

## **Reweaving the fabric:**

### **The study of the socio-spatial relationships in the inner city residential areas of Beijing, People's Republic of China**

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#### **Abstract**

Throughout history, Beijing's urban fabric has accommodated a rich variety of social conditions and neighborhood life within a cohesive and legible overall structure. The street patterns in the traditional residential areas are crucial to the social life of the neighborhoods there. The current practice of clean sweeping of the traditional neighborhoods, and plugging in large-scale modern housing estates, especially those gated communities are dramatically altering the spatial continuity of the environment. They are also having a damaging effect on the long-standing social fabric in the historical residential areas.

Today, the co-existence of both old and new urban typologies in Beijing represents a unique opportunity to study the relations between different spatial organizations and their social functions. This paper will focus on the public open spaces, especially the changing street systems and the way in which these changes affect the socio-cultural values of the residents and their behaviour patterns.

Beijing as a city has a history of more than 3,000 years and had functioned as capital for more than 800 years. Currently there are more than 1.75 million people living in the residential areas of old Beijing (about 40 square kilometers). One of the most essential elements of Beijing's environmental character is the way the city is built up of neighborhoods that have gradually been incorporated into the metropolitan agglomeration without losing their original scale and spatial identity. In Beijing's Old City, the traditional layout of "hutong" (alleys, lanes) and "siheyuan" (courtyard houses) allows a diverse population to live in close proximity. Local residents actively use this web of streets as a type of community living room. These neighborhoods have an enduring power to attract and a tendency to inspire new interpretations of their value in each generation. This paper explored the relationship between the morphological structures of the built environment and aspects of the social networks of the residents.

Rapid urbanization in China is demanding new strategies and new tools for both development and urban renewal. The central theme of this paper is that the unique street system of the traditional neighborhoods in Beijing plays an important role in supporting and strengthening social functions of the neighborhoods. It is an integral part of the dynamic and changing organism of the city. The current careless mass reconstruction in the inner city, some even under the name of preservation, is

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damaging both spatial and social fabrics of the old capital. The paper proposes that healthy urban fabrics are always in the process of change. It calls for a more integral approach for future urban renewal practices, which is aimed at preserving and regenerating the spatial links- regardless of whether they are new or traditional.

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