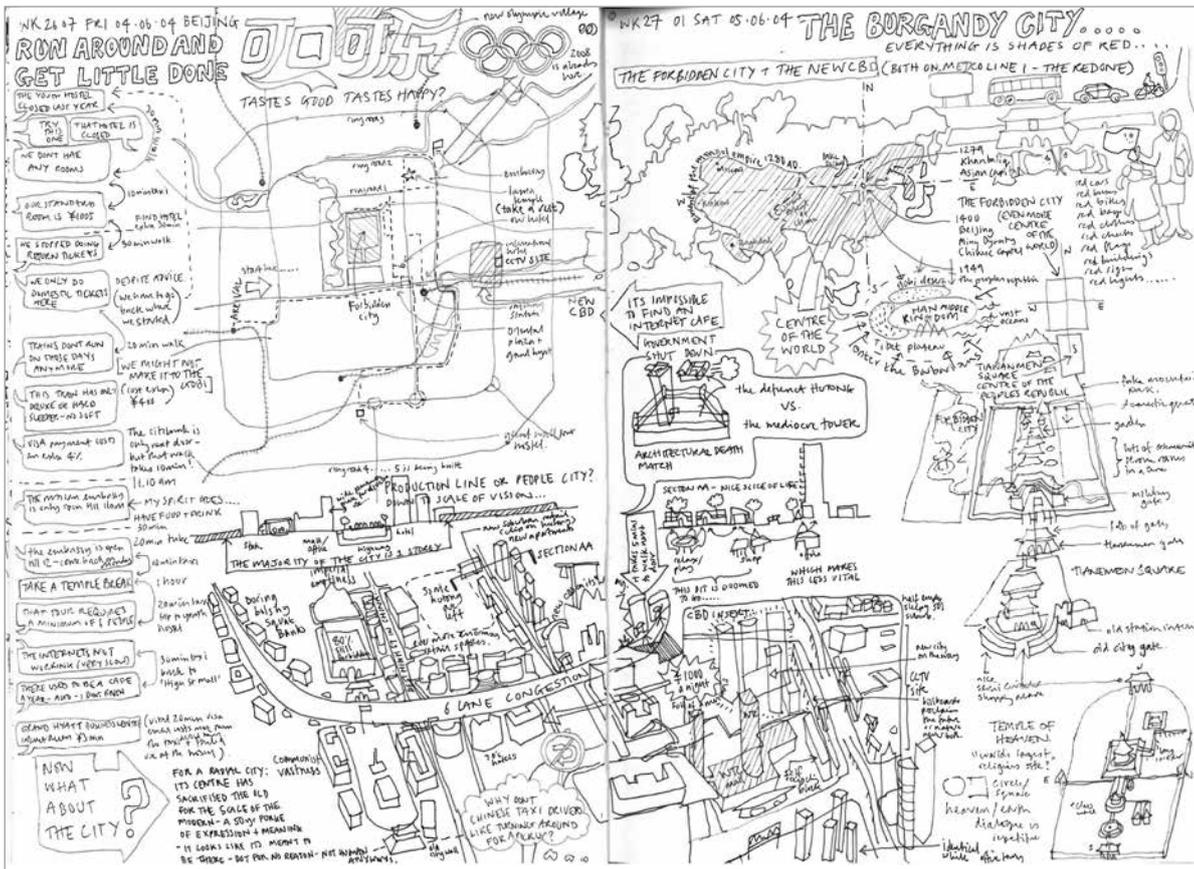
Tom Coward ... Beijing

Perhaps this is a typical view of the twenty-first-century metropolis: thirty per cent multi-lane road, surrounded by ever-taller buildings; construction work in progress, with greenwash on the site hoardings; commercial messages, with promises of touristic escape? In the foreground of the image, four of the six humans are on the phone. This could be Tottenham Court Road in Central London early in the morning – but instead it's Xidan Street in Central Beijing. The two cities, for me, offer up fascinating points of comparison.

I travelled to China for Beijing Design Week. During this short trip, I felt I couldn't comprehend Beijing at all, feeling dropped into a handful of vaguely connected moments. I first came here in 2004 and, streetside, it feels figuratively similar, the low-rise spreading city of old seemingly eaten by modernity. To every Beijing resident I asked, twelve years ago was considered as an eternity – a different world – with few points of comparison. Back then, I felt like I had witnessed what it must have been like to



1 Xidan Street, Central Beijing.



2 Hand-drawn sketchbook diary entry, Beijing, 2004.

be a Victorian in London. I have powerful memories of walking through densely infilled, once aristocratic, Hutongs and of the shock of the newly-serviced city rising up against it. My feeling now, on this visit, was of being overwhelmingly frustrated, stuck in traffic. Each car journey is smart-checked and pre-engineered between disparate destinations in town. And the city confounds the car brands' mythologies of automobile-revelry, which interspersed my in-flight entertainment from London to Beijing.

A casual glance at NASA's satellite-capture reveals the magnitude of the idea of Beijing in every resident's head. And it reveals the growth of the city over the last forty years. Time-lapse reveals not only geographical growth, but also a porosity made through unrestrained, identikit urban sprawl. Beijing is classically planned around a grid with axial routes. However, modern infrastructure became focused on the establishment of ring roads (similar to London's 'circulars' and the subsequent M25), with the first

ring road established following old tram routes in the 1950s. Ring roads two and three were established later in the 1980s and completed in the 1990s. In 2004, I somewhat epically walked the city, lapping the then-recent ring road four. Now, the new lasso-like ring road seven predicts an ever-growing city beyond the boundaries of the municipality. The city feels not so much polycentric as homogenised: a flat topography with only exotic, peculiar spikes, as defined through the machinations of development rather than through much sense of its physical geography. It is hard to navigate and orientate yourself, although easier when high-up from a point of privilege – the summer palace, your hotel, your office – and even harder, perhaps, to know your individual place or role in this enormous urbanity.

Beijing has been badged as an international city of business. Its global image is articulated by the exotics of Zaha Hadid Architects' Soho developments, Herzog and de Meuron's Beijing National Stadium (famously

known as the Bird's Nest) of 2008 – price 80 RMB to walk the rooftop air corridor – and Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA)'s CCTV tower, among others. But that image currently struggles to contain somehow the street market, all-day street-corner mahjong, small-scale shopping and, sometimes, whole swaths of more marginal communities. This is twenty-first-century architecture as bluntly powerful as Humphrey Repton's picturesque concealment of the butcher's block with a *Trompe-l'œil* or Marie Antoinette acting on her own play farm while the French masses struggled to buy bread.

At this scale of reflection, the conference at The Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) was positively surprising. Chinese speakers presented theories and papers describing problems with the 'carbon-based city' and the potential vacancy within the virtual 'silicone-based city'. They proposed a new experiential imperative – a spiritual city, an arts-based urbanism – by describing and shaping local

narratives, preserving assets, and providing local systems of energy creation and waste control, envisioning a different type of urban infrastructure.

The message of the conference – attended and presented by high-level political delegates – seemed clear. The carbon-based city was built; the long-lasting infrastructure had been made in just thirty years. And it was perhaps the most remarkable urbanism of all time. But, now Beijing was ‘full’: it should not grow its footprint, but instead be remade and better shaped around wellbeing as a city for people. It sounded like Beijing’s own ‘green belt’ moment, as instigated in the UK one hundred years ago, looking to apply some brakes to save some important things and rediscover some others.

A moment of change is forthcoming, then? No longer an all-out pursuit of unplanned development, but a look towards a longer, more sustainable trajectory – and maybe a view back to old Europe, and London, as a place that fortuitously kept some of its ancient pedestrian fabric. We were there to talk about regeneration and working with heritage: a UK entourage from a place that perhaps maintains heritage and harvests a creative economy relatively well (despite our own misgivings). We had been imported to give examples of how else things might get done.

In the same twelve-year period in London – say, 2004 until now – what growth and change has happened? Little, one feels, by comparison. We are still re-‘completing’ the docklands that the London Docklands Development Corporation started in 1981. We are proud to have re-achieved London’s prewar population through complex brown-field re-imaginings, but land prices escalate wildly on both sides of the green belt. We struggle with pollution, and the choice to build affordable homes or provide local services. It is in this complex context that Beijing looks at London and declares an interest in transitioning from the production industry to the creative industry. At the conference, there was tangible interest in the European models presented. Interest in masterplanners responding to context, to developers constituting

value through heritage, to planners constructing a compelling narrative to help bind old and new communities, to branding everyday experiences and structured place management. Lastly, to architects shaping place through relationships made between people, interconnecting public realm, and generous buildings accommodating varied use.

At the CAFA conference, Beijing delegates talked about the old city of their youth, thirty years ago, in a sentimental way; showing before/after pictures of air pollution on split screens. When we met individuals on our trip, and on enquiry, older people often lamented what they perceived as the breakdown in the old city structures – local communities – and old spaces of congregation. One suggested that people are generally too busy to meet up, that everyone is now isolated in blocks of flats where they struggle to know their neighbours on the same floorplate, and that the young enjoy the new city’s spaces but the elders don’t like the changes. This sounds familiar.

In London, modernity brought great social and economic change, improving standards of living for millions, and creating huge creative capital, which is still being harvested today. However, it is worth noting that such gains were not easily won and that they need constant maintenance to survive. In China, change happens within the context of that country’s own political system – a different process for dialogue – and one I can’t hope to fully understand. Indeed, let’s consider, in the time when modernity challenged London and ‘quality of life’ conservation came to the fore, how liberal and inclusive were UK politics when the green belt was established in 1919? On one register, male-only suffrage was secured in 1918, but universal suffrage for all those over twenty-one was not achieved until 1928.

I am not sure of the benefit of drawing parallels across time – there is only one time, and ideally lessons should be learnt over the long term – but also there is only your time and no one context is the same. Beijing reminds you what a crude tool urbanism can be – and, for me at least,

in London or Beijing, so much cultural currency and creative capital sits in those local, small-scaled everyday lives, especially when brushed by the potential of an international experience. If we want our metropolises to support wellbeing and deliver a profitable cultural creative output, we need to focus on continually enhancing the combined spirit of all city residents.

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