

Where one city yields to another

The construction boom walks hand in hand with Olympic fever in Beijing these days. The urge to modernize is so strong that even the future can be found in a museum.

The best place to go to get an overview of this mercilessly expanding city is to the new Urban Planning Museum near the old railway station by Tiananmen Square. Here you can find exhibits on several floors, but the main attraction consists of a 302-square-metre illuminated model of the city centre, with the surrounding floor covered with photos of the corresponding areas. And on top of that, the whole thing can be scrutinized through binoculars from the floor above. Historical Beijing is also represented by a 3-D film, but this is really no place for nostalgia. The overriding impression is one of fascination for and pride in technology and modernity.

Beijing is a flat city. It is some distance from the sea, and it has no river running through it. Instead, the main thoroughfare is Chang'an Jie, a 42-km-long six-lane motorway that cuts through the city's heart, running east-west right between Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City. Orbiting around this hub is an ever-increasing number of circular roads, of which the outermost are not to be found on regular city maps. Most of Beijing's population lives on the north side of this division, while those who live to the south are generally poorer.

Artistic area

The artistic District 798 (also known as Dashanzi) has been afforded a lot of attention lately. It is an old industrial area northwest of the centre that is now dominated by galleries and cafés. Along with the artists and artistically inclined, the area is full of workers armed with mattocks and spades. Dust is everywhere, but it is hard to judge whether the action consists of building or tearing down. At one of the café tables I meet Anne-Line Berg, a young Norwegian who runs her own media consultant company called YouShou Ltd.

“Five years ago we moved into a newly erected apartment block on the outskirts of Beijing, not far from District 798. All we could see from our window was a vast field with one simple dwelling, a *yurt*, housing a family that cultivated a small patch of land. During these years the field has been transformed into a vast construction site with around-the-clock activity. Naturally, the family is long gone, and there's nothing to see from our window but blocks of flats.”

One of the top stories in China recently has been about how people that are removed by force from their homes rarely receive adequate compensation from the state.

Anne-Line lives between the fourth and fifth circular roads. When she moved in they had barely started on number six, but now the seventh is well under way. Needless to say, this expansion requires a lot of manpower, and it is said that in addition to the registered inhabitants at least two million migrant workers live in Beijing, many of whom sleep on the construction sites.

“Workers from out of town are pouring in, but because Beijing already has around 15 million inhabitants, an additional million or two won’t always be noticed. There’s not so much outright poverty to be seen here, there’s much more of that in the countryside. It’s true that in the old estates, the so-called *hutongs*, the dwellers are forced to use communal bathrooms and fetch water from tanks, but these traditional small houses have now almost disappeared. A few have been kept and some have even been renovated, but this is only for the sake of appearance.”

Pop culture

Global attention has been directed towards China and Beijing for quite some time now. Many books have been written about Chinese finance and politics, while others are more curious about its culture. Not only is District 798 frequently visited by curators and prospective purchasers, but Chinese filmmakers like Zhang Yimou are celebrated at film festivals throughout Europe. Modern Beijing now has its own films, like *Lost in Beijing*, *Beijing Bicycle* and *Summer Palace*. Even though the last of these to some extent deals with the massacre at Tiananmen, Chinese culture suffers under strong censorship.

A kind of pop cultural showdown with Mao took place a short generation ago, and in District 798 his portrait can be found in many – sometimes slightly disgraceful – variations. But nowhere has this been taken further than within the literary world, especially in Yan Lianke’s novel *Serve the People*. Here, an adulterous couple is living out their forbidden love in passionate scenes that are spiced up with acts of debasement of Mao statues and posters.

Much of the youth culture in China is, however, all but irrelevant to the majority. Any punk rocker in Beijing probably has well-off parents, with most Chinese far more interested in their domestic Cantopop.

The most famous painting in Chinese art history is, indisputably, still the portrait that hangs above the main entrance into the Forbidden City. From here, Chairman Mao’s cold gaze overlooks Tiananmen Square, where hundreds – maybe thousands – of demonstrators lost their lives in 1989.

Deng Xiaoping

Mao’s successor was Deng Xiaoping, who – although he was never formally the head of state – was the country’s strong man until his death in 1997. His first steps on the world’s stage were taken when Thatcher and Reagan still dominated Western politics, and even if he was not China’s first brutal modernizer, he was its first free market communist. He famously proclaimed that “being rich is glorious” and that “someone has to get rich first”. At the same time he was responsible for the incidents of 1989 and for keeping up the censorship to such a degree that art was in practice virtually forbidden during his rule, so it makes sense to claim that the inner contrasts of today’s China reflect his thoughts, particularly in the cities.

Shanghai is China’s commercial capital, but Beijing also has a brand new area that caters for financial services. It is called Central Business District (CBD) and lies just east of the centre. Here, in a luxurious spa, we meet up with Josef Fung, a captivating personality and self-styled composer and environmentalist.

“10-15 years ago Beijing was still very grey and backward,” he tells us. “There were hardly any restaurants to be found at all. Back then, the central authorities were still taking care of the people’s fundamental needs, like housing, food and coal. But access to the city was

limited: outsiders needed a permit just to visit, and were issued with time-limited passports.” This system, called *hukou*, is still around, although in a modified form.

“Beijing is now an eldorado for cutting-edge architecture, and entrepreneurs can do almost whatever they like. It is important to understand that this is something the previously so conservative Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is actively working for.”

Josef Fung is of the opinion that today’s Beijing is a much more open place, but under great pressure in several ways.

“The politicians have now said that the capital has grown enough. They want to divert the increase in population to surrounding cities like Tongzhou, which is a city about 20 km east of central Beijing. Among other things, Tongzhou is gradually taking over some of District 798’s leading role within the arts.”

Hong Kong

Josef Fung enthusiastically presents his projects to preserve vast forest areas in the interior, and he wants to initiate the large-scale production of bamboo furniture. Bamboo grows rapidly, and Jung believes that less intervention in nature would be necessary if it could be used more as a raw material for chairs and tables.

Josef Fung was born in Hong Kong, but went to Iceland as an adult to work as a teacher. He moved to Beijing in 1999.

“I think my native town has been extremely useful for China. In 1980 Deng Xiaoping proclaimed Shenzhen, Hong Kong’s neighbour across the border, the first “free economic zone”, not without reason. For a long time Hong Kong had been a major port of shipment of goods, and an important gateway for political and cultural ideas entering China from the West. Neither was it a disadvantage that Shenzhen was far away from Beijing ...”

“The West has always trusted Hong Kong, and everything Western that can be found inside China at any time has been filtered through Hong Kong. I currently have the impression that China is becoming more and more like Hong Kong for every day that passes.” To emphasize his argument, Josef points to Russia. “They have no equivalent,” he says while blinking tellingly.

“It is true that the processes within the CCP have become more democratic, but even if architects can seemingly do whatever they want here at the moment, this is not the case in politics. The Chinese of today are looking towards the future, and I don’t think they see too many good reasons to try to overthrow the regime at the moment. Remember that “the good life” also contains a reasonable amount of freedom: opportunities are on offer, and no one wants a revolution now. Furthermore, all suggestions for improvements are welcome.”

“Tiananmen is already almost 20 years ago,” Josef says, implying that its importance has dwindled. “The young people of today don’t know too much about it, partly because there isn’t a lot of information available. Everyone is working for the economy, and everyone wants stability. Freedom of speech is simply not top of the agenda right now,” he concludes.

According to Will Hutton’s book *The Writing on the Wall*, as many as 400 million Chinese have been lifted above the poverty line in recent years. In light of this fact, the assumption

that most Chinese are more concerned with economic prosperity than freedom of speech and human rights makes a lot of sense, not least in view of Mr Fung's statement that relatively few are aware of the full extent of the Tiananmen massacre. At their latest congress, the CCP signalled that a democratization process will most likely not take place within the next hundred years. This lack of openness and transparency may one day cost the Chinese dearly.

Hoisting cranes

The headquarters of the propaganda machine CCTV is one of the most spectacular buildings currently under construction in Beijing. Designed by top architects Rem Koolhaas from Holland and Ole Scheeren from Germany, it is a feast for the eye for those who enjoy such creations: picture a hexagonal nut, broken once in either direction, or maybe a pair of jeans filled up by the wind. But, of course, there is one architectonic project that more than any other symbolizes Beijing's push forwards. Following the fourth circular road on the north side of town, you can catch a glimpse of the new Olympic layout, including the most conspicuous of them all, the so-called "Bird's Nest".

The construction of all these buildings is accompanied by an atmosphere that is at one and the same time both nervous and ecstatic. There is more than a mere Olympic fever running through this city: Not only is there plenty of money around, but there are also less building restrictions than any other place. The result of this is as yet open to question, since many of these projects have yet to be brought to a close.

Most of the workers that are actually carrying out these boisterous architectonic plans are all but unskilled. More often than not they are farmers by profession, and totally unqualified for advanced building work. Some have suggested that this also goes for the architects themselves. The recently inaugurated opera house at Tiananmen Square, nicknamed "The Egg", was created by the Frenchman Paul Andreu. He is also the man behind the failed construction work at the airports in Dubai and Paris-Charles De Gaulle, whose terminal buildings both caved in during 2004, causing the loss of human life in each case. A certain irony lies in the fact that the four casualties in Paris were of Chinese nationality. Incidentally, Beijing will soon be able to boast the largest airport in the world, masterminded by the Englishman Norman Foster.

Beijing has been a metropolis for three thousand years, and the capital of four dynasties since 1153. But nowadays hardly anything of the traditional life is visible, and that goes for more than just the architecture. Not long ago the multitude of commuters would constitute a swarm of bicycles, but now it is next to impossible to manoeuvre a two-wheeler through all the cars. To see a Beijing citizen who still swears by pedal power is rare, and will nowadays – along with the occasional fellow dragging a cart loaded with coal briquettes – rather serve as a contrast to the general development.

There is a forest of restless hoisting cranes out there, and dust in suspension perpetually fills the air. The old Beijing is disappearing under a sky that is no longer really blue.