



A Case Study on Revitalization of Beijing Qianmen Avenue

HSPV 660
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Dec. 2014



INTRODUCTION:

Qianmen Avenue, located at south of Tiananmen Square along the main axis going through Forbidden City, is one of the most representative traditional Chinese commercial streets in Beijing's history. The densely packed intermingling of buildings, buggies, trolleys and people made the Qianmen Avenue once the civic and commercial heart of the city of Beijing, just like the Main Street in United States.¹ However, with the large-scale urban renewal, growing usage of automobiles and changing preferences in consumption since 1990s, Qianmen Avenue lost its competitive power. In January 2003, in order to revitalize the Qianmen Traditional Commercial District, government of Beijing invited tenders for the revitalization and planning project of New Qianmen Avenues.² The New Qianmen Avenue opened to the public in 2008 before the Beijing Olympic Games. It was 840 meters (0.52 mile) long, 21 meters (68 feet) wide with 52 newly restored buildings according to their appearance in 1920s that could offer spaces for over 300 stores.³ As soon as Qianmen Avenue was open, it quickly became a controversial topic for being "too new", "too commercialized" and "too westernized" as a traditional commercial street.⁴ The controversy represented the general public criticism on the increasing tendency of building similar traditional commercial streets in the past decade all over the country. In this paper, I would argue that although the Qianmen Avenue project might not be considered as a successful project for preserving the authenticity in the fabrics and the culture values behind the fabrics, it reflects an increasing social awareness of historic

¹ Richard Longstreth, *The Buildings of Main Street: A Guide to American Commercial Architecture*, (National Trust for Historic Preservation Press, 1987)

² Ping Wei, "The Integrated Conservation Discussion of Beijing Qianmen Traditional Commercial Block" (Master Thesis, Beijing University of Civil Engineering and Architecture, 2006)

³ Nan Zhou, "Qianmen Street: Heading for Business Revival?" *China Market* 43 (2009): 16-17

⁴ Dong Jing, "Qianmen Avenue: Why Controversial?" *China Business & Trade* 11 (2008): 74-76

preservation issues and is a positive driving force for the development of historic preservation in China.

FABRICS: A Revitalization Project Losing Authenticity



(Figure 1: Photographs of West elevation at entrance of Qianmen Avenue from Northend from different period of time for 1963, 1994, 2004 and 2010 respectively from up to down)

Qianmen Avenue has been a busy market district every since it was formed in Ming Dynasty around 15th century when the Emperor Di moved the capital city from Nanjing to Beijing. In Qing Dynasty, it achieved its peaking prosperity as a commercial area catered to all levels of classes. Together with Wangfujing and Xidan, the triangular shape of central business district in traditional center Beijing was formed.⁵ However, with readjusting the layout of urban functions, enlarging extent of urbanization and boosting usage of automobiles in modern development, the position of Qianmen Avenue made it hard to be accessed and gradually became a hinder factor for its development. The lack of regulation on construction allowed a

⁵ Xiaojuan Zhu, "Evaluation and Recommendations for Preservation Practices in Historic District in China: The Case of Dashilan Area, Beijing" (Master Thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 2013)

big amount of contemporary buildings built (Figure 1) to take over the traditional buildings, which severely damaged the traditional scale of spaces in the area.⁶ Actually, before the revitalization project in 2003, the original architectures from 1920s, which was the period that the revitalization project was based on, merely existed.

The revitalization project of Qianmen Avenue was in fact a reconstruction project, which ranked as the highest level of intervention codified in the Secretary of Interior's Standards for historic preservation.⁷ Moreover, different from Yongding Gate, which was reconstructed strictly based on the compressive archives of architectural measurements and survey in 2004 after it was destroyed in 1957, the reconstruction of Qianmen Avenue was mostly based on inferences and exaggerations from a group of historic photos, which made the result to be extremely inaccurate from the real history. It also added some contemporary designs with



Figure 2: Birdcage shape streetlight at night



Figure 3: rattle-drum shapes streetlight

⁶ Wei, "The Integrated Conservation Discussion"

⁷ Kay D. Weeks and Anne E. Grimmer, "The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties: with Guidelines for Preserving, Rehabilitating, Restoring & Reconstructing Historic Buildings" U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service (1995)

traditional Chinese elements such as the birdcage and rattle-drum shapes streetlights.⁸ (Figure 2 and Figure 3) Though these inferences and designs strengthened the image of Qianmen Avenue as a traditional Chinese street, they violated the Theory of Restoration of Cesare Brandi and damaged the authenticity of historic fabrics.⁹ The modernity that were added to new buildings and ornaments in the process of reconstruction and reinterpretation not only infringed the original intention of the historic street, but also detached the Qianmen Avenue from surrounding historic context and destroyed the integrity of the Qianmen Traditional Commercial District as a whole.

The revitalization of Qianmen Avenue is very similar to the reconstruction of Colonial Williamsburg. As Huxtable describes in the book *The Unreal America*, this process of reconstruction is creating an illusion over the reality. After a cutoff date has been chosen, the process of “restoring back” means to selectively “recreating a place as someone thinks it was at a certain chosen moment, eliminating everything else that was not there at the time. This usually means moving or destroying a good deal of subsequent architectural history—exactly the stuff of which real history and art are made.”¹⁰ The revitalization strategy of Qianmen Avenue eliminated all the traces on architectures from the real history through reconstructing them all. The period of time between 1920s to present was completely missing in the new fabrics. Architectures also have the death and life.¹¹ No matter how “traditional” or “Chinese” the new buildings and avenue looked like, the architectures were dead at the moment when they became disconnected from their authentic history. The newly created replicas are just

⁸ Haijun Wang, “Three Strategies at Qianmen Historic District/ Qian Men Wai Li Shi Jie Qu Gai Zao De San Zhong Fang An” Art Criticism 03 (2009): 82-86

⁹ Cesare Brandi, “Theory of Restoration” Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage. N. Stanley Price, M. K. Talley Jr., and A. M. Vaccaro, eds. The Getty Conservation Institute, (1996): 230-235, 339-342, 377-379

¹⁰ Ada Louise Huxtable, *The Unreal America: Architecture and Illusion*, (The New Press, 1997)

¹¹ Lu Di, *Death and Rebirth of Historic Buildings: The Research on the Reuse of Historic Buildings*, (Southeast University Press, 2004)

empty shells that are composed by segmented elements of history, which are not much different from a building. In the future, a “soul” is needed to reconnect the fabrics with their history in order to give them a rebirth.

MEMORIES&VALUES: Intangible Values Hidden in the Fabrics

Historic preservation is not only about preserving the physical fabrics, but also about preserving the intangible values that are hiding behind the fabrics. As Mayes has discussed in his series of blog posts *Why do old places matter*, the existences of historic places may give people a sense of



Figure 4: Photograph of ruins in Qianmen area after invasion in 1900

orientation and place for rootedness. The old architectures are the reference points that glue the social memories and ensure the continuity between the past and future.¹² The reason for choosing 1920s as a cutoff date for reconstructing, as the planners involving in the revitalization project stated, was that this Qianmen Avenue with particular mixing style of traditional Chinese architecture and western architecture in early Minguo was the one that most old Beijingers were most familiar with.¹³ The original Qianmen Avenue that was formed in Qing Dynasty was destroyed in 1900s when the eight allies evaded Beijing. (Figure 4) The collective memory of the society as a group about Qianmen Avenue should be preserved. It is still an active past that form identities of old Beijingers and could create the connections between new Beijingers and

¹² “Why do old places matter” Tom Mayes, accessed 11 September 2014, <http://blog.preservationleadershipforum.org/author/tom-mayes/>

¹³ Wang, “Three Strategies at Qianmen Historic District”

that part of history that they have never experienced.¹⁴ Though this intention of preserving the collective memories behind the physical fabrics were good, it was not achieved due to both disconnections of fabrics and their real history as mentioned in the fabrics section above, and the prioritization of economic value that would be discussed in this section.

There are many different types of intangible

values that should be recognized in historic preservation process, as defined by Alois Riegl in his *The Modern Cult of Monuments*. This multiple value-centered theory is pervasively used in field of historic preservation as a powerful tool to weigh the significance of historic places from different perspectives. The values are changing over the time and space that should be judged carefully based on different conditions. The heritage values of a place may include age values, culture values, aesthetic values and etc. They are emphasized more in the curatorial approaches which are the traditional core of conservation interests. The contemporary values, on the other hand, are emphasized in the urbanistic approaches which focus on concerns of multiple stakeholders as well as public attitudes. These values

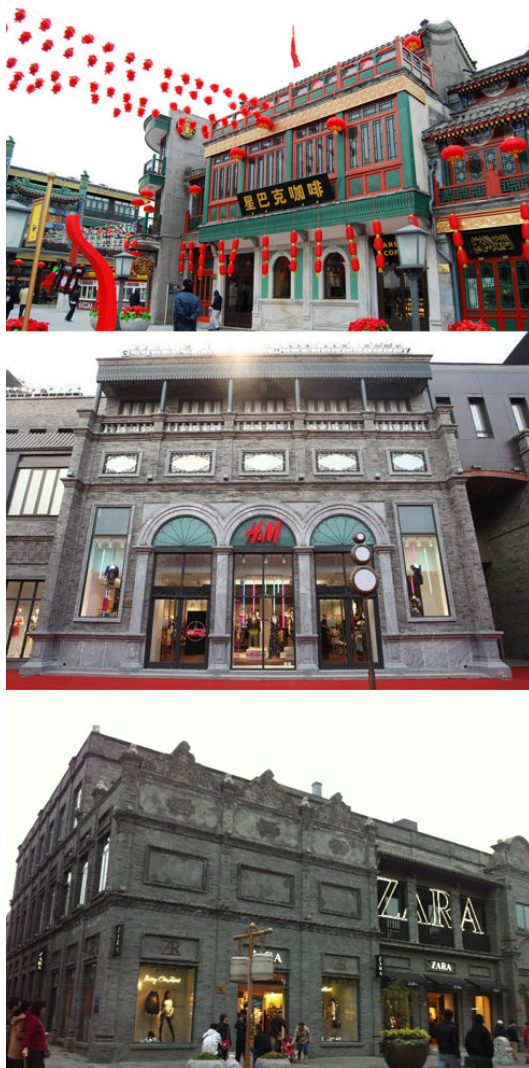


Figure 5: Western business on Qianmen Avenue, Starbucks, H&M and ZARA from top to bottom

¹⁴Pierre Nora, "Between History and Memory." *Representations* 26 (1989): 7-24

may include economic values, social values and environmental values.¹⁵

In the case of Revitalization of Qianmen Avenue, the contemporary values were weighed more importantly than the heritage values. It was a project led by a real estate company, SOHO China, for a for-profit purpose. Before the project, a large part of heritage value was already lost due to the missing of original architectures from 1920s. The historic value of traditional architectures along Qianmen Avenue and the culture value as being a representative Beijing commercial street were all used as a marketing tool to maximize the economic value that could be brought by the new commercial street. Essentially, like the Main Street Projects, Qianmen Avenue revitalization was an economic and revitalization project, which the values of fabrics were not prioritized. In order to maximize the profits, the new Qianmen Avenue was marketed as a “perfect combination of traditional and modern, Chinese and Western”.¹⁶ Western branches, such as Starbucks, GAPs, UNIQLO, Zara, H&M, were targeted to attract not only the tourists, but also local consumers. (Figure 5) On the other hand, many of the traditional Chinese stores (Laozihaos), which were forced to move out from Qianmen Avenue before the revitalization project, were not able to move back due to the high rent, even with compensation from the government.¹⁷ If we use a metaphor to say that historic value is a shell that is reflected through the physical fabrics, then the culture value will be the pearl that is embodied through the Laozihaos which are the soul of Qianmen Avenue. The prioritization of short-term economic values brought by western and contemporary fashion stores further alienated the New Qianmen Avenue from the historic Qianmen Avenue in old Beijingers’ memories, leading to a greater lost in authenticity.

¹⁵ Randall Mason, “Theoretical and Practical Arguments for Values-Centered Preservation” *The Journal of Heritage Stewardship* 3 (2006): 21-47

¹⁶ Lei Zhao, “Beautiful Scenery of Present Era will be Shown on Qianmen Street” *Invest Beijing* 01, (2008): 75-76

¹⁷ Zhou, “Qianmen Street: Heading for Business Revival?”

SOCIAL&POLITICAL: An Ongoing Transformation in a Bigger Context

The power of social campaign is very limited especially when facing the larger real estate investments. The controversy around the modern fashion stores on Qianmen Avenue has never stopped since the first day that the new street was open. But the real estate developer, SOHO China, merely reacted to and made changes on current business mode. One of another its controversial project, SOHO Galaxy, was completed in 2012 even under harsh criticisms for building such an out of scales modern architecture within the protected area of traditional Beijing district from both public and celebrities.¹⁸ However, there are also increasing efforts of preserving historic fabrics and traditional culture from smaller-scale and gain success. The closure of Starbucks in Forbidden City before the Olympic Games was one of these successful campaigns of preserving the unity of historic sites. It was a very similar debate to the Qianmen Avenue on whether should we allow the western business to operate at traditional Chinese heritages – a debate between economic value and cultural value. The controversy originated from a blog post of a famous Chinese TV host who argued the existence of Starbucks in Forbidden City offended the traditional Chinese culture. This blog post quickly received attention from international media as well as supports from Chinese Internet users. The pressure from the public eventually led to the closure of that Starbucks after over half a year of campaign.¹⁹ The success of this one campaign might not mean a lot to the entire field of historic preservation. However, when many of these campaigns are combined, they would be powerful enough to show a social inclination on historic preservation and gradually change the political

¹⁸ "Zaha Hadid's Galaxy Soho Project in Beijing Slammed by City's Cultural Heritage Protection Center", Realty Today, accessed Nov. 11, 2014 <http://www.realtytoday.com/articles/4622/20130805/zaha-hadid-s-galaxy-soho-project-beijing-slammed-c-cultural.htm>

¹⁹ "Starbucks closes coffeehouse in Beijing's Forbidden City", New York Times, accessed Nov. 11, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/15/world/americas/15iht-starbucks.4.6664994.html>

policies to meet the demand of public. In the most recent revise on the policy of reconstruction of historic residential area in Beijing, it emphasized on a better balance between modernization and historic preservation, reinforcing the preservation of style and features of historic Beijing, as well as launching a more flexible mechanism that encouraged the public involvement. The new policy would reward people who got involved in the community hearing process and allow privatization of people's residences if they used to be public property of people's company.

Although from historic preservation perspective, revitalization of Qianmen Avenue might not be considered as a successful example due to demolishment of authenticity of original site, its positive effect should not be ignored. The revitalization of Qianmen Avenue catalyzed the process of raising the public awareness and involvement in preservation issues, which eventually would lead to a better political environment that encouraged more public participation. In China, land selling is an important economic tool of the government that posses a big portion in government's capital. In this way, the government, as both a policy-maker and a market-participator, has a common goal of pursuing economic benefits with the real estate developers, who pay the government for renting land and make profit from it.²⁰ In general, Chinese people have comparatively lower awareness and willingness of participating in the decision-making process than Americans. For people who want to participate and get involved, the access to the political information and the power of individuals or even the non-profit organizations are usually very limited. However, with the growing controversy related to urban regeneration and large-scale deconstruction, society is becoming more and more sensitive to the preservation issues and the successful public initiatives on preservation are

²⁰ Li Yi, "Public Participation Issues in Preservation Planning: Practices of Chinese Historic District" (Master Thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 2012)

gradually increasing. With the corresponding reaction of the politic policy for an environment of public engagement, the heritage values of historic places would have a stronger voice than now when being compared to contemporary values.

CONCLUSION:

No one would question that historic preservation is necessary, just like no one would question that a city deserves a development. It is always a question about to what extend shall we preserve and to what exactly are we preserving for. We preserve and restore with intention and it is this intention which needs to be continually examined and questioned.²¹ An Architecture without continuity in both history and people's activities is just a shell without soul. We need to understand that historic preservation is not only about preserving the tangible fabrics, but also about preserving the intangible values. However, we should also be aware that all the preservation needed to be based on and complied with the development of economy and politics. What values are prioritized is greatly depended on the market and a higher level of decision-making, which in the short time neither the preservationist nor the public would be capable to change. We may criticize the revitalization of Qianmen Avenue for lacking of authenticity and culture values. But the social awareness of preservation issues as well as the economic values brought by this project should be acknowledged. All the development and transformation should be proceeded in step by step and we should allow a time for this process.

As the days go by, the metabolism of a city is irresistible and irretrievable. Just like you can never fetch water that is one hundred years old from a one hundred years old well, we

²¹Frank G. Matero, "Loss, Compensation, and Authenticity: The Contribution of Cesare Brandi to Architectural Conservation in America" *Future Anterior* 4 (2007): 45-58

should never expect the life on Qianmen Avenue to be exactly the same with 1920s. The urban settlement and social context have all been changed through time. Many of the traditional stores have already disappeared long before the revitalization project started. Before we figure out what exactly our intention and expected results of revitalization are, an unreal architecture, an illusion of “history”, as referred to Huxtable might not always be a bad thing. Even a shell without the soul could give people an experience or at least a sense of efforts of historic preservation. As long as these carriers of history exist, no matter originals or replicas, when the economic value accumulates enough capitals for redevelopment, it may be possible to rebuild the authenticity of physical fabrics and reinject missing values to the physical fabrics. Therefore, the revitalization of Qianmen Avenue should still be considered as a successful project overall for stimulating bigger contextual change and owning the possibilities of changing in future.



Figure 6: Qianmen Avenue around 1930s view to south



Figure 7: Qianmen Avenue in 2013 view to south with restored gate, electric trolley and buildings

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