

# Erasing Old Beijing

## A CONSERVATION TRAGEDY

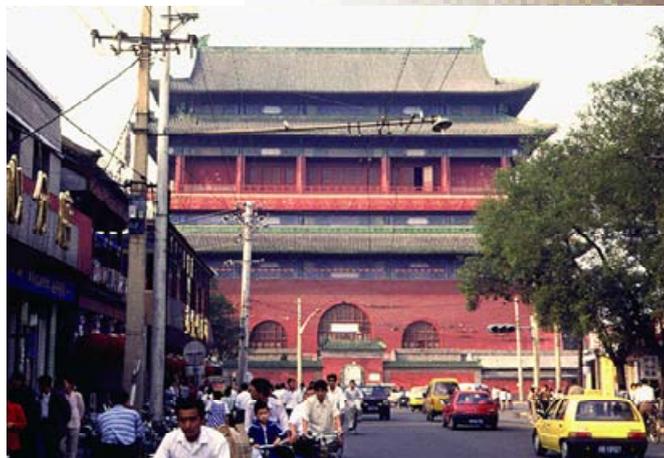
by ANTHONY M. TUNG

**T**he *hutongs* are being bull-dozed!" "The hutongs are being bull-dozed!" Why the hue and cry? What is a *hutong*? And why are these "whatevers" being plowed under? For more than six centuries, the hutongs—the thousands of small lanes and narrow passages lined with courtyard houses and commercial establishments winding their way through Old Beijing—were the silken threads that composed the architectural fabric of the ancient Chinese capital. Now, on the eve of the 2008 Olympics, the city is awash in a sea of construction cranes, and Old Beijing, it seems, is being razed. Arguably, here is the single most tragic loss of urban architectural culture in the 100 years—the denudement of the largest imperial capital in the history of civilization.

Why has it been so difficult to quantify the eradication of Old Beijing? How could such rapid redevelopment proceed seemingly unchecked? There are numerous reasons. First, the hugeness of the historic city, made of a million parts, makes it hard to monitor. And, throughout history, Beijing has largely been a city of walled compounds—much of its splendor hidden from general view. Had there once been something beautiful behind that recently leveled wall? In addition, since the destruction of the old metropolis is self-inflicted by the Chinese authorities, documentation of the deed is meager. Not only is China's governmental decision-making process notably impenetrable, but rarely do urban authorities chronicle their acts of cultural negation. Moreover, for many decades, the preponderance of the once-glorious vernacular cityscape has been cloaked in disrepair, potentially redeemable, but increasingly more dilapidated with each passing year.

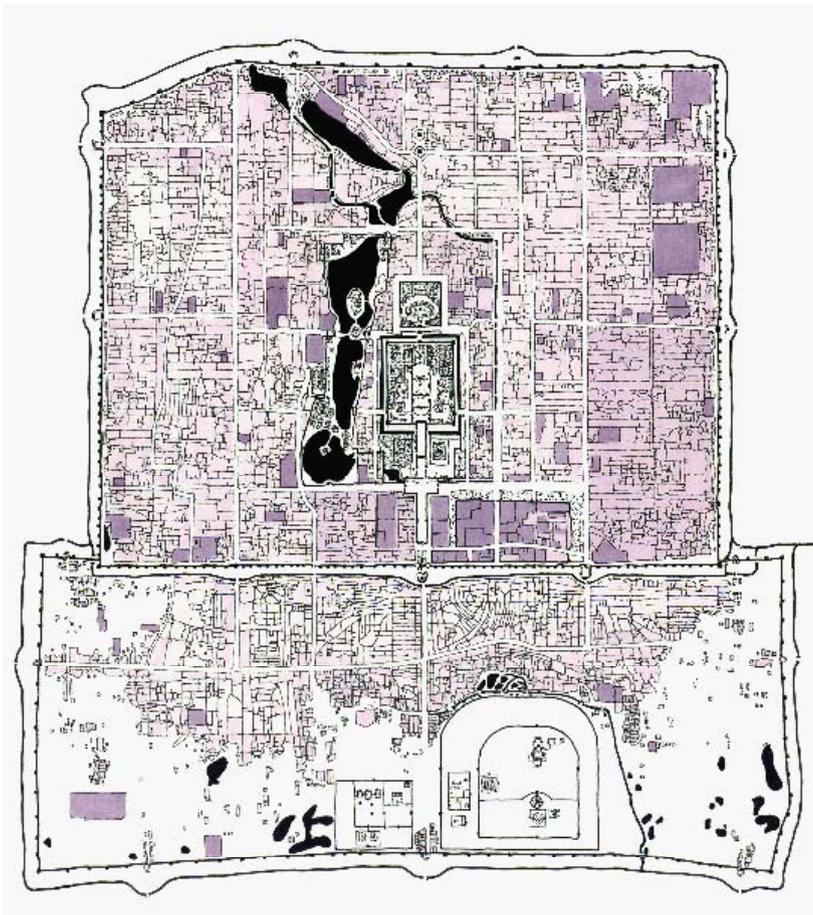
Yet, the unfolding transformation is shocking when comparing the contemporary metropolis with early photographs of the Chinese capital—as in the magnificent photogravure urban portrait by Donald Mennie, *The Pageant of Peking* (Shanghai: A.S. Watson, 1922). There are but 66 images in Mennie's portfolio, created during a narrow window of opportunity just after the Opium Wars and the subsequent opening of China to Western photographers; amid the turbulence surrounding the fall of the Manchu dynasty; and before the Sino-Japanese War, World War II, and the civil war that followed. Mennie's evocative images are replete with towering ramparts, mas-

**IMPERIAL LANDMARKS IN BEIJING ARE PROTECTED BY LAW, BUT PRESERVATION OF THE LOW-SCALE MILIEU THAT SURROUNDS SUCH ARTIFACTS AS THE DRUM TOWER, RIGHT AND FACING PAGE, AS CAPTURED BY DONALD MENNIE IN 1922, IS FAR FROM ASSURED.**



CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANTHONY M. TUNG





sive imperial gateways, teeming broad avenues, serene private gardens, and ornately decorated *pailou*, or memorial arches. This vast, handcrafted cityscape had for the most part survived intact until as recently as 1949, when the Communists assumed authority in China. Today, more than half of these ancient features are gone.

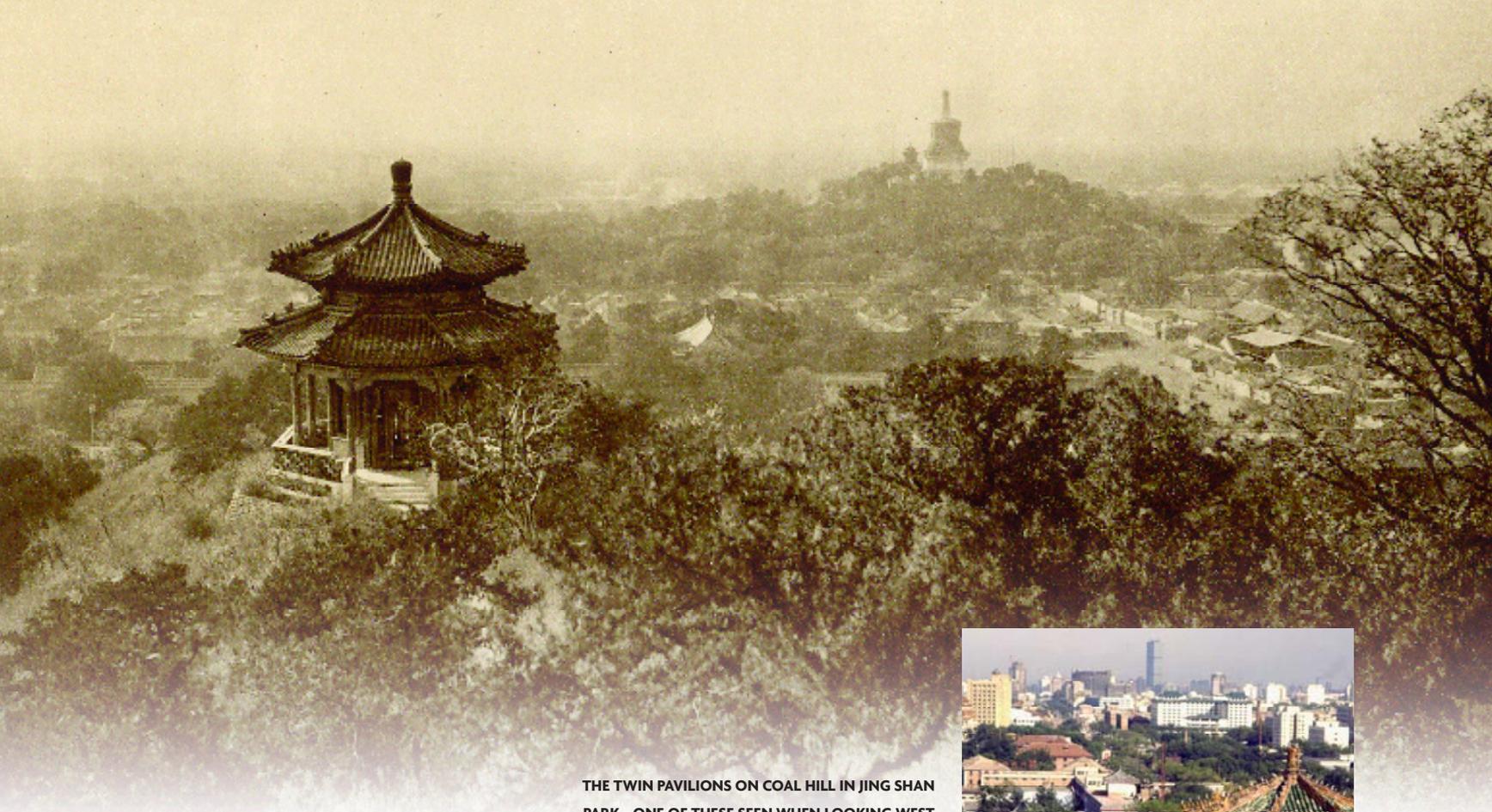
Unlike other large historic cities such as Rome, Vienna, and Paris—which increased both in dimension and the refinement of their layout as the number of inhabitants grew and wealth and power were accrued—Beijing was conceived from the outset as a giant, artistically integrated urban sculpture.

Two circumstances contributed to this phenomenon. First, although the Chinese realm fluctuated in size across its history, the dynasties that utilized Beijing as their administrative center—the Yuan (Mongols), the Ming, and the Qing (Manchurians)—were all able to consolidate large parts of the kingdom and thereby commanded a sufficiency of wealth to maintain a majestic capital on an immense scale. The geographic extent of this realm was, in several eras, greater than that of the Roman or Ottoman Empires at their peaks.

Second, the unique ceremonial significance of the capital city and its many prescribed institutions had already been established by a centuries-old town planning legacy. Hence, in determining the layout of their imperial capital, both the Yuan and the Ming dynasties were guided by such documents as the fifth-to-sixth-century B.C. Confucian classic, the *Zhou Li*, which spelled out in great detail the

A MAP BASED ON A 1930S SURVEY OF BEIJING SHOWS THE IMPERIAL CITY LARGELY INTACT—WITH WALLS, BARBICANS, AND MOATS. MENNIE'S PHOTO OF A TYPICAL COMMERCIAL AVENUE, BELOW, CAPTURES THE THEN-PERSISTENT TEXTURE OF ANCIENT CULTURAL FORMS AND TECHNOLOGY. A PHOTO TAKEN IN 1996, RIGHT, REVEALS THE MARCH OF TIME, INCLUDING THE DESTRUCTION OF THE PAILOU.





**THE TWIN PAVILIONS ON COAL HILL IN JING SHAN PARK—ONE OF THESE SEEN WHEN LOOKING WEST TO THE DISTANT STUPA—REMAIN MUCH AS MENNIE RECORDED. SADLY, TODAY, WHEN LOOKING EASTWARD, THE RISING CONTEMPORARY CITYSCAPE SUBSUMES SUCH ANCIENT LANDMARKS.**



requirements for that place on Earth where the emperor, the “virtuous prince,” exercised the “mandate of heaven,” performing those vital seasonal ceremonies that established harmony with the forces of nature. In practical terms, central bureaucracies located in imperial urban centers also planned large public works such as irrigation systems and canals to aid agricultural production across the far-flung empire. Compliance with these formulas, by definition, resulted in one of the largest and most opulent cities in the world.

Thus, in 1260, Emperor Kublai Khan would create a new capital, called Da Du, in the general location once occupied by several earlier imperial cities. Foreign visitors, such as Marco Polo, described the Yuan metropolis as “so perfect that no account can possibly do justice to its beauty.” Its glories were short-lived. In 1368, much of the city would be destroyed in the fighting that preceded the founding of the Ming dynasty. The Ming capital—called Beiping Fu, and known to us today as Beijing—was equally magnificent. It had a similar plan and was constructed atop the old Mongol city. The following dynasty, the Qing, elaborated and added its own stylistic touches to this basic framework.

The first phase of Beiping Fu, created in the fifteenth century, was a vast rectangular construction with a long central axis that ran north-south, bisecting the settlement and extending into the surrounding suburb, where the Temple of Heaven and Altar of Agriculture were eventually constructed. The length of this spine, passing through the Forbidden City, was somewhat greater than the length of the axial line in modern Paris that runs from La Defense through the Place d’Etoile to the Louvre.

All major roads in Beiping Fu ran either north-south or east-west in a great rectilinear grid of large super-blocks. The rest of the passageways through the settlement, called hutongs, were far narrower and of varying width, but were also predominantly aligned on the north-south, east-west axes. Almost every building in Beijing was rectilinear in plan and one or two stories high, with few tall or multistory constructions. Major residences, monuments, and significant institutions consisted of multiple buildings grouped so that they formed private rectangular courtyards, which were also in alignment with the great grid of the city. Important buildings and complexes generally faced to the south and the blessings of the sun.

Beijing was composed of walls within walls within walls: every residence was enclosed, every temple and institution was surrounded, and the metropolis as a whole was fortified. Only in commercial zones did the fronts of buildings commonly face the street. Penetrating the city’s many blank street walls were gateways, arches, and doorways of all sizes and degrees of elaborateness, each observing a strict architectural hierarchy that signified the social status of the occupants or institution within. Major avenues and hutongs were frequently adorned with decorative three-bay pailou—made of painted wood, stone, or brightly glazed bricks—whose arches alerted the passerby to the prominence of the families associated with the thoroughfare. The repeated presence of memorial arches throughout the street pattern, each one unique in its details, gave the city a celebratory character that is distinctly Chinese.

Three mammoth walls established the geometry of the layout of Beijing, and their towers and gateways were major points of orientation

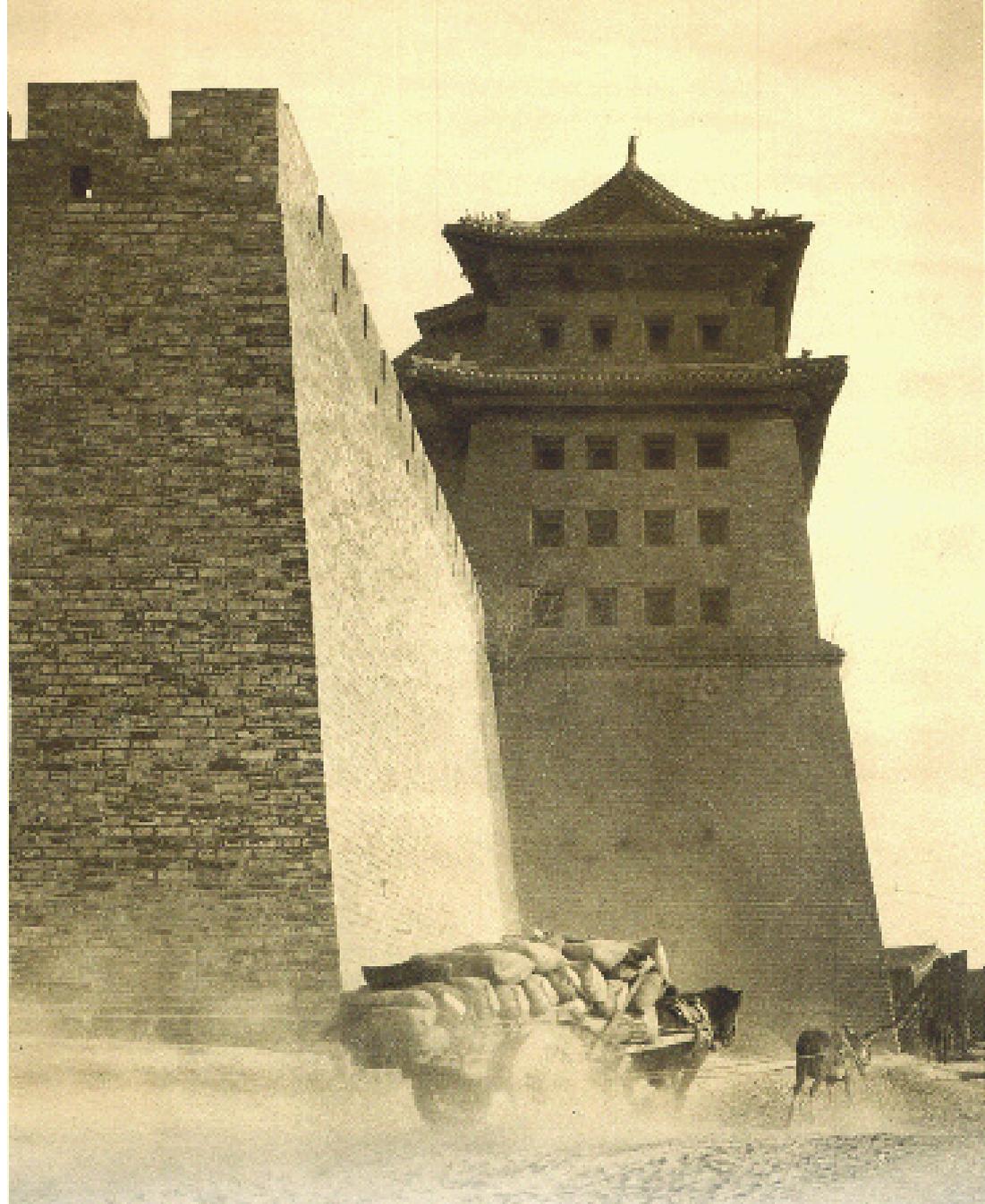
within the urban environment. The Ming walls of the original Beijing Fu, known in later years as the Inner City, were 20 kilometers long and constructed of masonry about ten meters high, 17 meters wide at the bottom, and 11 meters wide at the top. Every 80 meters, a bastion projected outward. The summit of the ramparts was paved, and the battlements were crenellated. There were nine barbican-fortified tower-gates. From these portals sprung the major avenues of Beijing's grid. Hence the huge gateways marked the principal vectors of the city's plan. In 1533, Beijing was expanded, and another imposing line of fortifications was built, enclosing a rectangle of land to the south which came to be called the Outer City. At this point, the population is estimated to have verged on one million. The third monumental wall of the settlement was the interior one that surrounded the Forbidden City. All of these great walls were encircled by moats and crossed by wide bridges with ornate marble balustrades.

The city walls of Beijing had several levels of significance. They established the harmonious geometric alignment of the capital with the poles of the Chinese cosmos. Their size and extent proclaimed the authority of the emperor and the kingdom. And they symbolized the orderliness of Chinese society, in which every inhabitant's house, courtyard, and daily life—whether that of a prince, a merchant, or a peasant—was also aligned with the giant grid of the capital city and the Earth.

Protected within these great fortifications were the many institutions of the city—its markets and commercial zones, theaters, brothels, teahouses, military compounds, shrines, universities, government offices, and, most important, the Temple of Agriculture, the Temple of Heaven, and the Forbidden City. Each of the imperial compounds was immense. The Forbidden City, composed of 999 buildings, is similar in size to the medieval Altstadt of Vienna, while the outer wall of the Temple of Heaven is large enough to enclose the whole of historic Jerusalem.

Early in the twentieth century, at the conclusion of the Boxer Rebellion, a French naval officer would express a universal first reaction to imperial Beijing: "Not one of our European capitals has been conceived and laid out with such unity and audacity. It is easy to understand why the Chinese ambassadors who came to visit our kings in the times when their immense country was flourishing were not particularly dazzled by the sight of the Louvre or of Versailles."

This was the material artifact inherited by the People's Republic. How might we comprehend it in relation to other great historic cities? In the Forbidden City and the Temple of Heaven—like Rome, Istanbul, and Kyoto—it held some of the foremost architectural monuments in history. In its great walls and barbicans—like Cairo and the pyramids of Giza—it contained a wondrous mammoth construction of world civilization. In the elaborate handcraftsmanship of its resi-



**“LESSONS DERIVED FROM MISTAKES COMMITTED: THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE CITY WALL,” READS A DOCUMENT FROM THE MODERN MUNICIPAL PLANNING BUREAUCRACY. TODAY, A RINGROAD RUNS BESIDE SURVIVING RAMPARTS.**



dential and mercantile neighborhoods—like Venice and Amsterdam—it was an extended harmonious assemblage of vernacular building parts. In terms of the city’s total artistic integration, perhaps only Paris, in its Belle Epoque, is comparable in quality and magnitude. In all, as in the words of American city planner Edmund Bacon in the *Design of Cities*: “Possibly the greatest single work of man on the face of the earth is Peking.” And it was uniquely Chinese.

Throughout China’s civil war, the foreign nation that had most reliably supported the Chinese Communists was the Soviet Union. As the Cold War began, a substantial flow of financial aid and teams of Russian experts were sent to the newly formed People’s Republic. In the field of city planning, members of the same Soviet system that had developed the anti-conservation plan that was eviscerating historic Moscow helped plan the future of Beijing.

The party that had come to power already had an anti-urban bias. From the Communist historical perspective, many of China’s cities had been consumer cities—elite societies that produced few actual commodities but nonetheless consumed great amounts of agricultural products. Beijing was a prime example of this phenomenon—so long as its role in the administration of the empire, or its wealth accrued from innovative thinking, or its products of cultural refinement were not taken into account as having social value—an evaluation that defies the facts of the history of civilizations.

In 1953, the first masterplan for Beijing, as well as the first five-year plan for the country’s development, was unveiled. The *Draft on Reconstructing and Expanding Beijing Municipality* called for the remaking of Beijing into a major industrial hub and warned that “the foremost danger is an extreme respect for old architecture, such that it constricts our perspective of development.”

At that time in the city, there were only 15 Chinese architects—educated professionals who could speak with authority about Chinese building culture and the planning of modern cities. From among these an alternative plan was advanced: that the governmental and industrial expansion of Beijing should occur outside the historic city, which ought to be preserved as an irreplaceable artifact of Chinese civilization.

Over the next 30 years, the Soviet-influenced *Draft on Reconstructing Beijing* would prevail. The city had few water resources, yet it would develop industries requiring heavy water use and expand residential water demand as the population grew tenfold. Increased traffic brought about by this expansion in population produced heavy levels of automotive pollution, which combined with high levels of industrial pollution to create an acid rain that melted the stone carvings of the landmarks of the city—as can be seen today throughout the Forbidden City.

In order to open a network of roadways, hundreds of pailou were removed. Only a handful now remain. Ancient bridges were widened and their carved marble railings destroyed. And while the grid of the historic streetscape would be honored, thus saving an important element of the city’s character, the low-scale profile of the traditional



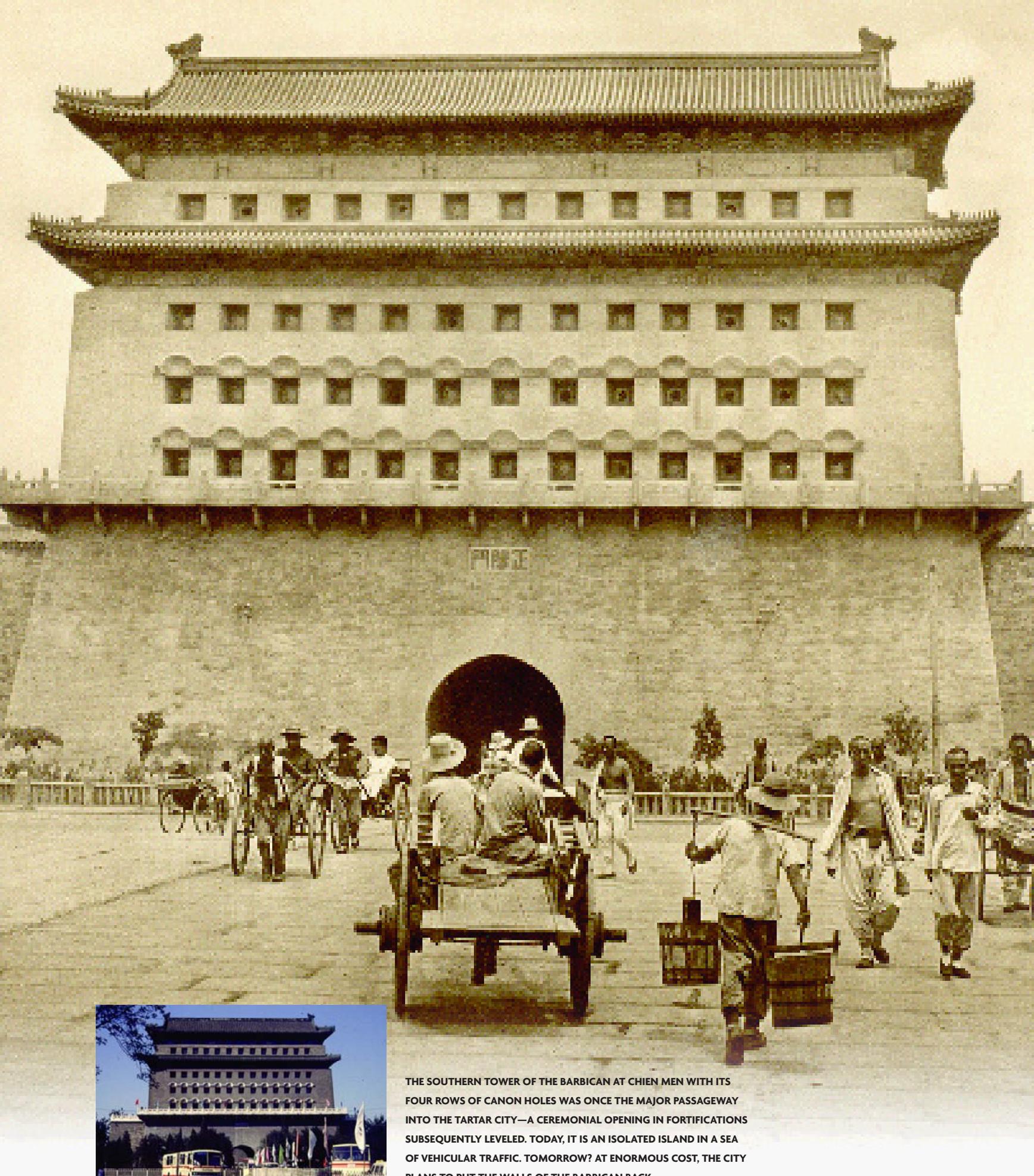
**ALONG THE HUTONGS—SOME NARROW, SOME WIDE—ANCIENT WAYS OF LIVING PERSIST. THE WINDING BYWAYS ARE LINED WITH INSTITUTIONAL, RESIDENTIAL, AND COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS THAT COLLECTIVELY COMPOSE THE SINGULAR URBAN CULTURE THAT IS HISTORIC BEIJING.**

city was disrupted as major avenues were zoned for multiple-story modern buildings. Towering over neighboring low-scale areas, these vectors of undistinguished commercial jumble cut wide, chaotic swaths across an historic environment that was the ultimate example of a metropolis governed by aesthetic rules. The resulting environmental cacophony was a harsh intrusion of alien values. Like Moscow, modern Beijing became a fractured environment of unrelated elements.

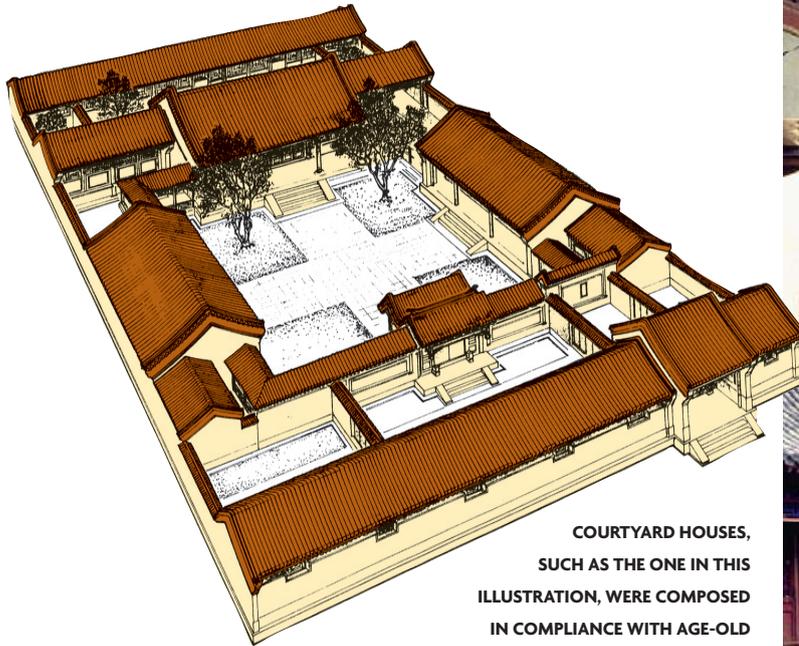
Also, as in Russia, individual ministries became separate fiefdoms competing for power. In areas such as the development of housing, transportation, and industry, objectives set by the central government were pursued as isolated agendas. The municipal officers of Beijing were not authorized to integrate the actions of these more-powerful national ministries. As a result, in the give and take of governmental bargaining, the least-empowered player was the agency whose mandate was the welfare of the metropolis.

Perhaps most damaging to the singular character of the ancient city was the gradual erasure, across the 1950s, of the mammoth walls, moats, and entry portals that once surrounded it. With the exception of but three barbicans, the entirety of these bulwarks was demolished in order to build a ring of highways and a subway. In no other instance in urban history had such giant fortifications been constructed as an integral part of the design of an immense metropolis. They were unparalleled.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1969) and the reign of the Gang of Four, which ended in 1976, arbitrary rules—for example, that no existing building could be replaced by new construction—led to the siting of industrial plants wherever open lots occurred, even in the middle of residential districts. More than a thousand such factories were erected. Protection of historic assets was



THE SOUTHERN TOWER OF THE BARBICAN AT CHIEN MEN WITH ITS FOUR ROWS OF CANON HOLES WAS ONCE THE MAJOR PASSAGeway INTO THE TARTAR CITY—A CEREMONIAL OPENING IN FORTIFICATIONS SUBSEQUENTLY LEVELLED. TODAY, IT IS AN ISOLATED ISLAND IN A SEA OF VEHICULAR TRAFFIC. TOMORROW? AT ENORMOUS COST, THE CITY PLANS TO PUT THE WALLS OF THE BARBICAN BACK.



**COURTYARD HOUSES, SUCH AS THE ONE IN THIS ILLUSTRATION, WERE COMPOSED IN COMPLIANCE WITH AGE-OLD**

**ARCHITECTURAL FORMULAS. IN THE FIRST DECADES OF COMMUNIST RULE, OPEN PATIOS WERE FILLED WITH NEW BUILDINGS, ABOVE RIGHT, TO ACCOMMODATE A BURGEONING POPULATION. AT RIGHT IS A RARE EXAMPLE OF A RESTORED QUADRANGLE THAT ONCE BELONGED TO PRINCE GONG.**



considered ideologically incorrect. Temples in particular were looted, and many of China’s movable artworks and artifacts were destroyed. Across these first turbulent decades of Communist rule, a vast social revolution fostered an expanded social equity, while also costing the lives of millions of Chinese.

**B**y the 1980s, however, rational planning was reinstated, and the future of the metropolis was reconsidered from a less ideological perspective. The isolation of China from non-Communist developmental trends ended. By this time, the new global economy had re-affirmed the vital function of cities as the birthplaces of innovation. Beijing’s role as a national center of administration and culture, as a magnet for world tourism, and as an inculcator of creative thinking was recognized as the new goal for the metropolis.

Preservation of the architectural heritage of the city was integral to these functions, and sophisticated conservation laws were enacted. In 1982, under a Cultural Asset Protection Law, landmarks were established at different levels of importance: national, provincial, and municipal. Developmental control zones—187 of them—were instituted around the most notable monuments. Several modest historic districts of vernacular buildings were created.

Conceptually, and on paper, this assemblage of regulations mirrored the web of municipal conservation protections in historic cities across the developed world. But given the changeability of official policy under Communist rule, would these statutes be applied in reality? In Amsterdam, Vienna, Warsaw, Paris, Rome, and New York, such laws gain positive results through diligent sustained application. Could the same be achieved in Beijing? And, in light of the heavy toll on cultural heritage already extracted in the name of progress, what, if anything was left to preserve?

Yes, the hutongs.

Off the bustling boulevards of the ancient grid were myriad, endlessly variable, and architecturally surprising traditional streetscapes—the commercial and residential historic milieu. Along the hutongs, the wandering, slender byways nestled in corners of the fast-developing contemporary capital and adapted to the needs of the proletariat, were the remnants of a disappearing world of handcrafted architecture, the product of the centuries-old Chinese building tradition. Old shops had retained their commercial purposes. The former homes of princes, court officials, and affluent merchants had become residential communes, neighborhood schools, community facilities, and government offices.

In terms of their conservation—though dilapidated, overused, and haphazardly altered—many of these structures nonetheless retained sufficient original fabric that they might be accurately reconstructed. In those few instances where this has occurred, the results are splendid. Thus at the moment that modern conservation protections were established in Beijing, it remained possible to reclaim substantial parts of the old city.

Yet, because of the mutability of Chinese governmental procedure, there also remained at that moment the distinct chance that only the most prominent monuments and a few small fragments of the vernacular city would be protected. For if the city’s preservation statutes are upheld merely to the most literal degree, only about ten percent of historic Beijing is likely to survive—nearly all of which is imperial in nature.

“Disastrous planning decisions made in ignorance, decades ago, sealed the fate of the city’s antique appearance,” recently lamented Zhao Xueqin, secretary-general of the Beijing Association of Cultural Relics—in an expression of what seems to be the current party line.

Is this a warning that the die is already cast, that there will not be an attempt to save what remains of the ancient vernacular cityscape, the last remnants of everyday life long ago? The Olympics are coming, and Old Beijing, it seems, is being razed. ■