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What surprised me at first in Beijing was the feeling of an endless city. The ten lane straight line boulevards, the endless row of small and big buildings, the smoggy air all contributed to the creation of an almost surreal cityscape of endlessness. Beijing is big. It has been built on a grid approximately 700 by 800 metres, with the Forbidden City at its centre. Beijing was designed in advance, just like Washington or Brasilia. It was planned on the basis of the best Chinese traditions of spatial planning summed up in the "Book of diverse crafts" (Zhou Li KaoGong Ji). That urban system was invented during the Ming dynasty (15th century) and the Old City of Beijing already measured 7 by 8 kilometres in the year 1425. Such an immense urban structure was the product of a social hierarchy. In the past no building could have surpassed in size the Pavilions of the Forbidden City. In fact the Emperor preferred the citizens of Beijing to inhabit one-storey houses. And since the administrative, military and commercial apparatus of the Empire were immense the city had to spread.

After few days of exploring the city I was astonished by the clear and very rational distinction between public, collective and private noticeable in both the ancient and recent urban fabric. On the sides of each block of 700 by 800 metres pass public streets (transformed into boulevards nowadays). Smaller streets (Hutong) run inside the blocks in an east-west direction. Along these Hutong streets are placed completely introverted courtyard houses (Siheyuan). The big boulevards are to be walked by anybody. The Hutongs form the community space and an outsider walking there would be noticed. The Siheyuans are the private world of each family. Such was the city already in the 15th century. The urban structure of the Old city remains mostly untouched since then. But due to an increased population each private courtyard house is shared nowadays by more than 7 families. The courts of the Siheyuans have been subdivided into miniscule covered spaces. It is noticeable that the Chinese had used the strategy of walling and defining very clear boundaries between private, collective and public in order to cope with the immense size of the city, implemented by the Ming Emperors.

Interestingly enough the immense city space is subdivided according to the same patterns also nowadays. Architecture inspired by the Modernists and the Soviets was the way of organising the living environment for 50 years after the establishment of the communist state in 1949. Having said that one could immediately imagine high rise blocks immersed in green, playgrounds and open air. Not in Beijing. "Modernist" buildings there are grouped by surrounding them with fences and allocating points of entrance/exit. So it is of no surprise to see buildings like the ones in Amsterdam's Bijlmer surrounded by a wall and controlled by a guard. This creation of "collective" is being practised since 1949. The nature of the fence or the guard changes depending on the income and the importance of the inhabitants. In higher class developments the fence becomes an opaque wall, watched via CCTV and controlled by professional guards. Developments for the "masses" use a more "transparent" technique but the presence of a fence and a guard is a must. An outsider in such a compound is often asked to leave.

A comparison to the traditional structure of blocks, Hutongs and Siheyuans is more mechanical. The collective spaces in the Old City (the Hutong alleys) were used for activities indispensable to the people living in the adjacent Siheyuans. Commerce, repair, exchange, meeting people were all taking place there. On the other hand the fence in new developments encloses an open space, which is used only to provide the required light, density ratio and greenery. A functionally, socially and emotionally empty space. In that sense the fenced space has become sterile and the collective consciousness has become weaker.

What is left to be desired in Beijing developments is the sense of inclusion and place making performed by dwellers. In most of the recent projects (the "Beijing prototype" has studied 16 of them) inhabitants are considered as occupiers of apartments. Their initiativeness and wish (or not) of creating a community has not been given a space to develop. In fact people have been stimulated to limit their world to their front door. This could have been the result of two apparently contradictory reasons. The one is a derivative of the communist system where the state takes control, but also responsibility of everything. A person is just an element of the whole and people are not given tools/space/activities to express. Spontaneous group actions are discouraged. The other reason might be a result of the capitalist system where the pursuit of money is a goal in life. The unpolished capitalism in nowadays China does not encourage people to

interact with each other but to compete in a fierce way. They have no interest to share things/ideas/inspiration with others.

Encouraging people to interact would not only follow a long Beijing tradition but would allow them to explore on a famous Chinese quality of initiativeness. Very interestingly at the gates of these sterile contemporary compounds one can observe people offering services typically associated with the Hutongs: sale of groceries, bike repair, hairdressers, entertainment and others. They look very out of place since the “Modern” compounds or the public spaces around them have not been designed for such activities. So there is a demand for a collective space for interaction and such places could create great added value to the cityscape of Beijing. This is an issue, which in my view, is worth considering in future projects for Beijing.