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## Spazi ibridi nel tessuto degli hutong di Pechino: il caso di Baitasi Hutong

### Keywords

Siheyuan (四合院), Hutongs (胡同), transitional spaces, interior–exterior spatial practices, event-based urban regeneration

### Abstract

This paper examines the urban typology of the remaining courtyard houses (siheyuan) and traditional alleys (hutongs) in Beijing, focusing on how the expansion of the metropolis has transformed their spatial and scalar organization, reconfiguring both interior domestic spaces and exterior spatial practices.

The paper adopts the Baitasi (白塔寺) area as a case study to explore how everyday living practices continuously reshape the use of space, generating spatial configurations that appear to evolve in response to residents' modes of inhabitation, blurring the boundaries between indoor and outdoor spaces. As a result, outdoor spaces are increasingly reshaped through informal activities, giving rise to a constellation of micro-public spaces for gathering, generating new loci of sociability between the inhabitants. Small plazas emerge at road crossings, in the interstices between walls, along narrow passageways, and even on the thresholds and stairways of dwellings, thereby transforming the urban fabric through everyday practices.

Within the broader context of hutong transformation, this contribution considers the role of programmed urban regeneration initiatives, such as the Beijing Design Week, hosted for multiple editions in the Baitasi area, in these transformation processes. These small-scale, incremental interventions have positioned the neighbourhood as a laboratory for experimental design strategies and forward-looking scenarios of urban regeneration, revealing the latent potential of historic urban fabrics to accommodate contemporary spatial practices.

### Biography

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## Blended Spaces in Beijing's Hutong Fabric: The Case of Baitasi Hutong

### Introduction

Over the last two decades, China has experienced one of the fastest rates of development and urbanization in the world. At the same time, cities such as Beijing, shaped by a millennia-long history, retain legible traces of this historical layering in the spatial organization of the Old City. This paper examines the urban typology of the courtyard houses (siheyuan, 四合院) and traditional narrow alleys (hutong, 胡同) in Beijing, relating their spatial scale and use to the contemporary expansion of the metropolis. Baitasi hutong (白塔寺) area is employed as a case study to explore these transformations. The spatial dynamics that originally regulated the use of hutong spaces have progressively shifted, reflecting broader changes in everyday practices and patterns of inhabitation within these spaces. In Baitasi, outdoor areas are continually reconfigured through everyday community practices, giving rise to spatial arrangements that evolve in response to residents' modes of inhabitation. Small plazas emerge at road crossings, between adjacent walls, in narrow corridors, and even on staircases, where improvised playgrounds are often created, or meeting points for the community, illustrating how external spaces increasingly operate as extensions of the domestic realm. These outdoor spaces are increasingly experienced as extensions of the private realm, blurring traditional distinctions between indoor and outdoor spaces. Some of these practices are ephemeral, reflecting transient interactions within the community, while others are more permanent, small, structured interventions that express the evolving needs of residents in a context where original spatial archetypes have been altered.

Although the morphology, origins, and genesis of hutongs and siheyuan have been extensively examined in existing literature, this study redirects attention to the contemporary lived dimension of these inherited forms, how they are adapted and reinterpreted by residents. Furthermore, it considers the role of programmed urban regeneration initiatives, such as the Beijing Design Week, in these ongoing transformations and in re-evaluating and potentially shaping the future of these historic urban environments through micro-urban interventions. Over the twentieth century, the urban fabric of Beijing's old city has been reshaped, altering not only its physical structure but also the modes through which interior and exterior spaces are used and lived in everyday life. Against this backdrop, the Baitasi area offers a critical lens for observing the continuing reconfiguration of spatial practices within the hutong system. The reflections developed in this article originate

from empirical observations conducted in Baitasi area between 2017 and 2018, during a period of collaboration for one of the installations designed for the 2017 edition of the Beijing Design Week<sup>1</sup>. The primary sources for this study consist of on-site analyses of the area's urban spaces, documented through photography, mapping, and systematic field observation. Walking through both the main alleys and the smaller, labyrinthine secondary lanes proved essential for observing residents' movements, spatial practices, and everyday forms of neighborhood interaction. The empirical material gathered was subsequently interpreted in dialogue with the existing literature, including historical studies of Beijing and morphological analyses of hutong and siheyuan, extensively discussed in international literature. The analysis draws on these observations as a fixed point of reference from which broader theoretical considerations are developed, contextualized, and linked to relevant scholarly debates. The reflections presented in this article should be understood as an empirically grounded and temporally situated account of the conditions documented during fieldwork conducted in 2017 and 2018. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that Beijing, an exceptionally dynamic and rapidly transforming metropolis, undergoes continuous spatial changes. More recent, although less systematic, visits to the Baitasi area between 2023 and 2024 reveal new emerging dynamics that partially diverge from, yet also complement, those documented during the initial study period. Several new cafés and small commercial activities have opened throughout the neighborhood, while some courtyards have been merged and converted into larger private residential units. These subsequent observations do not alter the focus of the present analysis but serve as a reminder of the fascinating, evolving nature of hutong areas and the ongoing transformation processes shaping Beijing's historic urban fabric. Accordingly, the findings presented here should be interpreted as anchored to a specific temporal framework within a broader continuum of urban transformation.

### Spatial Hierarchies at Multiple Scales: Urban Fragments in Beijing.

The city of Beijing, literally the “northern capital”<sup>2</sup>, represents the culmination of a long succession of imperial capitals throughout Chinese history<sup>3</sup>, and stands as a paradigmatic example of traditional Chinese principles of urban planning<sup>4</sup>. Strategically located at the edge of the North China Plain and enclosed on three sides by mountains, Beijing originated as one of the earliest walled settlements during the Shang and Zhou dynasties (11th century B.C.E. to 256 B.C.E.), and, unlike most preceding capitals that disappeared with the dynasties that established them, it endured and evolved through the successive Yuan (the Mongol empire, 1271-1368), Ming (1368-1644), and Qing dynasties (Manchu 1644-1912)<sup>5</sup> remaining the national capital for the last 700 years. During the Yuan dynasty, present-day Beijing became the capital of a unified empire.

The configuration of the old city of Beijing, as it is recognized today, can be traced back to the Yuan dynasty, when urban planning was guided by traditional principles that privileged unity, symmetry, and hierarchical order at the different scales of planning. The earliest forms of unit-based design in Chinese architecture are grounded in the concept of the unit, a scalable principle structuring compositions from the architectural to the urban level. This idea of modular construction was first

<sup>1</sup> The author was involved as a collaborator in the installation ‘Hutong Playground’, realized through a collaboration between the Politecnico di Torino and EPFL (Lausanne).

<sup>2</sup> From the Chinese language 北 *Běi*, north and 京 *Jīng* capital. Name first used during the Ming Dynasty in 1403.

<sup>3</sup> Liangyong Wu, *A Brief History of Ancient Chinese City Planning* (Kasseler Schriften zur Geographie und Planung. Urbs et Regio, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Boyd, *Chinese Architecture and Town Planning*, 1500 B.C.-A.D. 1911 (University of Chicago Press, 1962), 45.

<sup>5</sup> Liangyong Wu, *Rehabilitating the Old City of Beijing: A Project in the Ju'er Hutong Neighborhood* (UBC Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Pengfei Ma and Mengbi Li, “Economy and Extravagance in Craft Culture: The Deployment of a Grand Building Code in Chinese Construction History”, *Journal of Asian Architecture and Building Engineering* 22, no. 6 (2023): 3160-69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13467581.2023.2182635>.

<sup>7</sup> Qinghua Guo, “Yingzao Fashi: Twelfth-Century Chinese Building Manual”, *Architectural History* 41 (1998): 1-13.

<sup>8</sup> Giorgia Cestaro, *Protection and Management of Industrial Heritage in China: History, Practice and Meaning* (Doctoral dissertation, Tsinghua University and Politecnico di Torino, 2022), accessed August 18, 2025, <https://iris.polito.it/handle/11583/2967858>.



codified in the *Yingzao Fashi* (营造法式, literally “building standards”), which defines the timber unit as the basis for modular systems regulating all components of a building. The *Yingzao Fashi*, whose significance in China could be compared to the one that the *De Architectura* had in the West<sup>6</sup>, is indeed the earliest surviving Chinese technical manual on architecture, compiled in 1100 by Li Jie 李诫, then Superintendent of State Buildings and officially published by the Song court in 1103<sup>7</sup>. The manual further establishes standardized measures for the labor required in different types of construction and for the corresponding quantities of materials<sup>8</sup>. The concept of the module and its scalability, as addressed in the *Yingzao Fashi* within the architectural domain, although not directly concerned with city planning, likely contributed to

#### 7.1

Baitasi Hutong area, White Pagoda Temple. Picture author: Lidia Preti. 2018.

#### 7.2

Baitasi Hutong, narrow alleys between courtyard houses. Picture author: Lidia Preti. 2018.

the organized and coherent development of urban environments during its time. Even though Beijing has served as the capital of the Empire for several dynasties, the inner city, covering an area of approximately 62 square kilometres, retains much of the urban fabric bequeathed by the later dynasties of the Chinese Empire<sup>9</sup>. In particular, the Yuan (1206-1368 BCE), Ming (1368-1644 BCE), and Qing (1644-1911 CE) dynasties left a lasting imprint on the city, with their influence still evident in the street layout, palace complexes, and courtyard houses of the inner city. It was during the Yuan dynasty that the original central axis<sup>10</sup> of Dadu was built and continues to serve as the backbone of Beijing, shaping contemporary urban planning discourses<sup>11</sup>. The city was organized through a precise hierarchical system with a mathematical relationship between its parts. When addressing the scalar dimension of the different elements, in his fifteenth-century Latin treatise *De Re Aedificatoria*, widely regarded as the first modern architectural treatise of the Italian Renaissance, Leon Battista Alberti reflects on the relationship between urban and domestic scales, arguing that if the philosophical analogy – that the city may be understood as a large house, and the house in turn as a small city – is valid, it is consequently coherent to assert that the individual components of a dwelling can themselves be considered autonomous, miniature units of habitation.

If the philosophers' adage holds true, that the city is like a great house, and the house, in turn, a small city, it would not be mistaken to argue that the components of a house are themselves miniature dwellings.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Jie Zhang, "Informal Construction in Beijing's Old Neighborhoods", *Cities: The International Journal of Urban Policy and Planning* 14, no. 2 (1997): 85-94.

<sup>10</sup> The Central Axis of Beijing was inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2024, meeting UNESCO's Criteria in which recognizes its ability to bear a unique or exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or a civilization, whether living or extinct and Criterion iv acknowledges it as an outstanding example of a building, architectural, or technological ensemble, or landscape that illustrates significant stages in human history. UNESCO World Heritage Centre, *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, WHC.24/01 (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 31 July 2024).

<sup>11</sup> Yi Wang, *A Century of Change: Beijing's Urban Structure in the 20th Century*, 1st ed. (Springer, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *L'architettura (De Re Aedificatoria)*, ed. e trad. Giovanni Orlandi, introduzione e note di Paolo Portoghesi (Milano: Il Polifilo, 1966), vol. 1, p. 64. Translated by the author. Original text: «E se è vero il detto dei filosofi, che la città è come una grande casa, e la casa a sua volta una piccola città, non si avrà torto sostenendo che le membra di una casa sono esse stesse piccole abitazioni».

<sup>13</sup> Antonio De Rossi, "Esterno, interno-esterno, interno. Case villaggio e spazi transizionali", *ArchAlp*, no. 14, 2025: 129-36.

<sup>14</sup> Wu, *A Brief History of Ancient Chinese City Planning*.

<sup>15</sup> Wu, *A Brief History of Ancient Chinese City Planning*.

Crucial in this passage is the concluding remark, which, moving beyond simple analogy, evokes a mode of reasoning consistent with the scientific concept of scale invariance<sup>13</sup>. An examination of the settlement principles of historic Beijing reveals this condition of scalar continuity with particular clarity. The organizational logic underpinning the hutong system operates recursively across multiple scales of the urban hierarchy, from individual dwellings to courtyard compounds, blocks, neighborhoods, and ultimately the city as a whole, thereby illustrating a form of scale invariance. All these elements display isomorphic relationships with one another, exhibiting a structural or logical correspondence, as if they were scaled or repeated versions of the same underlying pattern. The streets were organized into three hierarchical scales of width and importance: a network of wide streets (大街, *dàjiē*), narrow streets (小街, *xiǎojiē*), and lanes (胡同, *hútòng*), about half the width of the narrow streets. It was during the Yuan dynasty that the tradition of the street system began to take shape, with major thoroughfares arranged parallel to the central axis in a north-south orientation, serving as the widest and busiest arteries where commercial activities were typically concentrated, while residential buildings were organized in rows along the narrower, quieter lanes, the hutongs<sup>14</sup> (胡同, *hútòng*). In his book *Rehabilitating the Old City of Beijing: A Project in the Ju'er Hutong Neighbourhood*<sup>15</sup>, Wu Liangyong suggests that the historic city of Beijing has a scalar disposition from the smallest unit to the largest. Beginning with the room, whose internal disposition reflects social order, to the building, typically organized along a central axis and oriented south for optimal sunlight and ventilation; to the





courtyard compound, where spatial sequences articulate a gradual transition from indoor and outdoor spaces, private and public ones; to the hutong, which serves as the interface between compounds and the larger circulation network; and further to the neighborhood and street block, where the grid pattern of hutong produces a legible hierarchy of movement by the progressive narrowing of lanes.

At present, the city of Beijing embodies a stratification of urban practices shaped across various historical periods. It remains profoundly shaped by its past, bearing witness to its historical evolution while embodying the enduring influence of China's imperial system and long-established urban and spatial planning traditions.

### 7.3

Homework. Children studying in outdoor courtyard spaces. Baitasi area, Beijing. Picture author: Lidia Preti. 2017.

### 7.4

Chinese chess (象棋, xiàngqí). Elderly residents playing board games in outdoor spaces. Baitasi area, Beijing. Picture author: Lidia Preti. 2017.

### At the Core of Beijing: Siheyuan and Hutong as Urban Archetypes

The courtyard house typology has long represented an ideal form of vernacular dwelling and appears in numerous regions beyond China, where the act of defining space through protective enclosures produced domestic forms that shaped the urban fabric of ancient cities. In his book *The Four Elements of Architecture*<sup>16</sup>, first published in 1851, the German architect Gottfried Semper identified 'enclosure' as one of the four fundamental elements of architecture, alongside hearth, roof, and mound, serving to protect the interior space of a dwelling. In China, the courtyard house typology had already reached a relatively complete form by the Han dynasty<sup>17</sup>, as evidenced by tomb brick depictions dating back two thousand years. Courtyard houses embodied the spatial expression of Confucian principles, emphasizing communal living and a clearly defined social hierarchy, with the dimensions of courtyards and rooms systematically reflecting the social status of the families. Resembling a complex system concealed within a clear geometric order, the courtyard is a seemingly simple composition: its perimeter, typically square or rectangular, is occupied by the building, while the center remains an open void<sup>18</sup>. The courtyard houses, further articulated into rooms as sub-units, are regarded as the basic building module in the heart of Beijing; the broader urban fabric can be understood as their scaled extension, reproducing the same spatial logic at successive levels. In the case of elite residences, this principle of aggregation of courtyards reached monumental dimensions: large compounds, such as those of the royal family, could include seven to nine courtyards, with a central main yard flanked by additional side courtyards to the east and west, resulting in imposing and expansive dwellings<sup>19</sup>.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the configuration of the courtyard houses compounds remained visible around the Forbidden City in Beijing, where it was framed by hutongs that constituted the city's primary urban pattern<sup>20</sup>. Having examined the origins of courtyard houses and their hierarchical spatial configuration, it is now essential to address the transformations they have undergone over the last decades of the 20th century. This entails exploring how Beijing's historic courtyard houses have been reshaped over the past century and considering how recent conservation policies have influenced both the preservation and the transformation of the city's historic districts. Over the past century, Beijing's urban space has undergone profound transformation and expansion, as China emerged as one of the fastest-growing countries in terms of socio-economic development. Despite the rapid pace of urban transformation, enduring forms of inertia remain. The historic centre, for example, notwithstanding real estate pressures and infrastructural modernization, continues to maintain an almost rural lifestyle within the dense hutong fabric, forming a low-density «void centre» unique for a city of this scale<sup>21</sup>. The persistence of this residential typology in the inner city of Beijing has been accompanied by significant changes in both spatial density and usage. In particular, the two traditional forms, the hutong (narrow alleyways between residential blocks) and the siheyuan (courtyard houses), have been transformed by successive urban policies, producing lasting changes not only in their spatial and functional configurations but also in the ways residents inhabit and experience them.

The first major phase of transformation occurred between 1956 and 1959, when the dismantling

<sup>16</sup> Gottfried Semper, *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings*, trans. Harry F. Mallgrave and Wolfgang Herrmann (Cambridge, 1989).

<sup>17</sup> The earliest forms of courtyard dwellings appeared during the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BCE), while by the Han Dynasty (206 BCE; 220 CE) the type had already attained a relatively complete form.

<sup>18</sup> Xing Ruan, *Confucius' Courtyard: Architecture, Philosophy and the Good Life in China* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

<sup>19</sup> Deqi Shan, *Chinese Vernacular Dwellings*, 3rd ed., *Introductions to Chinese Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Yantai Shen and Wang Changqing, *Life in Hutongs: Through Intricate Alleyways in Beijing* (Foreign Language Press, 1997).

<sup>21</sup> Michele Bonino, Pierre Croset, and Filippo De Pieri, "Pechino come arcipelago: La trasformazione delle danwei industriali", *Territorio* (2015): 56-63, <https://doi.org/10.3280/TR2015-074010>.

of courtyard houses reached its peak and multi-story administrative buildings were inserted into the historic urban fabric. Traditional courtyard houses were converted into multi-family dwellings characterized by self-built additions, allowing the residents to extend the living space into the space of the courtyards. Focusing less on housing provision and constrained by limited resources, residents of traditional courtyard houses were encouraged to erect additional structures within the courtyards, a spontaneous and unregulated process that gradually transformed the siheyuan into dazayuan (大杂院, *dà zá yuàn*), literally «large mixed courtyards», denoting compounds increasingly subdivided and shared by multiple households<sup>22</sup>. The traditional single-family courtyard house was therefore transformed into a multi-family dwelling accommodating more than five households, where unavoidable self-adaptations by residents led to overcrowding and to the shared use of facilities such as kitchens and toilets<sup>23</sup>. These transformed compounds now constitute the majority of the remaining courtyard houses and have become central to discussions on their preservation, regeneration, and future development<sup>24</sup>. Indeed, parallel to Beijing developing into a global metropolis, specific protection laws<sup>25</sup> have been enacted to safeguard its unique historic heritage of lanes and quadrangle courtyards. Building on this framework, in the late 1980s, a series of experimental housing projects were launched to test different aspects of redevelopment policy, focusing not only on physical solutions permitted by the inner city's restrictive lot coverage and height limits, but also retaining as many original residents on site as possible<sup>26</sup>. The earliest examples of new housing typologies in inner Beijing are the Ju' er Hutong prototype, constructed in 1990 and 1994 in the Nanluogu Xiang area, and the Nanchizi project, completed in 2003 on the eastern side of the Forbidden City<sup>27</sup>. Today, after decades of city expansion and modernization, only a fraction of Beijing's alleys preserves their original historical form; approximately 13% of the total remain protected under the historical blocks preservation policy and retain their traditional status as hutong<sup>28</sup>.

### Investigating Spatial Patterns of Baitasi Hutongs (白塔寺胡同)

Among the remaining hutongs in Beijing, Baitasi (白塔寺, *Bǎitǎsì*) area stands out as a distinct enclave of traditional hutongs, an 'oasis' of surviving historic urban fabric. The nomenclature of the hutongs was historically derived from diverse sources: some were named after individuals, others after markets or commodities, still others after distinctive buildings within the district, and in some cases after the physical features of the terrain. In the case of Baitasi (白塔寺), the toponym, which literally translates as "White Pagoda Temple", originates from the prominent temple situated at the center of the district, whose architectural presence not only shaped the area's identity but also conferred its name upon the surrounding hutongs<sup>29</sup>. The White Pagoda Temple, a remarkable structure built over 700 years ago, was constructed during the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368 CE) by the Nepalese architect Araniko. In recognition of its outstanding historical and cultural value, the White Pagoda of Miaoying Temple was designated on March 4, 1961, by the State Council as one of the first nationally protected key cultural relics. The first formal amendment, "Provisional Regulations on the Protection and Management of Cultural

<sup>22</sup> Shuishan Yu, "Courtyard in Conflict: The Transformation of Beijing's Siheyuan during Revolution and Gentrification", *The Journal of Architecture* 22, no. 8 (2017): 1337-65.

<sup>23</sup> Ying Liu and Adenrele Awotona, "The Traditional Courtyard House in China: Its Formation and Transition", in *Evolving Environmental Ideals – Changing Way of Life, Values and Design Practices: IAPS 14 Conference Proceedings* (Stockholm, 1996): 1-12.

<sup>24</sup> Ren Jinfeng and Lü Bin, "Preservation and Regeneration of Beijing's Courtyard Houses Based on Typology Methods", *China City Planning Review* 20, no. 3 (2011): 53-63.

<sup>25</sup> Yutaka Hirako, Dorje Lundrup, Andre Alexander, and Pimpim de Azevedo, *Beijing Hutong Conservation Plan: Study of Urban Changes in Beijing's Historic Inner City ("Hutong" Area) and Alternative Rehabilitation Concepts*, produced in cooperation with Tsinghua University for the Tibet Heritage Fund International, accessed August 20, 2025, [https://tibetheritagefund.org/media/download/hutong\\_study.pdf](https://tibetheritagefund.org/media/download/hutong_study.pdf). The report summarizes the main protection laws issued over the past decades concerning heritage preservation; the laws cited below are those referenced in this document. Law of the People's Republic of China on Urban Planning (December 1989), the Law of the People's Republic of China on Protection of Cultural Relics (November 1982, amended June 1991), the Regulations for the Implementation of the Law on Protection of Cultural Relics (May 1992), the Regulations of Beijing Municipality on the Protection and Management of Cultural Relics (June 1987), the Management Regulations of Beijing Municipality on Protected Cultural Relic Sites (June 1987), the Points of Reconstruction and Extension of Beijing City Planning Draft (1953), the Beijing City Construction Master Plan (initial 1957, revised 1958), the Beijing City Master Plan (1991-2010) (1993), the Planning of Preservation and Control Areas for Historical and Cultural Conservation Areas in Beijing Old City defining 25 conservation areas (1993), the Conservation Planning of 25 Historical Areas in Beijing Old City (March 2002), and the Conservation Planning of the Historical and Cultural City of Beijing (September 2002).

<sup>26</sup> Michael Leaf, "Inner City Redevelopment in China", *Cities* 12, no. 3 (1995): 149-62, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0264-2751\(94\)00015-Z](https://doi.org/10.1016/0264-2751(94)00015-Z).

<sup>27</sup> Donia Zhang, *Courtyard Housing and Cultural Sustainability: Theory, Practice, and Product, Design and the Built Environment* (Ashgate, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> Jingxian Tang and Ying Long, "Measuring Visual Quality of Street Space and Its Temporal Variation: Methodology and Its Application in the Hutong Area in Beijing", *Landscape and Urban Planning* 191 (November 2019): 1034-36, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2018.09.015>.

<sup>29</sup> Li Weng, 北京的胡同 [*Hutongs of Beijing*] (北京: 北京美术摄影出版社, 1993).



Relics” (国务院关于发布文物保护管理暂行条例的通知, *Guówùyuàn Guānyú Fābù Wénwù Bǎohù Guǎnlǐ Zàn xíng Tiáoli de Tōngzhī*), was approved by the State Council at the 105th plenary meeting of the State Council on November 17, 1960, and promulgated on March 4, 1961 designated as one major historical and cultural site in China, protected at the national level. Looking at the genesis of the neighborhood, it was during the Yuan dynasty, in conjunction with the construction of the White Pagoda Temple, that two principal alleyways were laid out parallel to Fuchengmen Road (阜成门大街, *Fùchéngmén Dàjiē*). The introduction of transverse alleyways during the Ming dynasty consolidated this framework, producing a dense and interwoven street network around the temple. During the Qing dynasty, additional minor lanes were incorporated, resulting in an urban fabric that corresponds closely to the street pattern still legible in the neighborhood today<sup>30</sup>. It is from the Qing period that the most detailed cartographic representations of the district originate, providing a crucial record of its pre-modern spatial configuration and attesting to the layered process of urban stratification over successive dynasties. Indeed, the “Qianlong Jingcheng Quantu” (乾隆京城全圖, *Qiánlóng Jīngchéng Quántú*) constitutes the most comprehensive graphic representation of imperial Beijing. This atlas, translated as the “Complete Map of the Capital under the Qianlong Emperor”, dates back to 1750 and nowadays is commonly referred to, as the Qianlong Map. The work comprises fifty-one volumes, each meticulously depicting the city’s dwellings, monuments, temples, and administrative buildings. By extracting information from volumes V and VI, it is possible to reconstruct the urban configuration of the area surrounding the White Pagoda Temple<sup>31</sup> at the time. The urban morphology of the Baitasi area is clearly legible in the Qianlong Map. On the western side, the map depicts the city walls running along the perimeter of the area, as well as the city gate at the west side of Fuchengmen Street, which was demolished in 1960. In the present day, the former city walls have been replaced by a major transportation infrastructure, with the Second Ring Road dividing Fuchengmen Inner Street from Fuchengmen Outer Street. The eastern boundary of the neighborhood is mainly interesting: the street now identified as Zhaodengyu Road, which currently runs tangentially along this edge, originally accommodated a small river, intersected at regular intervals by numerous bridges.

Today, the Baitasi area forms a distinct enclave within a markedly altered urban fabric. The area is situated in the Fusijing area (阜遂井, *Fǔsuì Jǐng*) of Xicheng District (西城区, *Xīchéng Qū*), to the east of the Second Ring Road (二环路, *Èr Huán Lù*) and north of Fuchengmen Inner Street (阜成门内大街, *Fùchéngmén Nèi Dàjiē*). To safeguard the historical and cultural value of the Baitasi district, the Beijing Municipal Government (北京市人民政府, *Běijīng Shì Rénmín Zhèngfǔ*) and the Xicheng District Government (北京市西城区人民政府, *Běijīng Shì Xīchéng Qū Rénmín Zhèngfǔ*) launched preliminary planning initiatives. With municipal support, the Beijing Municipal Planning Commission (北京市规划委员会, *Běijīng Shì Guīhuà Wěiyuánhui*) and the Beijing Institute of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (中国科学院北京分院, *Zhōngguó Kēxuéyuàn Běijīng Fēnyuàn*) prepared the Protection Plan for the 25 Historic and Cultural Preservation Districts of Beijing (Fuchengmen Inner Street) (北京25片历史文化

<sup>30</sup> Design Hop – BaiTaSi ReMade. Call for Projects. A Brand New Core Area 设计之旅 – 白塔寺再生计划. 新项目开始公开征集 (2015), unpublished report.

<sup>31</sup> “乾隆京城全图.” Nii “Digital Silk Road” / Toyo Bunko. doi:10.20676/00000211. Map available for consultation at: <https://dsr.nii.ac.jp/toyobunko/11-11-D-802/V-1/page/0001.html>.en (accessed December 16, 2025).



## 7.5

Outdoor living room. Hutong interiors: outdoor spaces lived as an extension of indoor ones. Baitasi area, Beijing. Picture author: Lidia Preti. 2017.

保护区保护规划 阜成门内大街, *Běijīng 25 Piàn Lishǐ Wénhuà Bǎohùqū Bǎohù Guīhuà Fúchéngmén Nèi Dàjiē*), formally approved in 2002<sup>32</sup>. In 2002, the Baita Temple area was officially designated as one of the 25 historical and cultural preservation zones within Beijing's Old City, covering an approximate area of 0.37 square kilometers.

When compared to the surrounding urban environment, the dense, low-rise morphology of Baitasi emerges as a distinctive element within the broader cityscape. With only a few exceptions, the area is characterized predominantly by buildings of one or two stories. In contrast, the neighboring compounds, particularly those across Fuchengmen Road, have undergone consistent transformations over the last century. A close analysis of the morphology of Baitasi neighborhood reveals that modifications to the courtyard and hutong system, resulting from the densification processes discussed above, continue to exert socio-spatial effects within the area. The original system of courtyard houses now coexists with layers of informal additions constructed over the past fifty years, which have transformed the original structure and the use of indoor and outdoor spaces. Although the formal typology and, in most cases, the original building heights were largely preserved, these informal additions progressively stratified dwelling space, a feature that continues to shape the neighborhood's spatial organization.

### Hutong Interiors: The Use of Outdoor Spaces as Domestic Ones

But the city does not speak its past; it contains it, like the lines of a hand, inscribed in the edges of its streets, in the grids of its windows, in the railings of its staircases, in the lightning rods and flagpoles, every segment itself etched with scratches, notches, carvings, and flourishes.<sup>33</sup>

The configuration of urban space often reflects how its inhabitants adapt and reshape the built environment. When discussing the planning of certain spaces, Henry Shaftoe observes that many convivial environments have developed organically through the incremental accumulation of adaptations and additions, contending that it is often more effective to 'grow' successful places and spaces rather than to impose them through rigid, pre-determined blueprints<sup>34</sup>. In 1999, in *Everyday Urbanism*<sup>35</sup>, Chase, Crawford, and Kaliski articulate a fundamental reorientation of urban theory and practice toward what they define as 'everyday urbanism'. Moving away from large-scale planning paradigms and aesthetically driven architectural interventions, they argue that the daily practices through which urban dwellers improvise, adapt, and informally appropriate space provide the most meaningful lens for interpreting and shaping the urban environment. Describing the informal adaptation of spaces, in 2013, the South Korea-based architectural office *Moto Elastico* conducted the research project *Borrowed City* in Seoul, analyzing the informal appropriation of public spaces by individuals as a paradigmatic example of an Asian metropolis in which public areas are intermittently repurposed for personal use. The term 'Borrowed City' denotes this temporary privatization, highlighting the adaptive, negotiated,

<sup>32</sup> Tsinghua University School of Architecture, Tsinghua University Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies, and Beijing Institute of Architectural Design, Summary Report on the Current Situation Analysis for the Protection, Renovation, and Revitalization Planning of the Baitasi Area (Draft, First Edition) (April 2010). 清华大学建筑学院, 清华大学建筑与城市研究所, 北京市建筑设计研究院, 《北京市白塔寺地区保护、整治、复兴规划设计现状调研分析汇总报告 (讨论稿 第一版)》, 2010年4月. (Original document in Chinese).

<sup>33</sup> Italo Calvino, *Le città invisibili* (Einaudi, 1972), 4. Translated by the author. Original text: «Ma la città non dice il suo passato, lo contiene come le linee d'una mano, scritto negli spigoli delle vie, nelle griglie delle finestre, negli scorrimano delle scale, nelle antenne dei parafulmini, nelle aste delle bandiere, ogni segmento rigato a sua volta di graffi, seghettature, intagli, svirgole».

<sup>34</sup> Henry Shaftoe, *Convivial Urban Spaces: Creating Effective Public Places*, reprint (Earthscan, 2009).

<sup>35</sup> John Chase, Margaret Crawford, and John Kaliski, eds., *Everyday Urbanism* (Monacelli Press, 1999).

and contingent character of the described urban spatial practices. Certain spaces, although formally designated as public, serve as platforms for diverse activities, and the duration and intensity of individual use can generate new interactions and emergent centres of gravity within communities occupying the same area. Through the appropriation of these spaces, social interactions are continuously redefined, reshaping the dynamics of the urban environment. This phenomenon, conceptualized by the authors as 'Metropolitan Interior', refers to the treatment of public streets analogously to the rooms of a dwelling, customized to accommodate personal comfort and functional needs<sup>36</sup>.

Shifting attention to another Asian metropolis, such as Beijing, the concept of 'borrowing the space' appears to occur in the hybrid use of hutong spaces by inhabitants, where the distinction between indoor and outdoor environments becomes increasingly blurred. The spatial transformation of residential compounds is shaped by residents' activities, including their movements and interactions within the space. These practices highlight the phenomenon of autonomous modifications to residential blocks and landscapes, as well as their significant impact on spatial change. Building the observation on a concept originally articulated in non-Asian contexts, Bianchetti's notion of 'urban interiors' provides a useful lens for interpreting the informal use of public spaces in Beijing, where similarly flexible and adaptive dynamics occur. 'Urban interiors' are understood as heterogeneous, porous, and fragmentary spaces lived as interiors neither formally private nor fully shared by all; they emerge from the density and specificity of relations and uses among inhabitants, acquiring an elasticity that allows them to expand or contract according to everyday practices<sup>37</sup>. Space emerges through the practices enacted within it: a street, while formally delineated by urban planning, becomes a lived environment through the patterns of movement and interaction of its users<sup>38</sup>. The street, therefore, constitutes far more than a mere conduit for circulation; it operates as a socio-economic and cultural arena whose multiple functions are fundamental to the collective life of the city. Streets structure the spatial and social *proximités* that sustain urban sociability, shaping the conditions under which public life unfolds and enabling forms of collective experience that extend well beyond their role as channels of movement<sup>39</sup>.

Over time, Beijing's remaining hutongs areas have experienced significant transformations in their residential compounds. By adaptively using outdoor spaces – layering inner courtyards or partially using the lanes between buildings – residents accommodate daily life needs and reshape patterns of urban activity within the neighborhood. These adaptations encourage group gatherings and strengthen social relationships, fostering a strong sense of community cohesion and vitality among the residents. Against this background, building on the concepts of 'borrowed space' and 'metropolitan interior' derived from studies of spatial practices in Seoul, and informed by observations of activity within hutong spaces, this study introduces the term 'hutong interiors' to describe these dynamics observed in the area. The term does not imply any specific cultural significance or reference to interior design practices; rather, it is proposed to describe the use of spaces originally designed as outdoor areas, which are experienced as

<sup>36</sup> Marco Bruno, Simone Carena, and Minji Kim, *Borrowed City: Motoelastico* (Damdi, 2013).

<sup>37</sup> Cristina Bianchetti, *Spazi che contano. Il progetto urbanistico in epoca neo-liberale* (Donzelli Editore, 2016).

<sup>38</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (University of California Press, 1988).

<sup>39</sup> UN-Habitat, *Streets as Public Spaces and Drivers of Urban Prosperity* (United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2013), ISBN 978-92-1-132590-4.



extensions of indoor space, where daily practices are enacted and continuously reconfigured. Although indoor and outdoor spaces in the urban environment have traditionally been mostly conceived as distinct entities, the conventional dichotomy proves increasingly insufficient to capture the complexity of urban spatial configurations, as closer analysis reveals that the distinction between inside and outside is rarely as clear-cut as commonly assumed<sup>40</sup>. The traditional distinction between indoor and outdoor spaces within the hutong system has become increasingly blurred, rendering the boundary between the two no longer clearly discernible. Urban places, such as those of the hutong, originally conceived as transitional or intermediary spaces, are frequently used as extensions of the private and domestic sphere to accommodate the community's evolving needs. Resident informally generate new loci of sociability: small plazas emerging at road crossings, in the interstices between walls, along narrow passageways, or even on the thresholds and stairways of dwellings, thus reconstituting the urban fabric through everyday practices. Margaret Crawford, in her studies of American cities, describes these seemingly ordinary, marginal, and often overlooked urban spaces – such as vacant lots, sidewalks, front yards, parks, parking areas, and other residual sites – as junctures between private, commercial, and domestic realms, which acquire meaning through everyday practices and improvised uses, challenging conventional distinctions and inviting continual reinterpretation by their users<sup>41</sup>.

The concept of 'hutong interiors' unsettles the conventional distinction between indoor and outdoor realms by highlighting and describing places that blur these boundaries and foreground a 'space in between'. In this sense, the oxymoronic juxtaposition of the term hutong, commonly associated with the street and thus the outdoor dimension of the city, with that of 'interiors', evoking the innermost sphere of space, highlights the tendency to inhabit external environments as extensions of domestic interiors. Outdoor spaces between buildings are reshaped by emergent practices, with the use of these areas as extensions of private domains manifesting in both transient, ephemeral forms of communal life and more structured, enduring interventions that challenge their original spatial archetype. Historical visual documentation from the late 1990s, as the photographic reportages by Shen Yantai and Wang Changqing<sup>42</sup> of Beijing's hutongs, foregrounds the inhabitants and highlights patterns of outdoor living similar to those observed nearly two decades later. The images depict "outdoor living rooms" within the alleys, where residents gather, elderly individuals play mahjong on low stools in street corners, and public space is actively appropriated for a range of everyday practices. These forms of spatial use resonate with the Mediterranean tradition of inhabiting streets and public spaces, as documented, for instance, in Hope Herman Wurmfeld's photographic collection *Italy 1964*. In both contexts, streets and public areas function not merely as circulation routes but as extensions of domestic and communal life, accommodating activities that include informal commerce, barbers' shops, cooking, dining, socializing, and children's play, thereby illustrating the centrality of everyday practices in shaping the social and spatial life of neighborhoods.

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<sup>40</sup> Christian Kray, Holger Fritze, Thore Fechner, Angela Schwering, Rui Li, and Vanessa Joy Anacta, "Transitional Spaces: Between Indoor and Outdoor Spaces", in *Spatial Information Theory. COSIT 2013*, ed. T. Tenbrink, J. Stell, A. Galton, and Z. Wood, *Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, vol. 8116 (Springer, 2013), [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-01790-7\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-01790-7_2).

<sup>41</sup> Margaret Crawford, "Blurring the Boundaries: Public Space and Private Life", in *Everyday Urbanism*, ed. John Chase, Margaret Crawford, and John Kaliski (Monacelli Press, 1999), 22-35.

<sup>42</sup> Shen, Changqing, *Life in Hutongs: Through Intricate Alleyways in Beijing*.



## 7.6

Temporary installation for the Beijing Design Week, 2017. Courtyard n.56. "Hutong playground" project, Politecnico di Torino and EPFL of Lausanne. Picture author: Lidia Preti. 2017.

## 7.7

Temporary installation for the Beijing Design Week, 2017. Courtyard n.56. "Hutong playground" project, Politecnico di Torino and EPFL of Lausanne. Picture author: Lidia Preti. 2017.

### Transformation Scenarios in Practice: The Beijing Design Week in Baitasi

Historic hutong fabrics reveal a latent capacity to accommodate contemporary spatial practices, functioning as adaptive frameworks emerging from everyday modes of inhabitation. In this context, programmed urban regeneration initiatives—such as the Beijing Design Week, hosted over multiple editions in the Baitasi area—have played a role in accompanying these transformations through small, incremental architectural interventions in the neighborhood. Indeed, after three decades of rapid urban growth in Beijing, attention has recently returned to the old city. Renewal and redevelopment processes have become central to architectural and planning debates that extend beyond physical change of the spaces, to encompass social and cultural dimensions. In contrast to mostly commercial redevelopment projects that have transformed other hutong districts of Beijing, since 2015, Baitasi area has become the site of two distinct yet complementary trajectories of urban regeneration. The first foresees more permanent architectural interventions by renowned architectural offices, such as DnA Architecture and Design, Standardarchitecture, TAO Office, dot Architects, Vector Architects, People's Architecture Office (PAO), URBANUS, to name a few, whose projects reframe the historic fabric through contemporary design strategies and innovative transformation and reuse of existing courtyards. The second trajectory has developed through the area's involvement in the Beijing Design Week, which was hosted in Baitasi for the first time in 2015. The Beijing Design Week is an annual urban renewal initiative that, through 'soft' design strategies, places design thinking, cultural production, and community participation at its core. The Beijing Design Week offered an ideal platform for the architectural and design community to develop solutions within the city's historic urban areas, bringing together professionals from diverse backgrounds to reflect on contemporary urban challenges and propose interventions addressing specific issues identified in the neighborhood, overcoming the limitations of the built environment in the area. In this perspective, a series of thematic programs has been developed over the years: *Baitasi Remade: Connection and Coexistence* (2015), *Baitasi Remade: The Future of Sharing vs. Urban Making* (2016), *Baitasi Remade: Towards New Neighborhoods* (2017), and *Baitasi Remade: Warming Initiatives* (2018 and 2019), all aimed at foregrounding 'soft' processes of change, in contrast to the more conventional commercial redevelopment strategies that affected other historic districts of the city<sup>43</sup>. Interventions aimed at improving residents' quality of life thus also function as mechanisms for urban revitalization, attracting visitors while simultaneously responding to local needs.

In this context, the 2017 edition of the Beijing Design Week held in Baitasi, *Towards New Neighborhoods: Baitasi Remade 2017*, solicited design proposals for both courtyards and public spaces in the hutongs, pursuing a dual agenda of spatial rejuvenation and enhancement of residents' everyday experience. Thirty-five selected temporary projects were strategically integrated into the existing urban fabric through an 'archi-puncture' approach, employing small-scale, context-sensitive interventions that preserved the historic character of the area while supporting its adaptive potential. Traversing the alleys of the neighborhood in September 2017, the

<sup>43</sup> Lidia Preti, "Pechino: così la Design Week cambia, in modo soft, il volto degli hutong", *Il Giornale dell'Architettura*, 21 November 2019, ISSN 2284-1369, <https://ilgiornaledellarchitettura.com/2019/11/21/pechino-cosi-la-design-week-cambia-in-modo-soft-il-volto-degli-hutong/> (accessed December 16, 2025).

vibrancy and dynamism of the area were perceptible, reflecting the active engagement of both residents and visitors with the ongoing interventions. These interventions not only materialized new forms of communal engagement but also extended the so-called concept of 'hutong interiors' explored in this study, blurring the boundaries between spaces. They reinforced the capacity of urban space to accommodate evolving social practices, ultimately enhancing both the neighborhood's cultural vibrancy and the lived experience of its inhabitants. Among these interventions, the project *Maximise the Minimum*<sup>44</sup>, started in 2016 and finalized for the Beijing Design Week in 2017, received the Holcim Foundation Awards Acknowledgement for Asia Pacific, standing out as a significant contribution to the regeneration of the Baitasi historic neighborhood. The project explored minimal dwelling dimensions and reconsiders domestic space in response to broader societal transformations, proposing a reinterpretation of the shared elements situated within the courtyard, which in turn operates as a mediating threshold between the neighborhood system and the internal microcosm<sup>45</sup>.

The opportunities generated by the Beijing Design Week over the years have acted as a urban revitalization catalyst within a consolidated and highly densified historic fabric, such as that of the hutongs, fostering new practices that have revitalized spaces and initiated transformations of increasing permanence and significance. Nearly a decade after the neighborhood's initial involvement in these initiatives, questions remain regarding their actual outcomes, the extent and modalities through which the market has capitalized on them, and what the effects are on the local communities still inhabiting the area. Empirical observations conducted in 2023 revealed that while certain interventions have consolidated into more permanent forms of spatial and social reconfiguration, others remain ephemeral, raising questions about the long-term effect of these initiatives and the extent to which they shape the neighborhood.

<sup>44</sup> Project authors: Shimeng Hao (Beijing University of Civil Engineering & Architecture (BUCEA), School of Architecture & Urban Planning, Beijing, China); Yu Wang, Zhang Yue, Peiming Li, Cong Nie, Mengxing Cao, Liying Wu, Yang Zhang, Qingchun Li (Tsinghua University, School of Architecture, Beijing, China).

<sup>45</sup> Silvia Lanteri and Marta Mancini, "Cronache cinesi. Così cambiano volto gli hutong di Pechino", *Il Giornale dell'Architettura*, 18 March 2019, ISSN 2284-1369, <https://ilgiornale-dellarchitettura.com/2019/03/18/cronache-cinesi-cosi-cambiano-volto-gli-hutong-di-pecchino/> (accessed December 16, 2025).