



Visions of Space in the New Beijing

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Introduction:

The evolution of modern cities is one of the key developments that historians can emphasize to uncover layers of social change, discussions about a people's expression of identity, and the role of economics in shaping patterns of everyday life. The instructor of a World Civilizations course, particularly those coming out of the older model of Western Civilization, focuses on the emergence of such western emporia as St. Petersburg, and Napoleon III's New Paris of the 1870s, and George Haussman's concomitant vision of urban planning expressed in Latin American cities like Buenos Aires and Guadelajara.

Beijing offers the World Civilization instructor an opportunity to expand the scope of his or her course, offer students opportunities to think about the city as a portrait on which are painted colors of national identity and meaning, and particularly the tensions between the forces of those who seek to preserve and express the past in the present and those who embrace a vision of unvarnished futurism. China's new cityscape based on the architectural vision of such international luminaries as Rem Koolhaus, Norman Foster offers Beijing as the iconic representations of futuristic spaces, perhaps more so than New York or any city in Western Europe.

An introduction to Beijing would offer students in World Civilizations courses an entre into 20th century and 21st century art, ideas about design, and the role of cities as

sculptures of modernity. Students should contextualize urban design. They must be expected to think about the kind of vision of urban space that architects and city planners project. They should also be encouraged to make comparisons across time and space

This perhaps more than any other way offers insights to think about globalization--that popular cliché—in a tangible light. Has a true era of globalblization entered when cities of the future have become based on Rem Koolhaas' vision of the generic city, cities that culturally and artistically cross time and space? Students should consider whether the architectural style constructed in China represents the emergence of a new planetary cosmopolis that expresses no cultural boundaries. Does the Post-Modern City accomplish what architects like Rem Koolhaas set out to accomplish? Students should think deeply about the gains and loss from what Joseph Schumpeter described as the creative destruction of the brand of capitalism that China has embraced in pursuit of a new vision of urban space. In this endeavor, they will enjoy an opportunity to think afresh about the nexus of past, present, and future.

The Process:

Included in this lecture outline is a power point presentation with slides to accompany the text. It is designed to encourage students to think about the role of buildings, boulevards, plazas, and public and commercial space that determines how urban life is practiced. Students should be encouraged to express their own ideas and reflect. In the final analysis, one hopes that a class unit such as this with a heavy visual emphasis on Beijing's architectural topography will offer something new and refreshing by contrast to

the more staid lecture on political developments. The presentation is designed to capture the best mixture of art and the humanities to enrich any freshmen level class in world history.

Pre-Conditions:

Students should already have some basic understanding of how China confronted the imperial presence of Britain, France, Russia, and Japan in China in the 19th and 20th centuries. They should also have a basic understanding of Marxism-Leninism and the historical events of the 1949 revolution.

Follow up:

Students should be able to write a research paper or an essay in class on an exam—like:

Compare and contrast the vision of George Haussman and Napoleon III in the construction of the New Paris with that of the modern Chinese state in the 1990s. What has been required of both to accomplish mastery of control over the landscape of everyday life?

How does the (re)construction of Beijing illustrate the tensions and struggles within post-Mao China?

Consider writing a research paper in which you compare New York's response to the destruction of Pennsylvania Station and Robert Moses' attending vision of New York

with that of China's debate over the leveling of the old parts of the city to build a new Beijing.

Write a research paper in which you consider the role of monuments in cities. Choose three monuments from cities on three separate continents. They should come from both the 19th century and the 20th century. Consider how they differ and how they are similar, and think about the philosophical foundation behind each artist's expression of public life.

An Overview of Tiananmen Square and the New Beijing:

I. In discussing Beijing, one must start at the center. And in the center of Beijing, if not the "center" of China is Tiananmen Square. It was there that Mao Zedong proclaimed the emergence of a New China: the People's Republic of China on 1 October 1949. Chiang Kai shek's portrait fell, and the new portrait of Mao rose up to begin China anew. Thenceforth the Square was the focal point for parades, state funerals, and expressions of civic life.

A. Along a north-south Axis the Communist envisioned a new Tiananmen Square that would supplant the Forbidden City as the political center of the country.

B. And What do you often see at the center of a city?

--courthouse, church, presidential house palace, capital building, monuments, plazas, perhaps a town green and the like.

C. The Center of Revolutionary Tiananmen Square is the Monument to the People's Heroes

II. The Monument to the People's Heroes

A. What do you see here?

B. It is extremely tall. It is a stele that rises to about 37.94 meters. It dwarfs Tiananmen Gate. The stele was a form of monument commonly used in China to commemorate the dead.

C. It features a series of panels—including the burning of British opium in 1840. Why do you think that imagery was included?

1. Another shows the Communists fighting a guerilla war against Japan in World War II. How are the people depicted? Do any of them stand out? Who is chiefly responsible for nation building according to the artist here? Is there one lone soldier on a horse and pedestal in Tiananmen Square? (hardly)

2. What is the general point that Mao Zedong was trying to get across here? --- namely, that the revolution of 1949 was at the core an anti-imperialist revolution against foreign over-lordship following the long Century of Humiliation that characterized the 1800s. The masses of people made the revolution. The masses make history.

3. They don't completely ignore the role of the great leader. Who is the great leader celebrated in China's Tiananmen Square?

a. unlike the European tradition of a man on a pedestal, Tiananmen Square in its own revolutionary way exhibits the great leader in the quintessential twentieth century manner: a portrait based upon a photograph.

b. and the Great Leader himself is exhibited in the Square: his corpse.

III. The Size of Tianamen Square

A. In celebrating the masses of the past and present, Mao wanted a big square that would embody the size of China.

1. He wanted a square that would hold a proverbial “billion people.”\
2. The call for a square of that size exemplified Mao’s hyperbole,
3. But it was expanded to hold approximately 400,000 and to 600,000 after Mao’s Zedong’s death.

B. Today it is the largest open air space in the world designed to hold the masses for civic parades, mass meetings and the like.

IV. The Topography of Tiananmen Square: the entire square is organized around a North-South Axis, not unlike the model of European cities that are typified by a cathedral or church in a cruciform.

A. Beyond Tiananmen Gate is the Forbidden City with its 10,000 room palace.

B. On Tiananmen Gate, the original 500 year old structure being rebuilt in 1969, is the portrait of Mao Zedong.

1. While the masses make history as exemplified by the Revolutionary monument, they do so through the foresight of Mao Zedong.

2. Not only does the portrait of Mao Zedong serve as a basis of unity within the mind of a great leader, but the Great Leader is there.

3. Right after Mao died, a decision was made that he would be preserved like Lenin in a new Memorial Hall. However much China has changed the presence of Mao is always there.

a. the change is there in the street vendors who sell cheap trinkets to tourists in a new commercial economy

b. it's there as the whole city has risen like a phoenix of glass and steel to proclaim a new commercial age.

D. Also surrounding Mao are the remnants of his China the Great Hall of the People lies on the western section of the Square, whilst directly across is the National Museum.

1. The Great Hall of the People and the Museum of Chinese History were built within ten months between 1958 and 1959 to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic.

2. Over three decades, roads, bridges, residential buildings, gates, walls were all destroyed to create this harmonious square of an orderly, but revolutionary, Chinese state.

E. To summarize:

1. the representatives of the people govern in the Great Hall of the People through the vision of Chairman Mao whose portrait hangs on Tiananmen gate and whose corpse lies in Chairman Mao Memorial Hall. All co-exist on the basis of the memories of previous revolutionaries who have gone before and hope to make new memories to fill the caverns of the National Museum.

2. So what is exhibited at Tiananmen Square is a state exhibition of Past, Present, and Future. In the midst of the various monuments to the past and present is the vast open space which the public fill.

V. But in the final analysis, China has not been satisfied with advancing revolutionary memory. There is a revolution ongoing in the cities that evokes change against everything Chairman Mao envisioned.

A. Tiananmen Square in the final analysis is but one part of Beijing. It is a vast city built around six concentric ring motorways that contain an outwardly expanding city of new suburbs.

B. At first Urban Planners exhibited some ambivalence over the course of China's architectural landscape:

1. Even the Avenue of Eternal Peace exhibits some ambiguity: as opposed to Tiananmen Square that runs in a longitudinal North South Axis, the Avenue runs on a latitudinal east-west scale:

a. the Military Museum, the Minorities Exhibition Hall, and later the Beijing Hotel.

2. Along the Avenue of Eternal Peace a vast boulevard reminiscent of George Haussman's New Paris, some buildings feature ornamental columns and traditional ornately finished Chinese-style pagoda roofs.

a. only older modern buildings built in the era of the Republic (1912-1949) look truly "Chinese" with eaves, pagodas, and courtyards.

b. Examples include Peking University which is the former campus of Yenching University, founded and built by American Presbyterians. (albeit, the University, often typical of Anglo-American style campuses is outside the city center)

3. the newer buildings elsewhere in the city have no such cultural-specific features of ornamentation. They are plain, modern, and bombastic.

What do you see here? (Show a Picture of the CCTV Building)

- a. What message is conveyed?
- b. What is the architect expressing?

C. They include:

1. Some of the more known buildings include the Central China Television Headquarters (CCTV), a building that is roughly the equivalent of thirty-seven football fields and almost five times as tall as the Arc de Triomphe.

a. Designed by Rem Koolhaas and his partner Ole Scheeren of the Rotterdam based Office for Metropolitan Architecture

b. it is the world's second largest office building save the Pentagon.

c. What do you think Rem Koolhaas had in mind when he designed the building? Someone describe it. Consider the fact that it houses the national television service.

d. Rem Koolhaas envisioned this space as a way for the public to look into the workings of the national media.

e. Government agencies in China embrace the kind of modernity and vision of future that these architectural typologies represent, but they embrace the kind of openness that western architects envision in creating these kinds of space with great reluctance.

f. a vast plaza that surrounds the building will be limited to employees of the company.

g. discussions are underway to close two local roads that cut through the site

2. Lord Norman Foster's new \$3.8 billion terminal at the Beijing airport is among the largest buildings in the world.

a. This is the way tourists come into China, a massive skeleton of steel girders. You can see how it's put together, not unlike a Medieval Cathedral.

b. Expressing the limitlessness of aviation, and perhaps China's rise, it offers grand vistas over looking the runway and

3. The National Stadium, designed by the Swiss firm of Herzog & de Meuron, who also designed the Tate Modern in London, is often referred to as the Bird's Nest.

a. the Stadium sits on a vast paved plaza that was created when a residential area was destroyed to make room for this centerpiece of the Beijing 2008 Summer Olympics.

b. the building is the equivalent to a twenty-five story building.

c. It is flanked by a broad boulevard designed by Albert Speer Jr., the 74 year old architect who is the son of Adolf Hitler's architect and planner of the New Berlin.

4. the National Aquatic Center referred to as the Water Cube,

a. was designed by the Australian firm of PTW, working with engineers of the firm ARUP.

b. it features a huge, blue polymer bubbles.

5. and the Grand Theatre designed by the French architect Paul Andreu (architect of Charles DeGaulle Airport) as the Big Egg, the Alien's Egg, and sometimes the Giant Doo-Doo.

a. the Grand Theatre is the first building to be erected in the historic center of Beijing since the Chairman Mao mausoleum was built opposite the Forbidden City.

b. The new National Theatre is just west of Tiananmen Square. It stands along the Avenue of Eternal Peace, the east-west latitudinal corridor that borders Tiananmen Square.

6. Consider the vocabulary people use: the water cube, the big egg, the birds nest--would they refer to the Chairman Mao Memorial Hall as the big box? Or the old fart's coffin? There is a sense of liberty that people can take with these architectural styles of the post-modern brand

VI. So if we can talk about George Haussman's New Paris, what is the New Beijing?

A. One could argue that it is based on Rem Koolhaas' notion of the Generic City that he develops in his book *S,M,L,XL*

B. The Generic city, popular across Asia and witnessed in such places as Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Singapore, is tied to no one place or moment in time.

1. It is not rooted in any one identity.

2. Koolhaas specifically emphasizes that identity itself—rooted in the past—is becoming passé.

3. the exponential growth of the global population means that so many people are arriving in the world at one time with no ties to a long-lost past. The past is too limiting for an exploding population—"too 'small' to be inhabited and shared by those alive."

The Generic City is open to all.

a. As architect Rem Koohaus suggests: "The Generic City breaks with the destructive cycle of dependency: it is nothing but a reflection of present need and present ability. It is the city without history. It is big enough for everybody. It is easy. It does not need maintenance. If it gets too small it just expands. If it gets old it just self-

deconstructs and renews. It is equally exciting—or unexciting—everywhere. It is “superficial” –like a Hollywood studio lot, it can produce a new identity every Monday morning.”

b. During China’s Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, the state policy was to force people to leave cities and move to rural areas to labor in the fields.

c. More recently the population of Beijing has risen: It is up to a population of 18 million—an increase of 11 million in just one decade.

C. Beijing like other Asian cities--Hong Kong, Shanghai, Singapore --is typified by its own verticality, but characteristic of the Generic City of the twentieth century it is a city with its six concentric rings designed to accommodate the influx and outflow of people over time. It grows and expands by circular highways that mark the passage of time like the rings on a tree.

D. It is this vision of a futuristic, commercial city that Beijing’s urban planners have embraced.

1. the new postmodern structures rise up to proclaim a New Beijing and a new China.

2. The buildings don’t just house a corporate culture but a new vibrant night-life and blocks of stores that have become monuments to a new consumerism.

D. Yet history is not completely abandoned. It becomes tourism; it becomes commercialized. Some older neighborhoods are saved, preserved, and look far grander than they ever did in “real” life.

1. As Kookhaus puts it: “History is the major preoccupation, even industry, of the Generic City. On the liberated ground, around the restored hovels, still more hotels are constructed to receive additional tourists in direct proportion to the erasure of the past.”

2. This is true of Beijing’s narrow alley-ways called hutongs with their traditional grey compound houses.

3. 90% of the Hutong fabric is being wiped out

4. Beijing residents embrace the new city, but lament the destruction of the fabric of neighborhoods that have offered homes to generations of native Beijing residents. Suddenly a diffusion of neighborhoods across the city into modern high-rise buildings has emerged.

VII. A debate has persisted over the meaning of China’s new era of urban rebuilding.

A. Some speak of China’s burst of urban redesign as exemplary of the totalitarian megalomania that characterized Adolf Hitler’s vision of the New Berlin in the 1930s.

1. (Here it would be appropriate, instead of lecturing, to assign Nina Khrushcheva’s “The PRC’s ‘Triumph of the Will,’” published 4 August 2008 in the Taipei Times

a. See link:

<http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2008/08/04/2003419333>

b. It would be sensible to have students read the article and ask them to consider the merits of Khrushcheva’s criticism. I summarize her main points below:

1. Professor Nina Khrushcheva compares the 2008 Beijing Olympics to the 1936 Berlin Olympics in design and purpose. Like the fascists of the 1930s, the Chinese of the twenty-first century are using large-scale works of public architecture to exhibit their new-found sense of power and greatness status.

2. More specifically, critics point to the fact that the Chinese government has employed Albert Speer Jr. to design a North-South Axis that would connect the Forbidden City with the new National Stadium and a new railway station in the southern section of Beijing.

3. The design is reminiscent of the architect's father's for Adolf Hitler's Berlin.

B. Others would argue that the a-historical architectural philosophy of Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius is based on the assumption that the modern style could be applied to any regime and any nationality.

1. The Generic city is just that, a generic style shorn of any cultural or historical identity.

2. In the thinking of Rem Koolhaas, it is open to all.

C. Another article that offers a more balanced approach is Alexander Hosch's "Building for the Bad." <http://print.signandsight.com/features/1152.html>
And Jasper Becker, "Seeing Red." February 2004 Travel and Leisure.
<http://www.travelandleisure.com/articles/seeing-red/page/1/print>

Concluding Points:

A discussion of the New China would give students an opportunity to discuss modern architecture in the 20th and 21st century and explore what this style means for the people who inhabit cities and the form of image-making that cities project to define themselves. In a World History class an over-view of the New China could serve as a capstone to a larger discussion about conceptualizing modernization and urban space. By considering the post-modern work of Norman Foster and Rem Koolhaas, they should

have some context to think more seriously about ideas like internationalism, globalization and the like. They should emerge with a better understanding of their own cities and the place of human beings in the world.

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