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Beijing Architecture: Part 2

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In the midst of the forest of new skyscrapers, a subtle change is occurring in Beijing architecture which may have more lasting importance than the soaring towers of the Central Business District. Outside the fourth ring road massive new apartment blocks are greatly increasing the average living space and comfort level of the growing middle class.

Built in record time by massive crews of migrant laborers the new complexes promise residents a more controlled and relaxed life, but the centralized, homogenous designs hinder the development of neighborhood feeling and community. The new developments allow the beneficiaries of China’s thirty years of rapid development to isolate themselves from urban crime, noise and pollution in gated communities removed from the majority of the population.

The developments have been fueled by easy credit at rates often below the rate of inflation, the desire of city officials to leave tangible legacies, and real estate developers eager to tap into the booming wealth of Chinese professionals. The resulting scale of Beijing’s new communities is unrivalled in East Asia, with the possible exception of South Korea’s chaebol apartment blocks. Single developments can occupy up to a square kilometer, with average buildings up to twenty floors high. Located far from the major commercial areas in Chaoyang or the city center, massive underground parking garages extend up to three floors below ground. Residents are mostly young professionals with university educations and stable high-income jobs in technology, finance or service industries.

Compared to the cramped, five and six story brick apartment blocks built in the 1960s and 70s, the new areas are bright, airy and spotlessly clean. Large kitchens boast a full range of modern appliances and multiple bedrooms allow one-child families to have private rooms, often with a spare room available for visiting grandparents. With average prices ranging from $150,000 to $300,000 U.S. dollars, the quiet dignity of homeownership is relatively accessible and many buyers are in their mid to late 20’s. Although many analysts expect a post-Olympic slowdown, most buyers are confident the double-digit growth in property prices will continue for the foreseeable future.
New, wide roadways with separate bus lanes and elevated subway line.

While home ownership is undeniably a good thing for individual and society, and Beijing needs to continue new development projects to improve the quality of life for its citizens, there are multiple blind spots in the centralized pattern of Beijing’s urban architecture. Much of Beijing’s development program seems to have been copied wholesale from historical bad examples, such as Robert Moses’s automobile-centered vision of New York or the hubris of Chicago’s Cabrini Green.

The popularity of grey tile and unfinished stone is practical given Beijing’s harsh environment but presents a rather gloomy, cold and foreboding appearance. Residents spend little time outside their apartments due to a lack of congenial open spaces such as parks or courtyards. Shopping for groceries normally involves a trip to a large shopping center, often a Carrefour with attached parking garage, which can be kilometers away. Due to the one-child policy and the career orientation of many young residents, children are few in number and seldom seen. Large numbers of private security guards in sometimes garish uniforms complete with tassels and braid occupy all entrances and patrol the grounds.
High-end housing development adjacent to elevated subway.

The overall effect is to create a highly structured, managed space with little variation or required social contact. Some of this effect can be blamed on 1950s zoning, which divided Beijing into large city blocks that not only make the city difficult to walk, but also increase traffic congestion and hinder small development of individual parcels of land in favor of large, square complexes stretching from street to street.

A deeper problem for Beijing is the rapidly growing social stratification that has accompanied the housing market expansion. New buildings are built by work gangs of unskilled laborers coming from the countryside who live eight to ten to a room on site until the project is completed. In these temporary structures, sanitation facilities are limited, bare bulbs provide lighting and the un-insulated metal or tents rely on weak space heaters in the winter months.

Mule haulers under elevated subway with local resident in background on roller blades.
Meanwhile, many residents commute to work by car along wide, well designed highways or can take the modern, efficient metro service which has expanded rapidly into the wealthy northern suburbs. Older, normally working class areas of the city are forced to rely on the crowded and unreliable bus system. Very selective public and private schools have also boomed in these new areas as parents with sufficient income seek to provide their children with every advantage in gaining access to domestic and foreign universities. These schools boast fantastic computer and language facilities and in several cases cricket teams.

While every city wrestles with issues of growth and income distribution the sheer size, high rates of economic growth and the fact it is the national capital make Beijing an interesting test case for Chinese mega-city development. In the next twenty years, as the ratio of urban to rural population
steadily increases, dozens of other Chinese cities will be confronted with similar problems of sustainable, equitable urban growth.

Tags: architecture, The 2008 Beijing Olympics