

## The Three Cities of Beijing

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### Abstract

In this photo-essay Francesco Marano identifies three models of city in the context of Beijing. The work is the result of a short fieldwork during the workshop “*Urban Visions. Strategic Images in Constructing New Worlds*” (Jiao Tong University of Beijing, 2-11 luglio 2014).

### Keywords

Beijing, City, Urban Ethnography, Visual Culture

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These short notes are the outcome of a ten days “fieldwork” in Beijing in July 2014. It is not a true ethnographic research, because the short time of the fieldwork and the less of interviews with the inhabitants of the city. But the observation and other research methods described below permitted a visually based knowledge.

Walking and emplacement have been the main methods I used in research. Only recently *walking* has been introduced in the ethnographic methods (Ingold and Vergunst 2008), even if there are, at this time, few supporters of this approach. Anyway, the practice of *walking* has a long history that starts in the domain of contemporary art (Careri 2006) and nowadays it is placed at the intersection of many disciplines: urban studies, contemporary art, anthropology. It wouldn't be possible to think of *walking* as a research method without considering the anthropological focus on the body that started in the 90's of last century with the well-known Csordas' article (Csordas 1990), the insight of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, and Bourdieu's theory of practice. *Walking* recalls the concept of *place* as theorized by the philosopher-geographer Edward Casey that wrote: “Places happen” (Casey 1996: 27).

*Walking*, as a scientific method, incorporates the work of the eye and other senses acting in the moving body. It respects the real phenomenology of an “observing” body not separable for its environment: when we walk, look, ear, touch, smell, feel

and think. A consequence of this approach is that visual knowledge can't be separated from the work of the other senses.

The second method used in my research was *emplacement*. *Emplacement*, as a method, has been theorized by Casey during his theoretical analysis of place. We are essentially emplaced beings, entangled in a place. Later, other scholars, above all anthropologists (Howes 2005; Pink 2009), have appropriated this concept and included it in ethnographic methodology. When we are emplaced, we can focus our sensory attention to the small place in which we stay, observing what people are doing. While when we are walking, we cross people, buildings, roads and we get a sense of the connection between one place and the other. Both walking and emplacement are necessary in the cultural analysis of a place.

I have used the method of *emplacement* in the areas of Xizhimen, Jaoda, and National Trade Center.

With the modernization of the city, since 1976, new subway lines have been constructed, old neighborhoods have been demolished and new buildings have reshaped Beijing day by day creating a sort of spectacle of the architecture where the city in itself is the main focus of attraction. The moving of the focus from the singular architectures to the whole urban area happens within the frame of a postmodernist aesthetics where the meaning is the signifier itself, not the signified. The MacLuhan's slogan "the medium is the message" becomes "the city is the message". A political result of the shining spectacularization of the city is the removal of the contemporary social issues that maybe only nowadays the Chinese intellectuals are questioning: how has it changed the life of the former inhabitants of the *hutong*? Who kept the memory of the old ways of life? How do public spaces meet people's needs? How are new buildings connected to places?

The postmodernist character of Beijing is not only in the shining movement of its vertical continuous modernization, but also in its paratactic architectural narrativity showing different but precise styles through which the city tells itself. Some scholars state that the Chinese postmodernism is an answer to the various social problems produced by the urban modernization<sup>1</sup>, and there is the necessity

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<sup>1</sup> "Rapid urbanization and widespread reconstruction of existing urban areas create enormous problems for Chinese urban planners and architects. Some urban planners have pointed out that profit seeking increases the size and density of buildings, and decreases the distances between them. This extensive, and sometimes abusive, development of the land has further debased the fragile environment. In addition, the scope of construction and the rapid rate in which these projects are completed have created enormous problems in the relocation of the population, in the protection of historical landmarks, and in the building of public-service facilities. Capricious and repetitive construction wastes land and financial and material resources, and threatens to destroy the preexisting structure of urban space and the community network. Those involved in the new round of urban construction and renewal tend to be oblivious to the fact that their goal is to revitalize, not to abolish, the social and human environment by means of a radical rearrangement of the urban space" (Wang and Zhang 1997: 175).

to understand the economic reasons in which the modernization of Beijing is embedded<sup>2</sup>.

“Chinese postmodernism is not merely an idea, a school, or a style but an existential choice, a strategy of survival in a new, globalized (and localized) environment” (Mingxian and Xudong 1997: 175). More precisely, “Chinese postmodernism is characterized by its spatial plurality, its hybridity, and its inclusiveness, in which various schools, theories, and ideologies coexist and compete in the same socioeconomic environment. But Chinese cities also deeply reflect the cultural traditions of an ancient East Asian civilization. The diversity, complexity, and fragmentation of contemporary Chinese architectural culture betrays a kind of conscious, sober schizophrenia indicative of the cultural logic of the contemporary world as it is articulated on Chinese terrain” (Wang and Zhang 1997: 163-164).

If Wang and Zhang see in Beijing a postmodern aesthetic, Daniel Benjamin Abramson sees a bumbling style in the urbanization. He claims: “despite years of planning, Chinese urban designers and preservationists were unprepared for the demands that the actual dynamics of implementation would put on them. Under the hurried and unpredictable conditions of rapid urbanization, it is understandable that city builders usually borrow as much from previous generations’ aesthetics and design techniques as they create anew. The result is usually an *incomplete vision, aesthetically compromised and ripe* with contradictions to be addressed by subsequent visionaries” (Abramson 2007: 130; italic added by the author). Therefore, for Abramson, “visual aesthetics and ‘visuality’ – ‘sight as a social fact’ – were not just expressive of this political culture but also instrumental to it” (Idem: 131).

### **Landscape, urbanscapes, visualscape, socialscape**

I interpreted the urbanscape of Beijing identifying three main visual styles. Therefore, the starting point of my insight is the shape of the city in particular areas, but in the argumentation of my view it is not possible to separate visuality

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<sup>2</sup> “In a recent debate in *City* (Vol. 10, No.1), scholars from different disciplines agreed upon the necessity to identify the larger cultural and socio-economic forces that underlie the production of iconic architecture. [...]

These discussions amount to the observation that we need to go beyond the analysis of the style, form and aesthetics of architectural iconicity, and instead examine the socio-economic institutions in which iconic architecture is embedded. [...] It has also become common that a place is not only consumed locally by residents and visitors by physically being there and experiencing it, but also consumed globally by a wider audience

of spectators who watch the images of places circulate in global telecommunication networks. Urban space is also subject to multiple, and often contradictory interpretations, and invested with different meanings

by both local and trans-local agents. These competing interpretations at various scales form an essential process of the transnational production of space as well. Transnational production of urban space, constituted by the global flow of investment, design concepts, technology and professionals, has played a major role in reshaping the built environments in post-socialist Chinese cities” (Ren 2008).

from other dimensions of the urbanscape. I use the term urbanscape including all the features of the social life in the city: the social practices, the environment, the sense of place, the climate, the symbolism, the history, and so on.

“Visuality” refers above all to the shapes of the place, but also to the connections of the place – and its visible items – to the imaginary, the human practices and the memories. Anyway, the ethnographic approach to the enquiry of the place, even if “limited” to the visual style, removes any doubt about the possibility of focusing the research only on the sight. As noted before, the “work of the eye” is not separable from the other senses. “Because vision is an embodied experience, it is altered by the infinite range of the possibilities presented by corporeal performance. The body moves in space – quickly or slowly, the head still or moving side to side, up or down – the eyes view a scene, and a cognitive process begins in which particles of light are assembled by the brain to create an ordered image” (Harris and Ruggles 2007: 6).

### **The Symbolic City**







*Symbols are polisemics: the meanings change with the use of specific groups (youths, elders, dancers, etc.). People appropriate places and use symbols to play their identity.*

**Keywords:** Horizontality; Collective practices; Sense of community (people share the place); Production of locality (belonging to the place); Production of identity (representing themselves through the place); Multi-sensoriality; Intense communication; Community space.

## The Logo City









*The Logo City is a mono-functional city. Its visual symbols should be wonderful for the sight, but it is designed only for one aim. People can't appropriate the place. If the symbol is polisemic, logo is mono-meaningfully.*

Keywords: Verticality; Mono-functionality; Mono-sensoriality (only sight: no touch, no smell, etc.); No communication among people; Almost private use.

## The Augmented City



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Beijing, *The Place*, video 1



Beijing, *The Place*, video 1

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