

Relocation and the People - A Research on Neighborhood Renewal in the Old City of Beijing

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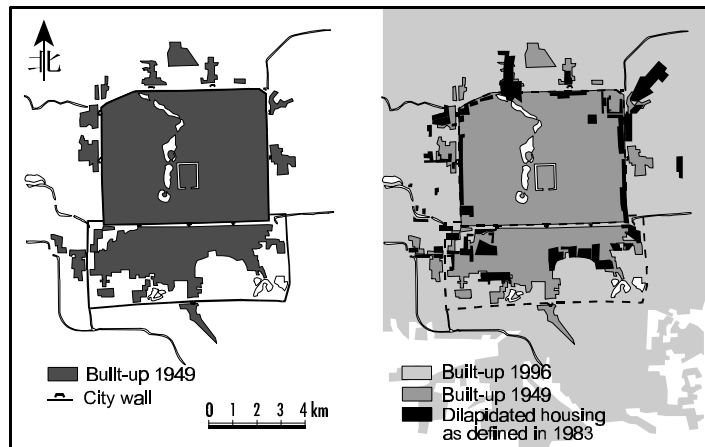
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INTRODUCTION: ISSUES IN RENEWAL AND RELOCATION

The old city of Beijing, which covers 62 sqkm, was first planned in the 13th century according to the Chinese traditional idea of planning. In the 16th century, the plan was developed and most of the city built up. Since then, the city gradually upgraded itself within the existing framework and a large part of its layout survived until today, the street pattern, the water system, the palaces and even the architecture style of the common buildings. As of the end of the 1980s, most parts of the old city are still occupied by one-story courtyard houses of various quality, built and rebuilt over the centuries. Due to insufficient maintenance and improvements in the past decades, most of this housing do not have proper kitchen and sewage facilities and are in some cases dangerous.

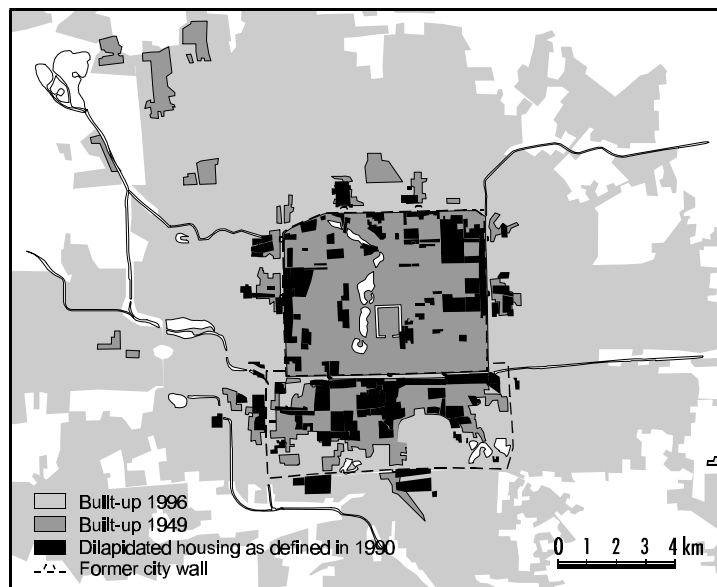
An investigation showed that by the end of 1980's, there are about 800,000 residents living in hazardously dilapidated housing, situated mainly in the older built up areas including the old walled city and the areas just outside the city gates. (Figure 1.)

Figure 1. Distribution of dilapidated housing areas as defined in the early 1980's.



To improve living conditions in these areas, the Old and Dilapidated Housing Renewal Program was initiated by the government in 1990. Since investment from the municipal government is very limited, real estate redevelopment operated by the developers are taken as solution of raising money for carrying out the renewal program, and each renewal project should be self supporting. Today, it turns out that the program has grown into a profit-led rush to rebuild a much larger part of the old city's residential neighborhoods. (Figure 2.)

Figure 2. Distribution of old and dilapidated housing areas as defined in the 1990's renewal program.



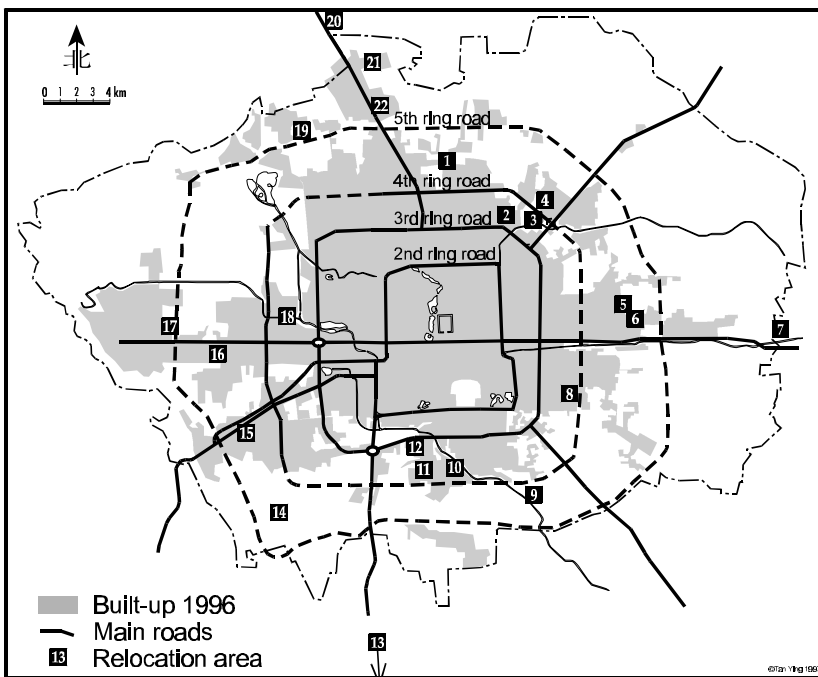
By the end of year 1996, the number of renewal projects more or less decided and in different stages of implementation was over 200; 150 parcels of which, with a total area of 22 square kilometer, are located in the four inner city districts that consist mainly of the old walled city.

The renewal program has not only exerted a major impact on the old neighborhoods of Beijing, but has also been a sensitive issue related to housing and social problems. Reduction of residential land and replacement of the residents are causing relocation of thousands of families to peripheral areas of the city. Table 1 shows the reduction of residential land and proportion of residents that can move back to the same area after renewal.

Renewal Parcel	Xiao Hou Cang	De Bao	Tao Yuan Phase 1	Guan Yuan
Construction start (year)	1988	1990	1992	1995
Reduction of residential land	9%	25%	28%	40%
Return ratio	98%	70%	21%	18%

Table 1. Reduction of residential land and proportion of residents that can move back to the same area after renewal

The policy is that all residents should pay the construction cost of the apartment if they want to move back. They also must find accommodation by themselves for 2 to 3 years during the construction (with an exception for some of the very first renewal areas started before 1992). Otherwise they are allocated a rental flat in newly developed housing areas in the suburbs. Figure 3 shows the location of new housing estates known as “relocation areas”.



Although families being relocated to the fringe areas are provided standard flats usually of better standard than their original condition, many of them are not willing to move at all.

My own research, as one part of a group study concerning the renewal of the old city of Beijing, was focused on social aspects, mainly relating to the impact of relocation on residents and the resultant potential housing problem.

Figure 3. Distribution of “relocation areas” for the renewal projects.

IMPACTS OF RENEWAL AND RELOCATION

Two main impacts in Western experience

Experience of urban renewal in many developed countries shows that, as most renewal occurred in areas consisting of poor housing and low-income families, there are at least two social impacts of renewal and relocation widely existing and discussed in the West. One is the up-rooting of working class neighborhoods and the consequent disruption of low-income residents’ social networks and families. The other is the consequent scarcity in amount and distribution of low-rent housing whenever an old inner city neighborhood is “renewed”, and the increasing difficulty for low-income families to find any affordable accommodation in the city.

Our research was to find out if the present large scale urban renewal in Beijing produces the same or similar situations, and also to work out more sensitive model of renewal.

Social-economic conditions in renewal areas

Social-economic condition of the families in renewal areas is the key issue to understand what kind of impact the renewal will bring to the residents. To find out the situation in Beijing's renewal areas, we carried out a series of surveys both in areas next to the former city wall and in the very central area. (Figure 4.)

Together with municipal statistics and surveys done by other researchers, we came to a conclusion.

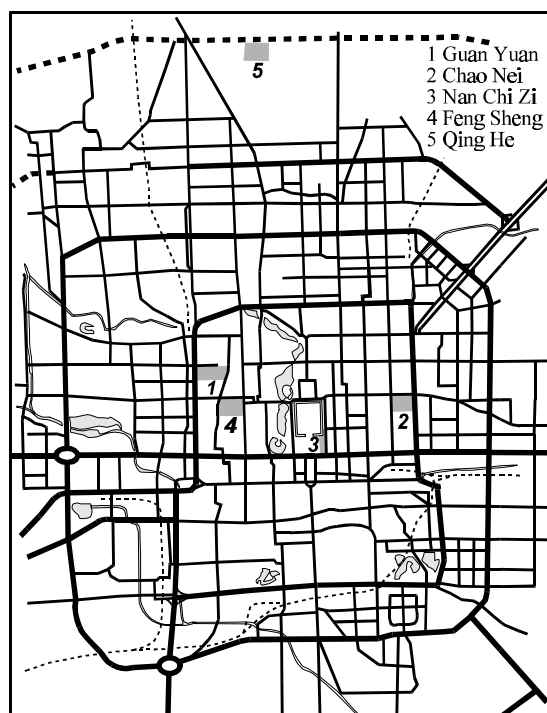


Figure 4. Distribution of surveyed areas for this research

Statistic shows that the average social-economic status of the residents in the old city's one-story housing areas are relatively low. Here, the residents consists of a relatively high proportion of elderly people; families of low income; working population of low education level mainly employed in district- or city owned small factories and shops. A relatively small proportion of individuals have a high employment position or work in central-government-owned enterprises. The poorer physical condition an area has, the poorer the average eco-social condition it contains.

Yet, the social mix in all of these neighborhoods is remarkable. Building quality and living conditions in different yards can be surprisingly different. Many of the old palaces and mansions were taken by government institutions and high leaders while the common people's homes have become more and more crowded and dilapidated due to lack of maintenance for decades. To support the coexistence of different lifestyles and living standards has always been an important character of the courtyard house.

Locally distributed social ties

Further surveys on social life and residents' attitude towards relocation clearly shows that a large proportion of the families had lived in the same area for more than 20 years, many for generations, and are really rooted in their neighborhood and environment. This was shown from the following four aspects.

1. Working place. In two of our survey areas, we recorded the location of residents' work. The result shows that 2/3 of the employed residents have managed to find their working place within a distance of 5 km from their home, a distance of 20-30 minutes by bicycle. This is a practical arrangement to save money and time from commuting.
2. Public services. Residents prefer to live close to their working places, convenient public transportation, good quality schools and shopping centers. This shows that most of the residents are very much dependent on local public services.
3. Social networks. Resources for help was included in the survey. We found that when in trouble, residents are most often provided help by or are most likely to provide help to their neighbors, relatives, friends and co-workers living close by, and the local neighborhood committee. Social ties in a supportive network of these families and residents are locally distributed based on the spatial location of their home.
4. Unwillingness to move. Although most families are happy about improvement of their living condition, less than 10% of the families in all the four surveyed areas are willing to move to a new "modern" apartment located outside of the fourth ring road of the city.

Limited by time and energy, the low income families are "tied" to there own reachable area as the city still has no efficient transportation system.

Follow-up survey in “relocation areas”

A follow-up survey was carried out in one typical relocation area in Qinghe town in the northwest fringe area of the city. (Figure 4.) 119 families that moved in from different renewal areas in the city center during the past two years were interviewed. Table 2 shows the general complaints by the residents after moving.

Complaints	% of 119 households	Average age of respondents
1 Service and management are not as good as in the old city	76%	47
2 Increasing family expenditure	73%	46
3 Increased waste of time and energy	60%	43
4 Feels unhappy and boring due to reduction of social interaction	42%	46
5 Less public facilities available	40%	49
6 Life becomes more difficult due to the lack of mutual help among relatives and neighbors	39%	51
7 Living condition and environment is not very good	39%	48
		48 (Average age of all respondents)

Table 2. Complaints by the residents after moving.

More conclusions were drawn as following:

First, monthly expenditures increased significantly for many families due to the higher cost for housing and commuting. (Table 3.) This has become one common complaint by the residents. As the housing area of new apartments, typically with larger living rooms and built-in kitchen, bathroom, and shared semi-public space included in the calculation, usually increased over the old courtyard housing, and since location is not a factor in the official rent, families usually have to pay more rent after moving out. Compulsory central heating is also an additional cost that cannot be avoided.

At the same time, most of the residents have to remain at the same job after moving. And since quality of public facilities in the peripheral areas is generally not as good as in the city center, children still go back to the old school and elderly people to the familiar hospital in the city center. All of these bring higher expenses for transportation.

Increase of monthly expenditure to the total income	1-10%	11-20%	21-30%	>30%
Number of households	26	40	16	8
% in the total 91 households	29%	44%	18%	9%

Table 3. Increase of monthly expenditure for rent and commuting to the total income after moving.

Second, besides the direct economic loss, time and energy wasted on transportation is significant for residents at work and at school. If the average commuting time increase for 200 residents is 1 hour per day each person as we found in the surveyed area, 200 hours are wasted every day, not counting suffering on the overcrowded buses at peak hours. Children who must choose between commuting or not attending their previous good schools in the city center suffer most.

Third, restrained by time and money, many residents have to live with fewer public amenities and reduce their spare-time activities. Among the 119 families, 65% of them have reduced their recreation activities, 53% of the families reported that their elderly members had to reduce their visits to hospitals, children in 30% of the families reduced their activities after school, 19% of the families found their members attending less spare-time education.

Fourth, comparing the resources of help and support to a family before and after moving, the big contrast shows that the old supportive network was destroyed, and new ones were not so easy to establish. (Table 4.)

All these situations bring major impacts on the residents, both from economic aspects and from psychological aspects. (Table 5.) People of different age groups may feel the impact in different ways, with the young adults generally least likely to feel any impact of relocation.

Before moving, who could provide you help in time of trouble, i.e. illness? (113 families)		Now after moving, who can provide you help in the same situation? (115 families)	
Relatives living together or close by	50%	Relatives moved here together	10%
Relatives living elsewhere	16%	Relatives living elsewhere	17%
Neighbors and friends living close by	53%	Old neighbors and friends moved here together	17%
	-	New neighbors	13%
Friends living elsewhere	8%	Friends living elsewhere	8%
Co-workers living elsewhere	6%	Co-workers living elsewhere	2%
Workunit	14%	Workunit	2%
Neighborhood committee	19%	Neighborhood committee	1%
Other organizations	1%	Other organizations	1%
Nobody	15%	Nobody	66%

Table 4. Resource of help before and after moving for the families surveyed in Qinghe relocation area.

Main impacts	% of 94 households	Average age of respondents
1 Life becomes boring	50%	46
2 Direct and indirect economical loss	46%	49
3 Loss of daily help and care	37%	53
4 Feel lost and grief	23%	53
5 No noticeable impact	21%	41
		48 (Average age of all respondents)

Table 5. Impacts felt by the residents after moving to Qinghe relocation area.

Potential housing problems caused by renewal

Many of the old city's residents rely on the central location itself for employment and services, but they can only afford to stay in low-rent house. This reveals the social value of old and "poor" courtyard housing in the city center in addition to its architectural value in forming a unique urban environment.

Providing housing for low-income families is one of the basic task of the government. For low-income families, the choice of housing location and standard is constrained by their affordability. And the government subsidy to improve their housing condition is always limited. Therefore, it is important to keep the low-rent housing stock of different standards and at different accessible locations to meet the needs of low-income families. Existing municipal-government-owned and privately owned "poor" low-rent housing in the city center serves this important function. As discussed above, a significant proportion of its residents are of relatively low social-economic status.

When the existing low-rent housing stock is quickly replaced by business use and housing of much higher standard for sale, reduction of low-rent housing in the city center could not be reversed for a long time. This loss of low-rent housing can not be compensated for by other housing located close to the city center since most of them has already become crystallized property that can only flow within certain large "work units". So more and more original residents of low and middle incomes have to move to the distant city periphery without much choice. We can foresee that if the renewal continue in this way, low-rent housing accessible for the relocated are only those of same standard and distributed in certain relocation areas. This is causing a change of the overall condition of low-rent housing in a direction that certainly not favor the low-income families, especially for those who rely on the city center to make a living but cannot afford to move back into a new apartment on the original site after renewal.

OPTIONAL APPROACH TO RENEWAL

Changing situation and the residents opinion towards renewal

After several years of rapid redevelopment in the city center, the real-estate market is cooling down. We believe this may be a chance to promote different approaches to renewal. Our research in the northwest quarter of the old city shows that, here, since most of the truly hazardous dilapidated areas are already rebuilt, later projects usually include areas with many good quality buildings both for housing and business use, and the general infrastructure conditions are not as bad as in those areas first renewed. Another important fact is, as residents are gradually moving to new housing areas due to many years of effort by the government in housing construction, the situation of overcrowdedness is also gradually improving. So it is easy to understand that the residents are not as enthusiastic about renewal in today's old city neighborhoods as they were at the outset of the program.

The residents' opinions towards renewal also give arguments for an alternative approach. While most families want to stay in the same area after renewal, their opinions towards the method of renewal are very different according to their different living conditions and economic conditions. We found that in different surveyed areas there are always families that prefer to maintain their existing situation without any renewal, and a large proportion of families are willing to pay to have their housing condition improved on the site. A brief analysis concerning the families' existing living condition, monthly income and the householder's age was conducted in one area. There are several useful findings:

1. Families that prefer to move to the city periphery are relatively young and have the poorest living condition but not necessarily the lowest incomes.
2. Families that prefer to stay in the same situation or move to nearby unrenewed areas of slightly better condition are the oldest, poorest and have the fewest complaints about their present living condition.
3. Families that prefer thorough reconstruction and to move back by buying a new apartment at a preferential price (equal to construction cost) or improve their original housing by themselves are the ones that have a relatively high monthly income.

Two important conclusion: One is that the one-story courtyard house in the old city, poor or not, is still considered to be the most preferable accommodation by some of the residents, especially the old and the poor who have the least choice, so demolishing everything is not necessary and not to those residents' benefit. Another is that different approaches to renewal like improving at a modest scale by the residents' own effort is economically feasible.

Optional approach

Based on the research focusing on the social aspects, we come to the same conclusion as from researchers concerning preservation of characteristics of the Old City's physical environment, the best way is to adopt a gradual infill model of renewal. The suggestion simply is, to keep and maintain the old courtyard houses where there is no need for immediate rebuilding; to rebuild yards that are really in bad condition; to provide moderate improvement of the infrastructure and public space; to redevelop the most profitable land along the main streets when appropriate to cross-subsidize the more moderate improvements.

Compared with large-scale redevelopment, a small-scale gradual improvement can reduce the impacts of relocating large numbers of residents in a very short time. It will help to keep a certain proportion of low-rent housing to reduce the impact on families of lower income that otherwise can never dream to stay in this area as soon as the redevelopment takes place (although gentrification may still occur in the long run). This is a more sensitive way of meeting the needs of families in different situations.

OBSTACLES AND LATEST DISCUSSION

Although it is not difficult to understand that new approaches need to be adopted, there are still fundamental obstacles to practicing the new ideas:

1. Most decision makers and common people never experienced or could understand the life style and the culture in the old city neighborhood. They simply view the old one-story housing as a symbol of a backward and miserable life, just like viewing an ancient painting as a roll of yellow paper that is only good for recycling for make new paper. Expectations of the old city's environment is a vision of neat, tree-shaded buildings which can only be achieved by replacing the old ones, except for some houses and areas set aside for museum-like preservation. A common argument against conservation of the old city neighborhood is: a poetic memory of the past must give way to the need of "modern" life. That shows the housing needs of low-income families and the value of old neighborhood as community are not yet fully understood.
2. All the history and stories lies in every street and lane that has survived for centuries are still not considered as sufficient reasons for preventing the streets and lanes from being widened for traffic or simply disappear totally. Since present funding demands the redevelopment of the areas alongside them, widened streets and better infrastructure in turn facilitate property-led heavy redevelopment in the old city at a much faster pace.
3. After several years of fast development, real estate development and construction companies themselves have become strong forces pushing the renewal forward. Considerations of conservation and benefits of the residents are far less than that of profit.

A call for new strategy of conservation the integrated environment of the Old City while still improving the living condition for its residents can be heard due to the efforts of many people at various position. Yet, lots of things need to be done to change people's ideas: information and education through newspapers, academic discussion through academic journals and conferences, reports to decision makers, practice of small scale improvement...

SUMMARY

Based on a number of surveys, the research proved that Beijing is experiencing similar situations as found in the West during old neighborhood renewal.

1. For historical reasons, a big proportion of families living in the old city of Beijing affected by the renewal program are of a relatively low social status. They live on relatively low incomes and depend on locally spread social ties.
2. To many families, the centrally located low-rent housing has a much more important socio-economical significance than just a shelter. Although most families relocated to the new residential areas at the city's periphery have seen an improvement of their housing condition, many of them found it not enough to compensate for their economical loss and psychological suffer caused by moving.
3. Resulting from the renewal, the municipal government-owned land and housing are reducing and the city's low-rent housing stock is spatially more concentrated to the fringe areas. Not only are the old city's low-income families suffering from these changes, it also makes it more difficult for the government to fulfill its new task of providing suitable housing for low-income families.

After a close study of today's physical environment in the central old city and a number of surveys on the residents' needs and opinions, small scale gradual renewal and rehabilitation is seen as an alternative approach from the concern for the residents, in addition to the concern for the physical environment.

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