

Observations from the Dashilar Project
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Developing In the Urban Scale [The Role of the Architect]

Though parcels for development in China have transcended into the urban scale, large projects are sold in the same fashion as singular pieces of architecture. Glossy renderings from a bird's eye view of finite, fixed objects are used to represent the project. As in any investment, the client would like to fully understand the "product" before they put down the money, but when this "product" is the future city, it is impossible to foresee the outcome with accuracy. So why do we continue under the pretext that architects can deliver what they draw on an urban scale?

Cities are living organism. While architects can decide what to subtract and what to add, architects cannot control how the citizens will interact and contribute to their built environment. As the scale of the project increases and more parties are involved in it's production, the designer naturally will lose control of the final output. If this uncertainty can be accepted by both the architect and the client, attention can be turned to actions which can be controlled: an approach, a methodology to change, a strategy which will react to the city in real time.

Like the city, urban projects can be alive, developing and responding to it's constantly changing environment. The shift in the approach for urban development requires also a change in the relationship between the architect and the developer. It will require an entangled involvement of the architect and the site as well of the architect with the developer. The interwoven networks within the existing community along with outside organizations of academic, commercial, or creative nature become key resources as the project comes alive.

The effects of the soft approach will be ambiguous. Unlike the obvious results of an architectural drawing, curation, facilitation, and strategy are intangible. Change can be visually subtle, and a length of time will be needed for the project to mature. The boundaries of the project will expand and blur. How can the actions of soft urbanism be reconciled with the framework of the real estate development industry in China?

The Nature of Chinese Public Projects [Tendency for the Tabula Rasa]

The rapid change of Modern China's development flourishes within the boundaries of the physical realm. Change to the visible "face" of China is easily understood and can be immediately quantified, therefore urban hardware projects (as opposed to the software of social, economic, or commercial programs) have been the favoured by political leaders. Public projects must be carefully planned to be in step with the political lifecycles. In order to execute the project within the time frame of their current posts, political leaders prefer the tabula rasa condition as it is an "easier" and quicker context in which to affect dramatic change.

When the tabula rasa condition cannot be achieved because of complicated landownership issues, a superficial "beautification" strategy is put in place to maximize the appearance of change. Surface level construction such as pavement, façade, and landscaping are employed. Facades of properties along the targeted street purchased by government development corporations along with private properties will be incorporated in the wholesale face-lift project, giving the neighborhood a unified, "finished" look.

Assessments of public projects are confined to the insular hierarchy of political leaders rather than experts in the field of architecture, urbanism, or sociology. As politicians, the leaders usually prefer conservative styles such as ancient China inspired motifs. Large design institutes, which are also government entities, reinforce these design preferences. The success of public projects is measured by the experience political leaders have with the site which is limited to a guided walkthrough. During this visit there is no conversation with local residents, no testing of local facilities, no way to interact with the site besides in a visual manner. Therefore there has been minimal incentive for public projects to expand beyond the tangible and thus more digestible change.

If public works are to take on the complexity of intangible social problems or hidden infrastructural challenges in historic contexts (such as sewage and gas lines), we must rethink both the criteria of success and the approach to defining project missions. While still operating in the political system, how can we enrich the evaluation framework to incorporate the intricacies of the citizen's experience and the messiness of authenticity? While still following the 5 year political cycle, how can we define missions which engage broad and non-finite social issues?

MEDIATION:
 initiating long term development through
 the focused energy and resources of the
FESTIVAL



claim public space with art

The semi-temporary installation, "Brachina," designed by the Campana Brothers prompted the demolition of construction walls enclosing a void space to create a public place for art and play. Unused space quickly become a parking lot, so the structure of the art piece is necessary to defended the public space from cars.



attract attention to the site

Beijing Design Week 2013 brought in 800,000 visitors, 44 domestic & international participants, 180 accredited media





run programs with FESTIVAL sponsorship



Guang'an and Xicheng lingdaos walk through Yangmeizhu Xiejie.

Since the changes of soft infrastructure can only be understood at street level, the best way for the client to imagine the future of the project is to experience it. Compared to hardware projects, these soft approaches need more time to mature. The street activated by the festival satisfies the expectations of the *lingdao walkthrough** and buys the project some more time.



With all the media attention the FESTIVAL generates, brands are happy to sponsor relevant projects to their product or image. "24 Hours in Dashila" film competition brought young film makers to Dashilar, generating new content about the site. Lomography sponsored cameras, film, and processing for film making. Film post production company, Luma Lu, ran free film making workshops.

showcase the FESTIVAL as a 1-1 scale model of the future

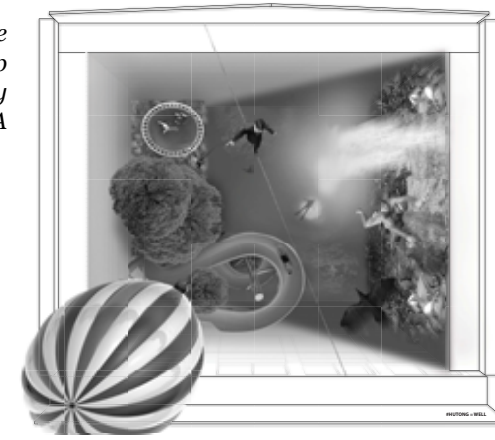


expose the client to new ideas through forums and discussions



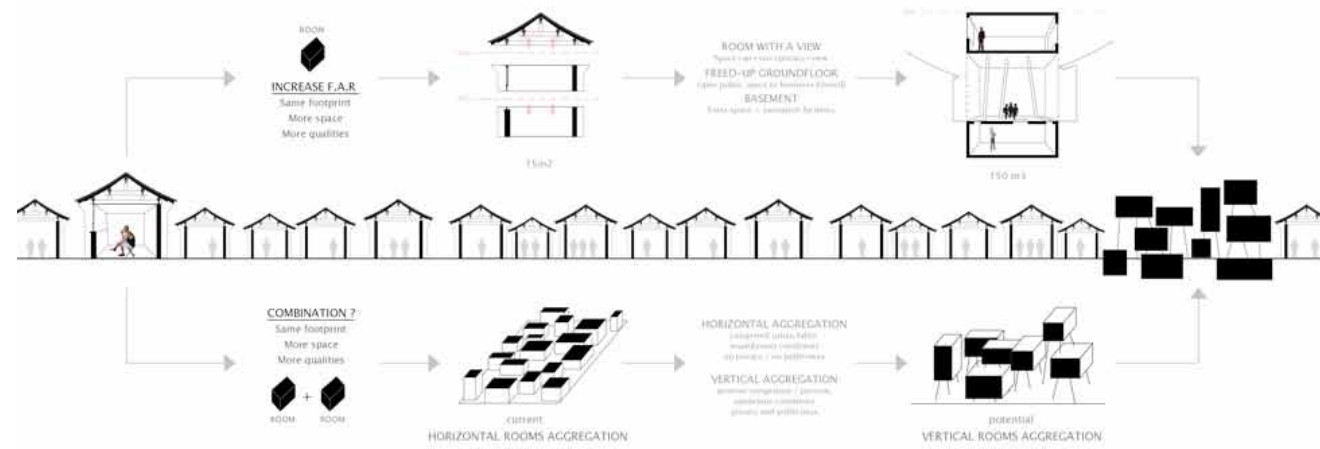
Student workshop ran by (Re)iterate

Charette runner up entry by WAA



generate ideas with workshops and design charettes

Winning charette entry by BaO Architects



Forums and panel discussions are a good opportunity for experts in urban development and architecture to bring their insight in a personal and engaging way to the decision makers of the developer entity. Staff members listening in can also gain a better understanding of the project. Since our approach is drastically different from how the enterprise normally functions, there will need to be a shift in the client's collective conceptualization of development.





MEDIATION: cutting through red tape by using the term “TEMPORARY status”

UBI Gallery for Contemporary Jewelry and Ceramics has been occupying this space as a “pop-up” while it is waiting for the restoration of its permanent location. Contract negotiations and paperwork takes a long time with state-owned entities, so the buffer provided by the temporary status was most helpful in getting the gallery up and running.



Initially, the gallery borrowed plinths and display cases leftover from Design Week.



offer free spaces for pop-up shops during the FESTIVAL to build relationships with future long-term collaborators

Often times, businesses interested in pop-up locations are new shops, just starting out, or internet-based businesses looking to move the business into a physical shop. A positive experience with the site could attract these businesses to stay on a long-term basis.



initially label shops as “pop-up” or TEMPORARY allows business to get started while still waiting on the long and arduous paperwork process for the long -term contract

SUPPORT: tying things together as a nexus of information for all collaborators involved



host events to gather
collaborators for
exchange of ideas
and strengthening of
community



curate special events to strength
collaborators' relationship with the site



Holding regular get-togethers keeps the community active. Friends bringing friends builds the network and spreads awareness of the project.



Highlighting Dashilar's charm by rickshaw and by foot, a carefully curated tour brought collaborators on a series of encounters... stories of the site's red light district past, a rare look inside the neighborhood mosque, an underground Christian art installation, film projection in an old garment factory, Mr. Zhang's racing pigeons...

Development of Historic Sites in China [Authenticity and the Contrived Narrative]

When the municipal government directs its attention and funding to historically significant areas, development efforts are usually geared to capitalizing on the tourism industry. The “historic” pedestrian commercial walkways have become a staple strategy for Chinese cities to boost the local economy via local tourism.

Abruptly disrupting the historic narrative of the area, the development displaces local businesses and residents either by buying or pricing them out. Common to new developments around the world, tenants of the new spaces are local and international chains: Starbucks, KFC, along with established domestic chains. These public projects tend to be linear with clearly defined boundaries. Visible development will appear only along the designated walkway while adjoining lanes are not upgraded and are even visually obstructed to minimize the impact of its poor conditions to visitors.

As backpacking or independent travelling is still a fledgling concept amongst Chinese tourists, the tourism industry is insular. Media and marketing influences have constructed preconceptions for visitors prior to arrival. Tourist zones are demarcated by tour guides and tourist services whose profits are based on upholding the prescribed narrative. History and historic sites are de-constructed, sanitized, and reconstructed as a simplified facade of the past in line with the approved national narrative. Elements, which are incongruous with the narrative set forth, are removed to be replaced by pastiche. The “historic” motifs used on these new buildings have little relevance to what had previously existed on-site, however its presence is an ostentatious reassurance of the area’s historical significance. Meanwhile, for those who are aware of the pastiche, truly historical elements are easily confused to be new, losing the impact of their historical value.

In a development climate where “historic preservation” is deeply intertwined with commercialism and the tourism economy, there must be careful consideration of how the interaction with these resources can revitalize an area, rather than jeopardize its very integrity. How can we breakdown the barriers of the insular tourism economy and empower the independent explorers? How can we shift consumer tendencies to recognize and value local products and experiences? How can we tell the story of a continuous narrative in real time, rather than only in the past tense?

Intervening in China's Commercial Ecology [The Local Economy and Its Creativity]

Wholesale urban development projects bring sweeping changes to the commercial ecology of the area. The clean, conventional commercial spaces available are conditions catering to international and domestic chains, which can afford the higher rental rates. Adjacent to these developments, local and informal businesses teem in the undeveloped areas selling low cost souvenirs and food. For the most part, these souvenirs have very little to do with the site itself, either in its production or in its cultural association.

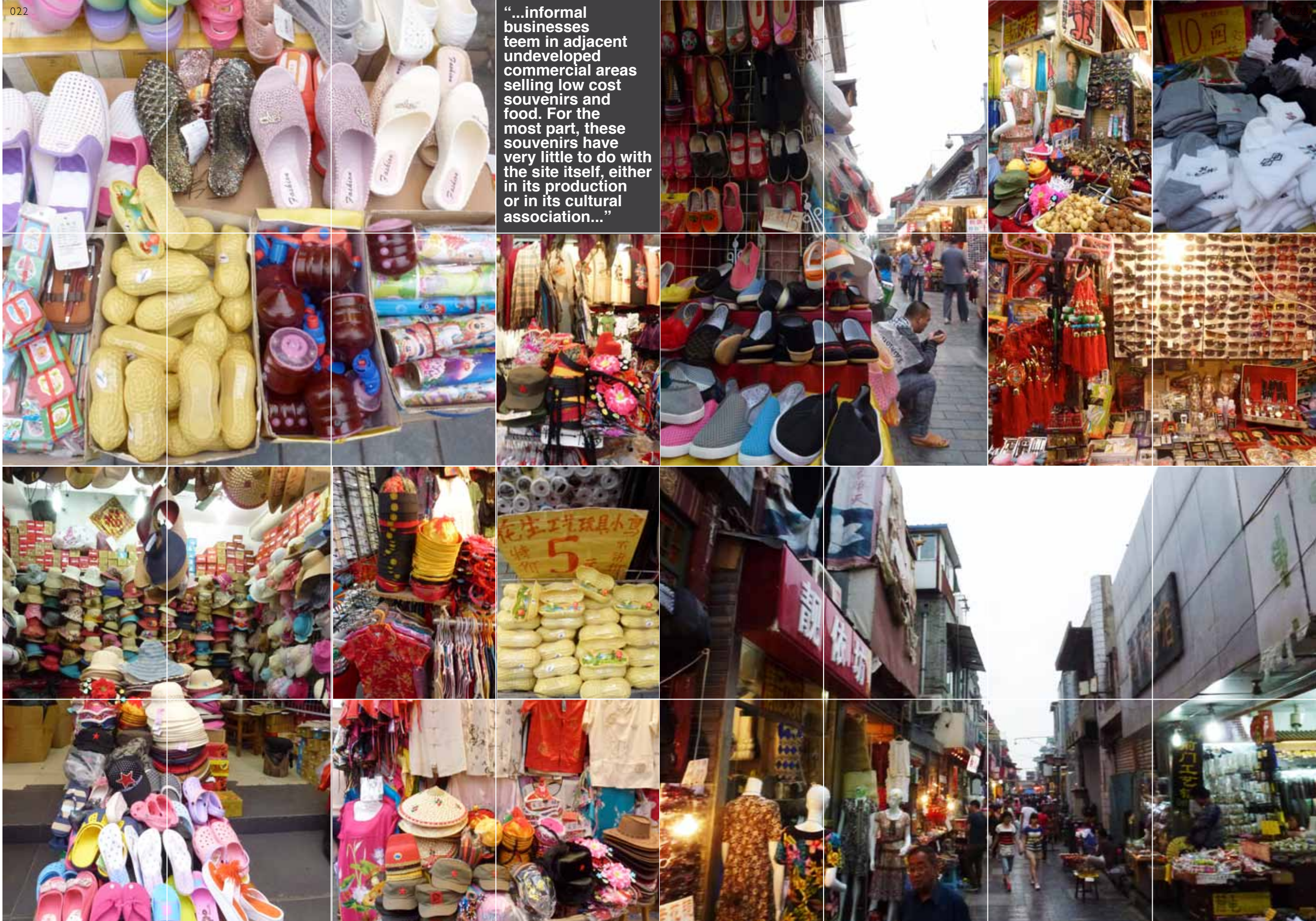
“Beautified” commercial streets have mixed commercial characteristics. Beyond landscaping, paving, and façade construction, the government entities that direct these types of projects will acquire as much property as they can along these streets. As landlords, the government developer will select other government entities, or friends of government leaders, lingdaos, to become tenants, bringing conservative and unoriginal businesses along the street. Some successful local businesses with unique products manage to survive the post-facelift rent increase. Others are replaced with shops hawking cheap products ubiquitous to other commercial streets. The short lifecycles of these non-local, low-end, low profit margin shops are detrimental to the commercial health of the area.

While there is no shortage of commercial activity in China, growth has mainly come from the expansion of businesses, where products and business models are copied and repeated. Development and progress in the commercial sector requires innovation and distinction that come from a cultivated knowledge pool tied to its context. The Cultural Revolution's interruption of the traditional transmission of craft and trades skills, and the physical displacement of commercial centers because of new real estate development has caused disruptions in China's commercial cultural progress in recent history.

The title of “Time Honored Brand” (laozihao), given to selected historic specialty shops representative of Chinese culture, is a top-down attempt to reconcile these gaps. The Xicheng municipal government in Beijing has chosen to use this label as their channel of support for Chinese commercial heritage. In the “Directive To Protect and Support Time-honored Brands in Xicheng District of Beijing,” 北京市西城区人民政府《关于保护和支持老字号的意见》 issued in December 2011, laozihao shops receive government support in forms of rent subsidies, city planning policies, business management consultancy, financial mechanisms, and state-ran media outlets. With this support, shops have experienced financial growth, however the quality of the products, which was the basis of the shop's reputation, has greatly suffered. The government sanctioned business model to utilize modern production methods to increase production volume and the focus on “tourism products” has taken these shops away from their history of 前店后厂 (qiandian houchang), onsite handcraft atelier and shop and a heritage of quality products. For the sake of the tourism industry and local branding, the directive has stipulated the collection of 50 laozihao shops along one themed commercial pedestrian walkway (in the case of Dashilar, only # existed in its history). Planning policy has also stipulated that the buildings which house the laozihao must be decorated with faux historic motifs. Instead of promoting the progression of Chinese design, the program is reducing heritage to commodified kitsch.

In any case of urban development, there will be a shift in the local commercial ecology. How can the resources and energy of new development be invested to promote businesses that can contribute to the neighborhood's sense of identity (i.e. local business, innovative businesses, businesses of cultural value, businesses to serve the community)? Instead of rigid top down definition of heritage, how can facilitation and partnership foster a sustainable innovative community?

“...informal businesses teem in adjacent undeveloped commercial areas selling low cost souvenirs and food. For the most part, these souvenirs have very little to do with the site itself, either in its production or in its cultural association...”





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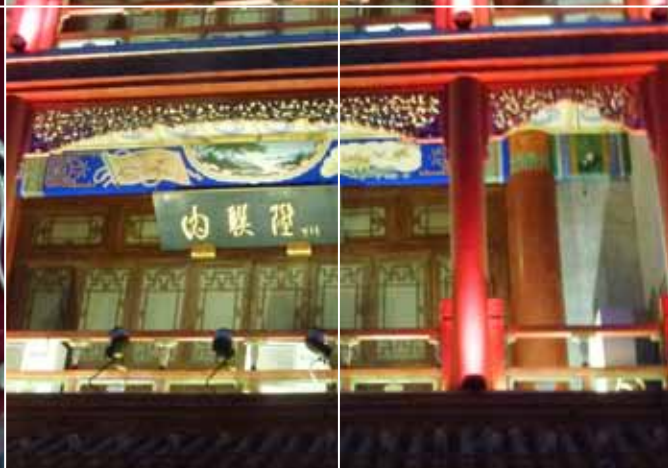
前店后厂 *qiandian houchang*, onsite handcraft atelier and shop which create unique products manage to survive the post-facelift rent increase.





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Local businesses for the local community. Yanshou Jie, market street

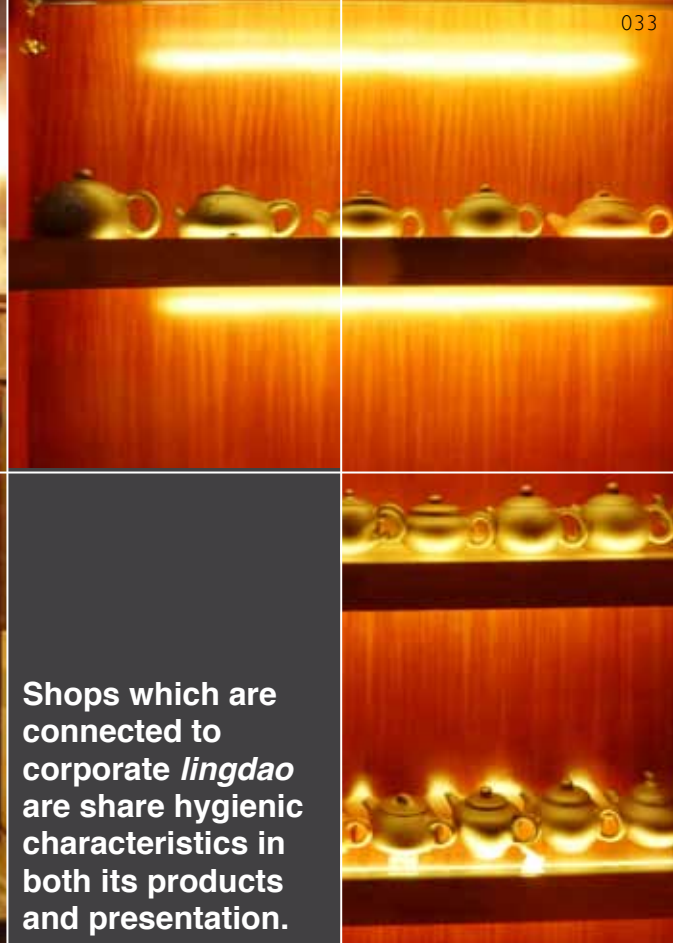


Laozihao shops, "Time-Honored Brands" with stipulated faux historic motifs. Statues outside of the shops are a popular photo op for tourists.



"Beautified" historic commercial street, Liulichang DongJie





Shops which are connected to corporate *lingdao* are share hygienic characteristics in both its products and presentation.



Shopkeepers who are also the landlord have less financial pressure. The shop is considered a pastime, and carries a lot of the shopkeeper's personality.



Community Input [Participation in Communist China]

In the PRC's authoritarian political climate, an individual's role in civic life is prescribed from the top down. Information and services are dispersed through a network of neighbourhood committees (juweihui), which are located in every neighborhood. Volunteers and other active community members pass on the information to every household through friendly informal interactions. The network of juweihui are an effective and efficient top-down method, but it has no capability to work bottom-up by gathering suggestions or organizing citizens to initiate community wide projects.

The juweihui networks are particularly active within historic areas where the urban fabric is more complex because of its prevalence of informal built form and its legacy of property re-distribution from the Cultural Revolution. In Beijing, courtyard homes were seized from landowning families and divided up into tiny 20 square meter units to be redistributed to other families. The result is a high density of landowners in an underdeveloped area, which lack simple facilities such as private toilets.

Government initiated projects in such areas face the challenging task of coordinating with all the local landowners. State ran developers take control of the site by buying or trading for as much property as they can in the area targeted for development. Landowners who do not wish to relocate can negotiate with the state ran developer to cover a percentage

of costs for complete new construction of their home. Only prominent properties visible at street view have leverage in these negotiations. For those remaining landowners who do not wish to rebuild their homes, the developer will offer a free "upgrade" on their facades lining the targeted street. Landowners can refuse to participate in the project, but only a small minority would reject a chance for their property to be "upgraded" for free. Suggestions for and approval of the façade design of their own property is the only channel of input these individuals have. In street beautification projects, properties not visible from the street are not legible for the "upgrade" but owners can negotiate for sale.

Mandated community review of the development's schematic plan is not an involved event. Response from the residents are reactive (approve or disapprove), rather than generative (suggesting or discussing new ideas). A long elevation drawing on the proposed façade is placed in the neighbourhood committee office for the community to comment. Landowners of properties that are a part of the project comment only on the proposed design of their own home. Though the session is open to all residents, landowners of properties just outside the linear boundaries of the project and renters have nothing to react to. Landowner sign-off for each property's façade designs is the only community response requirement placed on the developer.

Productive community input begins with empowering the citizens. In an undemocratic society, how can individual voices be encouraged and heard in a productive manner? How can communities start to think of themselves as a collective and foster positive social action? Instead of only responding to what will happen in front of their own door, how can residents feel ownership and responsibility to generate improvements in the neighborhood as a whole?

MEDIATION: communicating with the community through activities which embody the spirit of the project



Active, hands-on events are a gentle way to familiarize local residents with the new changes. Project collaborators moving on-site bring with them new elements to the neighborhood. This addition will be better received if the residents have a personal connection, and a better understanding of their new neighbors.



introduce collaborators to the community
through workshops of familiar themes such as
food and crafts

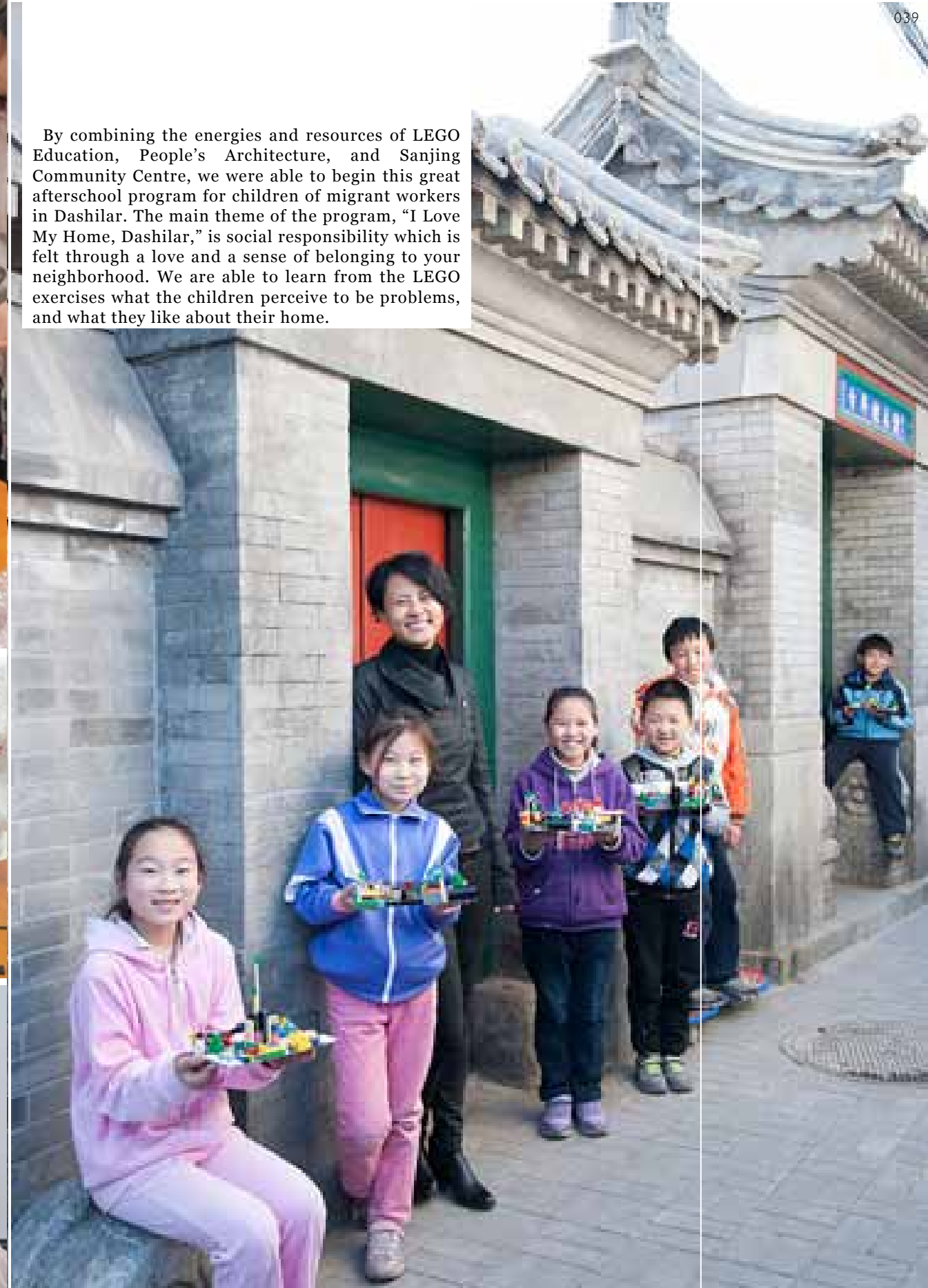
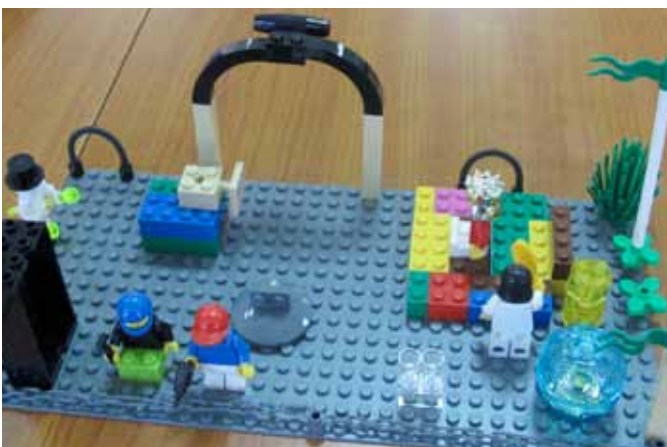
Fromager de Pekin teaches how to make and enjoy cheese. Artisans of Beijing show off how to make amazing *shoubing*. Tang Roulou, children's clothing designer, instruct how to make traditional Chinese knots. Casual Location asks, "What vegetable are you"?





Reach out to the community through children's programs

By combining the energies and resources of LEGO Education, People's Architecture, and Sanjing Community Centre, we were able to begin this great afterschool program for children of migrant workers in Dashilar. The main theme of the program, "I Love My Home, Dashilar," is social responsibility which is felt through a love and a sense of belonging to your neighborhood. We are able to learn from the LEGO exercises what the children perceive to be problems, and what they like about their home.



The Need for Change [Living Conditions of Underdeveloped Hutong Areas]

A culture of top-down control has led to a hyper-individualistic response from landowners in decision making about their own built environments. The prevalent use of 拆迁 (chaiqian) or eminent domain in previous urban renewal projects in historic areas of Beijing has given landowners of similar type of properties great insecurity about their future ownership. Rumours about high compensation rates for evacuating properties in previous chaiqian projects have promoted a passive attitude amongst landowners. Expecting the same types of compensation, landowners are waiting to be bought out and relocated, neglecting property upkeep or investment in their community.

Building add-on's in the semi-public space of the courtyards became acceptable after the Tangshan earthquake initially as an emergency contingency. Residents now use these add-on structures to occupy more space for their own use, but also to increase the amount of square meters of property they can be compensated for if they are bought out by the government. These individual's actions seeking to improve their own living situation often result in the deterioration of not only the communal but also private living environments, often times causing conflicts amongst neighbors.

Living in these courtyards of fragmented ownership is not easy. The close quarters and poor living conditions without private toilets, lead many landowners to relocate to more modern residences if they can afford to do so. The vacated spaces are rented out at low costs mostly to migrant workers. Often times, these already small spaces are divided up into even smaller spaces to accommodate more tenants, exacerbating the already overcrowded situation of the courtyards. Because of the temporary status of their residency, the tenants are not incentivized to invest in improving the property or even caring for its upkeep. Local long-term residents exclude the tenant population from the community because of these lifestyle differences and also the social stigma of being a migrant.

As both physical and social environment continuously deteriorates in these historical and centrally located areas, change must happen. New comers can bring investment and new positive energy to the area if they understand and are inspired by the complicated context. Foreign eyes can bring a new skill set of restoration and innovation. So how would this marriage of old and new come about in a healthy way? Opposed to gentrification where a community is being displaced, how can change stop the exodus of long-term residents? How can change be sustainable without the decline of over commodification?