

## Restoring history in China

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The impending restoration [1] of Shanghai's former Holy Trinity Cathedral, once described as "the most magnificent church in the East", may seem relatively insignificant compared to the massive changes taking place in China, but the decision to return this former British Protestant stronghold to a Christian flock belies important aspects of China's current transformation. Many of China's contemporary triumphs, problems and contradictions appear sharply in focus when viewed through the prism of urban heritage preservation (pdf) [2], a topic that has become a political and historical minefield.

Of the many renovated buildings constructed when China's cities were subject to various forms of foreign control, few surpass Holy Trinity's historical significance. Not only was the church, which became a cathedral in 1875, among the most hallowed Christian buildings in China until 1949, but also its original design (which was later comprehensively altered) was conceived by one of Britain's great Victorian architects, Sir George Gilbert Scott [3], in the early 1860s.

Holy Trinity's restoration is a response to a genuine shift in the Chinese government's attitude towards religious tolerance from the sectarian extremes that saw China's places of worship comprehensively closed before and during the Cultural Revolution. China's Christian community is said to be nearing 100 million and growing fast, so the decision to return the former cathedral to a religious community will receive widespread applause among Christians, human rights groups, historians and architectural enthusiasts worldwide.

### The consequences of the "urban makeover"

While the restoration of architectural landmarks invites prominent media attention, the destruction of China's urban residential buildings, the very essence of China's diverse urban character, receive significantly less publicity. In Shanghai, the traditional *li long*, a curious fusion of the British terrace house and the Chinese courtyard house, was central to the city's once low-rise, dense, and busy character. An acre of land contained up to 120 *li long*, making Shanghai one of the most densely populated cities on earth in the early 20th century. In Beijing, its impervious, sheltered and serene character was derived from the compact lanes known as *hutong* that interlaced the vernacular courtyard dwellings, or *si he yuan*, which encircled the Forbidden City.

As China's cities undergo the largest urban makeover in history, the speed and scale of development have devastated the *li long*, *hutong* and other residential types. Hundreds of thousands of former residences have been demolished to make way for the ubiquitous high-rise apartment. Chinese eager to escape the squalor of China's nationalised housing stock worn out by multiple occupancy and decades of failed housing policies welcomed these modern tower blocks. China's familiar low-rise street life languished as families were stacked one on top of another.

The inevitable backlash to this omnipresent architectural solution has seen concerned residents actively oppose developers. In some cases, these unlawful displays of community organisation have postponed and sometimes prevented the bulldozers from razing entire city blocks of old housing. People have demonstrated in front of municipalities, in the worst cases burning themselves to death. In 2003, a group from Shanghai travelled to Beijing by train to present their grievances to the central government, but were intercepted by police and forced to return to their homes. Such public incidents of resistance have alarmed government officials and have helped to expose the corruption inherent in privately arranged land purchasing deals.

In spite of these events, the domestic media repeatedly produce awestruck versions of urban development that its international counterparts rapaciously consume and regurgitate. The destruction of China's urban heritage and the social problems that ensue have been given short shrift compared to the more glamorous headlines that boast sci-fi skylines and names of A-list [4] foreign architects.

### **The price of cultural heritage**

Strangely, for foreign audiences, it has always been this way. In 1864, the UK *Times* was the first newspaper to write glowingly of Shanghai when it reported booming trade at the fabulous city where "a merchant could attach a deer park to his house." A year later, a global depression had ended the city's brief flirtation with opulence. It had become, according to P G Laurie in *The Model Settlement* (Shanghai, 1866), a place where "everybody appeared to run wild, nobody had any money ... and everything was turned topsy-turvy, struggling, broken, and wrecked."

Sixty years on, and with confidence restored, Shanghai experienced an unparalleled property boom. Land prices rose by 1000% in the decade from 1924. China's Treaty Ports provided property investors a safe haven where they could accumulate immense fortunes. This affluent epoch infused China's cities with a diverse and fascinating heritage forged by the agglomeration of countless cultural interventions.

Despite obvious physical legacies, the era of direct foreign involvement in China from the mid-19th century to 1949 is a relatively brief chapter in an unremitting saga of dynastic ascendancy and decline that has furnished China with a rich, varied and almost continuous cultural heritage extending over five millennia. This impressive record has hardwired a respect for antiquity into the genetic makeup of the Chinese. Heritage is an ancestral inheritance to be protected through one's lifetime and bestowed to future generations, not squandered for ephemeral reward.

For many Chinese, the last fifty years symbolise a catastrophic malfunction of this primeval doctrine, which has left China bereft of heritage assets that had survived centuries of calamities. Although the Cultural Revolution is an undeniable nadir, history may portray this decade-long trough from 1966 as part of a broader period of decline in which unfathomable devastation was wrought on the cultural landscape of one of the world's high achievers in the cultural realm. Perhaps the most destructive factor in this period is not military, political or environmental, but economic. It is common and heart-rending to hear families lament the destruction of their ancestral homes through the voracity of an economic system that was touted as their salvation.

The government is acutely aware of its perceived poor record in safeguarding the country's inheritance. Many Chinese people now cite the fact that before 1949 China had over 5,000 ancient walled cities, towns, and fortifications, whereas today there are just four. Pingyao in northern China is the last remaining complete city wall, while Xi'an, the former capital and once the greatest city on earth, has had parts of its wall reconstructed in a bid to exploit the kitsch demands of a ravenous tourism industry.

In October 2005, Xian hosted the 15th General Assembly of ICOMOS [5] (International Committee for Monuments and Sites), a non-governmental organisation that aims to protect heritage sites worldwide. The local government carried out this prestigious duty [6] with awesome pomp and ceremony, impressing the 600 foreign delegates.

However, one Chinese delegate and prominent heritage expert privately described Xi'an as a dismal Chinese version of Disneyland. Xi'an, the delegate posited, is not cultural history, but invented fantasy. This recurring formula of historical reinvention and reinterpretation is a highly effective method of validating current demolition in the name of progress. In Shanghai, this formula has been executed at the site of the first congress of the Communist Party, now attached to a prosaic tourist and shopping complex known as *Xin Tian Di*.

Most people, excluding its developer, herald *Xin Tian Di* as one of China's most successful examples [7] of architectural preservation. It is not. Just like Xian's city wall, it is reconstructed fantasy. The forces of politics and economics have created this site while the local population that lived in this part of Shanghai, who know nothing about and care little for the tawdry idiocies of a consumer culture of which they will never be part, have been forcibly evicted from their homes and banished to the suburbs, in order that tourists can be fed disproportionately large servings of historical events and wealthy visitors can sip coffee in a faux-traditional environment and claim to have experienced the real China.

### **Making money, making history**

China's unique breed of capitalism has brought undeniable wealth and opportunity to many, but it is far less effective in safeguarding the property of the disempowered. All housing was acquired by the government after 1949 and only since the 1990s has private ownership been reintroduced. China's nationalised housing stock, once seen as the solution to the country's chronic urban housing problems, is today an ageing and under-maintained resource that is a tremendous burden on the public purse. The cheapest solution is to sell it or raze it and start again. Developers comfortably legitimise the expunging of entire neighbourhoods while making unimaginable private fortunes in the process, because the inhabitants of nationalised housing have no rights of abode and are considered, as one prominent developer described, "squatters".

In Tianjin, over Christmas, the UK *Times* reported [8] a sit-in protest by nuns and priests of a Catholic community situated in the heart of the old city against the developers who wanted to demolish their religious compound. The peaceful demonstration by these "squatters" was allegedly interrupted by a group of hired thugs. This insidious tactic is becoming increasingly common in China, as the corrupted intimidate those who try to oppose abuses of power that range from crooked business activities to major environmental degradation.

As China's rapid growth continues, friction between different interest groups will intensify. While the future of the former Holy Trinity seems assured, the fate of innumerable less consequential structures remains uncertain. Gaining access to or taking photographs of such sites often invites the worst excesses of officiousness by ageing gatekeepers or, worse still, arrest. In a country where even the ruling party has yet to reach a consensus on an interpretation of its tenure, it is hardly surprising that the physical manifestations of history are so sensitive. For the time being, it is expedient to let people see only what you want them to see, while history is reconstructed.

*Please click the image below to begin the slideshow of images accompanying this article*



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The former Holy Trinity Cathedral, seen here in the late 1920s. Once situated in a spacious compound, it has today been encroached upon and is hardly visible from the street. The spire was added in 1901 and destroyed in the 1960s. The plans to restore the structure include rebuilding the spire.

[8]

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