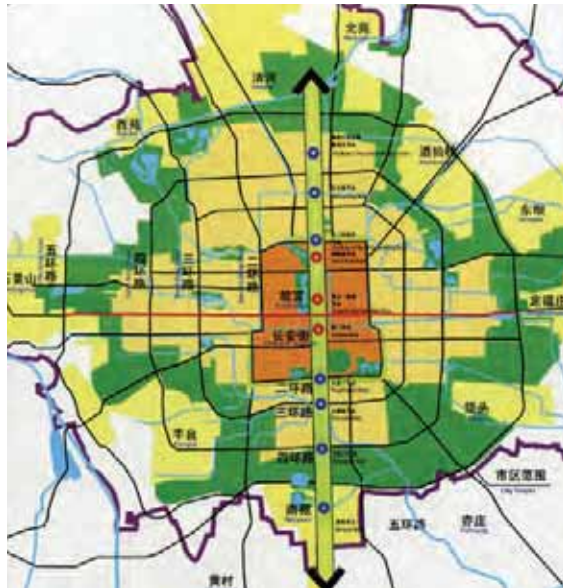


# Urbanization of Post-Olympic Beijing

In order to comprehend the effects of the 2008 Olympic Games on Beijing's urbanization, one should look both at its preceding urban development context and future potential post-Olympic strategies needed to sustain it. The 2008 Games as an event catalyst has transformed Old Beijing into New Beijing. Many questions remain for Beijing's future planning now that the spectacle is over. Would Beijing succumb to the same slump that affected many other post-Olympic cities, or could the Chinese capital be radically different in the urban trajectory it now chooses?

## Beijing urban development before the 2008 Olympics

Prior to Beijing winning the Olympic bid in 2001, it had held two mega-events that had transformed the city through urban development and spectacle. The 1990 Asian Games and the 1999 People's Republic of China (PRC) 50th Anniversary Celebrations, both had heavy political overtones and an Orwellian precision that characterized China's transformation from a socialist to a market economy over the past 30 years. Since Mao had literally destroyed the Old to establish the New China in Beijing since 1949, urban transformations linked to such mega-events were meant to heal and beautify the city as a political Chinese icon.<sup>1</sup> After membership of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the failed 2000 Olympic bid, Beijing subsequently rebranded itself as an



Beijing City Structure Plans showing expansion and N-S Axis, Beijing Municipal Planning Commission. Image courtesy Beijing Tsinghua Planning Institute, 2008

international metropolis with avant-garde architectural icons symbolizing contemporary China's arrival on to the world stage. This called for a massive overhaul of the city's urban fabric and infrastructure leading up to and after the 2001 bid for the 2008 Games including: 22 new stadiums, 15 renovated facilities, two new Ring Roads, 142 miles of new infrastructure, eight new subway lines, 252 new star-rated hotels, 40km of cleaned rivers, one million new trees and 83km of planted greenbelt.<sup>2</sup> Even an artificial mountain and lake, at the scale of the projects of the Qing Dynasty Emperors, were built in the Olympic Park to symbolize celestial harmony along the extended North-South Axis. The Olympic Park itself is three times the size of New York's Central Park, and the North-South Central Axis linking the Olympic Park with Tiananmen Square is conceived by no less than Albert Speer Jr.<sup>3</sup> Entire new Central Business Districts have sprung up in the vertical image of Hong Kong and Shanghai.

These vast additions to Beijing have come at the expense of older *hutong* streets and housing fabric being forcibly demolished, or socialist-era factories relocated, releasing huge tracts of land—all land is state-owned—for urban renewal. In the post-1998 real estate boom housing prices rose between 400 and 600 percent between 2001 and 2008. With Beijing's vernacular fabric cleared in the same way that Baron Haussmann cleared Paris in the 1800s, recent urban developments have become a global stage for theatrical set pieces complete with neo-traditional gentrified restorations and futuristic landmarks, supported by the Stalinist maxim that *you can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs*.

An estimated 1.5 million Beijing residents have been relocated to suburban satellite new towns as part of a Modernization Policy,<sup>4</sup> and entire migrant workers districts have been literally erased as officials felt they presented an unsightly image to tourists and Olympic Committee members alike. It is ironic that the hundreds of thousand of migrant workers that literally built the Olympic developments were sent home unable to witness their own creations. Meanwhile the city's population swelled to officially 18 million (with an estimated seven million extra unregistered migrant workers) causing urban development bottlenecks so typical of major Chinese cities today: highway expansion; traffic congestion; air pollution; housing shortages; income gap increases; displacement of locals to peripheral suburbs, and in the case of Beijing, architectural heritage destruction and architectural stylistic confusions.<sup>5</sup> These presented challenges to planners and architects leading up to 2008, with lessons to be learnt from preceding post-Olympic Games cities as well as the experience of the 1990 post-Asian Games.

## 2008 Olympic Bid and Legacy: Mega Event, Policy and Utopian Tradition

The Olympic Bid Legacy is to make the 2008 Games the biggest and the best ever. Branded as the "Green Olympics" the "Technological Olympics" and the "Peoples Olympics" the claim of the legacy is designed to justify the colossal budget of \$42 billion<sup>6</sup> (10 times

2004 Athens' budget and three times London's for 2012). This echoes Chinese grand tradition since Mao to build extensive monuments and infrastructure as physical propaganda to the world to demonstrate political ideologies and give Chinese face, thereby purging historical wounds. Developing Beijing for the 2008 Games at such scale and speed has been likened to a building a new Great Wall. This manifestation of China's biggest ever coming-out party celebrated not only sporting prowess, (winning most gold medals), but also its global economic ascendancy and political pride for its own population after recent tragic natural disasters, (such as the 2008 Sichuan earthquake and Lunar New Year snowstorms).

Such massive development to create New Beijing also follows a more brutal urban tradition of Chinese utopias being created through wholesale destruction and rebuilding of both society and cities (Classical Utopia, Soviet Utopia, Modern Utopia as classified by scholar Zhou Rong).<sup>7</sup> Mao's ideological void had been replaced by Olympic development for everyone through the slogan "One World One Dream." The Olympic Games Park in rural northern Beijing and other Olympic sites now acts



Beijing City Model, 2008—Olympic Green/CBD

as a *tabula rasa* strategy to impose a new ideological order over the chaos of 1990s urban development.

#### Olympic cities sustaining development—at what cost to the city?

Recent history of such mega-events as an urbanization tool could be traced back to the world fairs and expos of the early 20th century in the US and Europe. However the Olympic Games themselves, despite their scale and prestige, have not always yielded similar successes with respect to sustainable development. 1960 Rome and 1964 Tokyo built new infrastructure projects, 1972 Munich built social housing, while Atlanta and Los Angeles refurbished existing sports facilities. The 1996 Barcelona and 2000 Sydney Games were successful urban regenerations, while 2004 Athens and 1976 Montreal were deemed unsustainable failures leaving behind unused stadiums and huge debts. We need to question both the sustainability of the Olympic Stadium typology and the mechanisms of the Olympic funding model. The Barcelona Effect where debts are recovered quickly through further investments and tourism, as opposed to the Montreal Effect where financial debts took 30 years to pay off. Funding models vary: Munich relied mainly on government funding linked to a social welfare mission; while Los Angeles was sponsored by private finance and made a profit.<sup>8</sup> Financial costs to each city must be balanced with sustained urban growth models, so that new stadiums do not lay idle requiring large, annual maintenance budgets. Currently the Birds Nest™ National Stadium requires annual maintenance of US\$15 million, with entrance ticket sales declining from 80,000 daily to 10,000 daily within eight months of the Olympics closing.<sup>9</sup> There are rumored plans to revive the Olympic Opening ceremony extravaganza within the Birds Nest as a show to boost revenues, after discussions to transform it into a hotel and football stadium failed.

#### Expiry of Olympic types and Sustainable Development—Is Beijing different?

The difference with Beijing is that investment is going into mostly new development rather than redevelopment or regeneration projects compared to other Olympic cities. Furthermore, China is still a developing country with high growth rates compared to other past Olympic cities in more mature economies.<sup>10</sup> Social costs and knock-on effects to nearby regions such as Tianjin Bohai region should also be accounted for. In Beijing's case the service industry was overhauled, communication and energy networks improved, much technological transfer in construction industry included "green building" designs,<sup>11</sup> and certain media freedoms prevailed during the Games.

A housing boom with millions of square feet built per annum in Beijing prior to the Olympics, has created a more mature real estate market, but also vastly inflated home prices and unaffordable housing for locals as well as forced evictions. Inequitable distribution of housing since China's housing reforms in 1998—market-driven private housing was introduced and social housing provision stopped—have been exacerbated by local government taxation laws related to property. Beijing has created



Fireworks of the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games held in the National Stadium, also known as the Bird's Nest, in north Beijing, China. © Erich Schlegel/Dallas Morning News/Corbis

brand new urbanized districts from former agricultural lands in a rapidly rising property market. However the 130,000 hotel rooms built were not fully occupied during the Olympics as predicted and will suffer unless Beijing can continue to boost its tourist industry, especially on the China domestic front, (locals are spending three times the foreign tourist total per annum). Of the \$42 billion total Olympic budget, \$15 billion was spent on infrastructure with 25 percent spent on upgrading existing facilities. Investment on environmentally polluting road networks was balanced by building new cleaner metro lines and intercity rail links. Radiating developments will spread Beijing's growth outward to integrate the region while de-densifying the city that still has an average living space of only 18 sq meters per person. Due to the scale and speed of construction, Beijing's Olympics is estimated to have created over two million new jobs, compared to the only 150,000 for Sydney and 135,000 estimated for London.<sup>12</sup> These extra jobs are temporary, related to new hardware of the city, while the software of the city needs to continue growing to sustain new job creation after the Olympics.

The "Green Olympics" initiated nearly \$17 billion investment into environmental initiatives to clean up the city prior to and after the 2008 Games. Examples include the 83km greenbelt with one million trees planted around Beijing, water recycling, solar heating and geothermal

heat pump systems. Venues such as the Watercube Aquatics Stadium deployed energy-efficient designs and recyclable materials. However what remains to be seen is whether the Clean Air Days (an enforced halving of cars on streets during the Games and rain-inducing chemical rockets from the army) and green building technologies, can themselves be sustained in Beijing's post-Olympic development. Some new stadiums have been integrated into university campuses, or will be converted to other uses after the Games (the Olympic Media Centre was designed to be converted into a much needed convention center with hotel).

The Beijing Olympics have also been called the "world's largest single urban development since the Pyramids"<sup>13</sup> by Prof John MacAloon, so long-term urban planning and investment must be considered in a self-sustaining manner to reduce the burden on future generations. Beijing's Deputy Mayor and the Beijing Olympic Organizing Committee were advised by international experts on sustainable Olympic urban development as a "once in a lifetime opportunity to change the way the city operates, the feeling citizens have and the perception of the rest of the world towards Beijing and China." Policy recommendations included "looking hard at essential future stakeholder needs of the city and questioning what type of facilities/infrastructure to build. Opportunities for Beijing include transportation

emission controls, water conservation, waste management, energy efficiency, improving air quality, sustainable building design, etc.”

### Society of the Spectacle, Soft Monuments and City Branding

But would these “Green and Technical Olympics” really provide what the “Peoples Olympics” need in a sustained manner beyond the pride and spectacle of the Games themselves? The opening and closing ceremonies of the Beijing Olympics within the Birds Nest National Stadium are now legendary for their Zhang Yimou-directed extravaganza that celebrated Chinese culture with hi-tech special effects.

Notwithstanding the huge production cost and media coverage of this “event as Olympic architecture,” China for 17 days in 2008 became a *Society of Spectacle* to the world, either real or fabricated (including lip-synched theme songs, digitally rendered fireworks, and staged participants in Tiananmen Square). Arguably the Chinese people had been waiting for 100 years for this

glorious moment, and the legacy of this event should be sealed in our collective memory through images and symbolic monuments at all costs. Rumored to have cost over \$300 million,<sup>14</sup> Chinese people interviewed on the street generally applauded the mythic quality of the Olympic ceremonies held amid a national fervor not seen since the Cultural Revolution. Such temporary visual spectacles created by architectural events are what urban theorist Paul Virilio calls soft monuments as opposed to traditional hard monuments. He describes them as “disembodied electrical signals that dissolve solid forms” and as “petty narrative(s) of practical opportunity” characterized by the “contemporary monumentality of installations.”<sup>15</sup> In this sense, the Olympic events at the Birds Nest and Water Cube are no different from those created in Tiananmen Square by the Communist Party in previous years, except that Olympic development exists within an ideological trap of a depoliticized slogan: “One World One Dream.” The National Stadium architects Herzog de Meuron have even likened it to the Eiffel Tower of Beijing.<sup>16</sup> Architecture has become part of city branding machine through mediated imagery, and no longer related to Aldo Rossi’s typological permanence.<sup>17</sup>

### Endless City, Keeping the Dream Alive and the People’s City

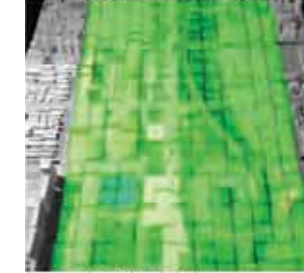
Pre-Olympic masterplans (2005-2020) for post-Olympic Beijing reveal that most of the surrounding context of the Olympic Park will remain unchanged, and approximately 2.3 million sqm GFA of land within the Olympic Green, (which is the 2.5 sq km rectangular park containing most of the main Olympic venues including the Birds Nest and Water Cube) is planned for new development into a commercial and cultural zone, complete with underground shopping malls. Various real-estate swaps and the redevelopment of Olympic facilities will render many into non-sporting venues aimed at tourism and mass-market commercial developments.<sup>18</sup> Stadiums will house new tourist and leisure programs. The copyrighted Beijing Olympic brand is no doubt a strong one in the Chinese consciousness, but how will such typical developments and monumental scale of the Olympic Green keep the (Chinese) Olympic Dream alive? One needs to ask if this dream is worth maintaining through memorializing the Olympic Park. Should it be returned to Beijing’s citizens as accessible city fabric as part of the *The People’s City*?<sup>19</sup>

Pre-Olympic urban problems listed previously have returned to Beijing after the Games’ temporary solutions, and it is time for more permanent measures to sustain Beijing’s development in a coherent manner. The eventual expiration of Olympic types is unavoidable, and the best way forward is to gradually dissolve them and keep urbanizing the city through its refabrication (see our proposal below). Richard Burdett and Deyan Sudjic’s new book *The Endless City* describes the megacities of our future as globally competing metropolises bursting with both potential and urban problems.<sup>20</sup> If Beijing became one of the projected megacities with over 30 million inhabitants, it would signal a return to *Dadu* (Great Capital) when Yuan Dynasty Imperial Beijing was the biggest and grandest city in the world. While other cities in the developed economies are shrinking, China’s cities continue to expand. Beijing

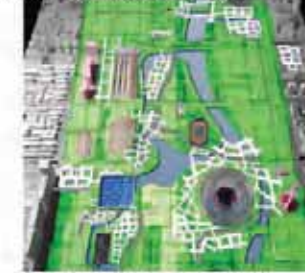


Beijing Urban Masterplan 2005-2020. Image courtesy Laurence Liaw/CUHK

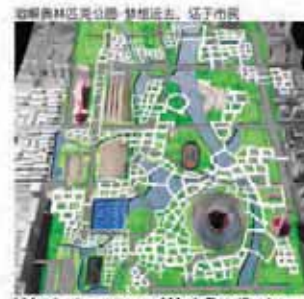
### DISSOLVING THE OLYMPIC PARK – THE DREAM FADES AND RETURN TO THE PEOPLE



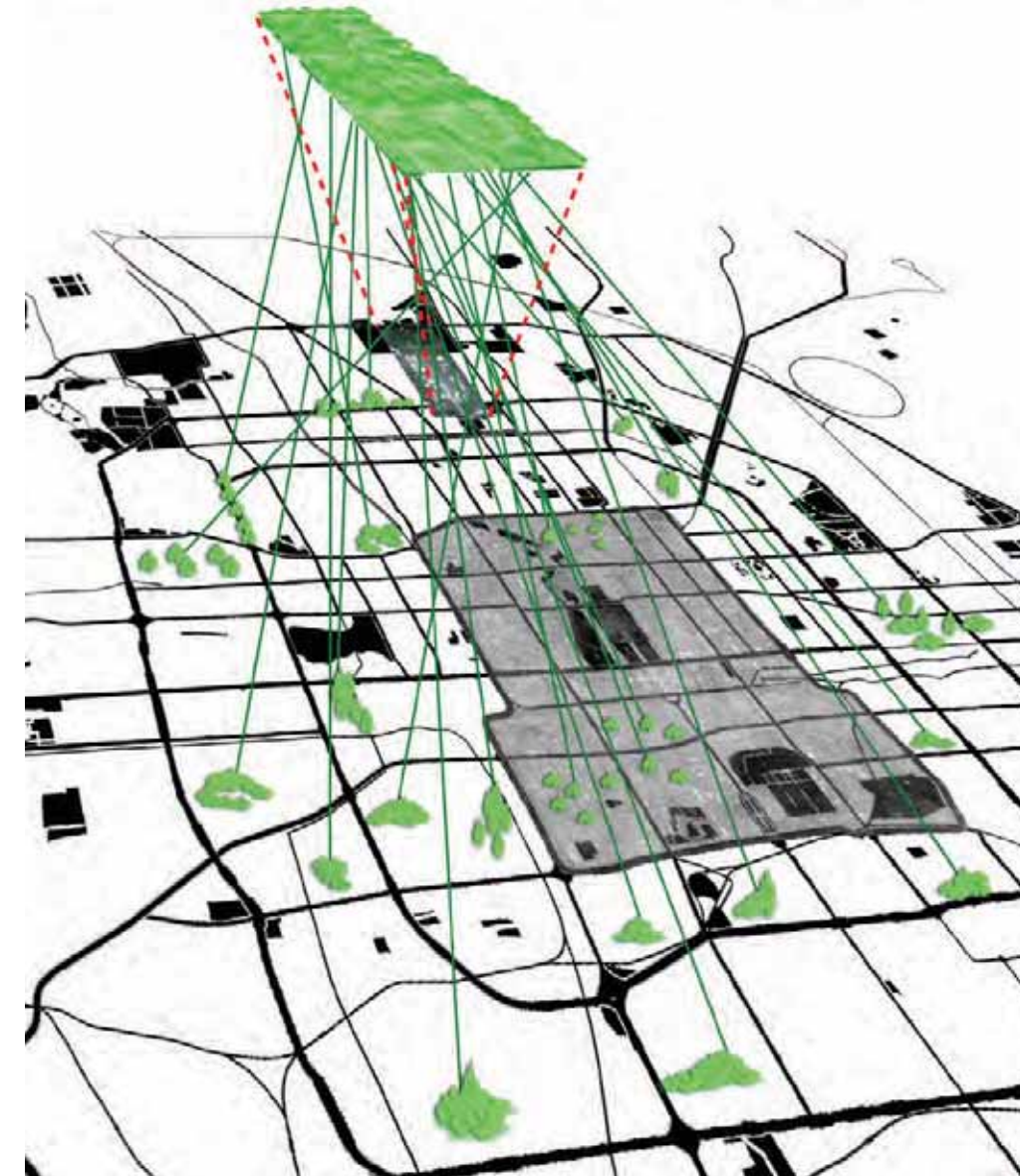
Dissolving the Olympic Park / Landscape Infrastructure  
溶解奥林匹克公园 / 景观基础设施



Dispersing the landscape is dispersed / local scale fabric emerges and grows  
分散景观 / 本土尺度的肌理出现和生长



Urbanization process of Mesh Densification evolves over time  
网状肌理随时间发展的城市化进程



Proposed 4 Stages of Post-Olympic Urbanization Process—Dissolve, Urbanize, Disperse, Re-Fabricate. 1. Dissolving the Olympic Park/Landscape Infrastructure. 2. Dispersing the landscape is dispersed/Local scale fabric emerges and grows. 3. Urbanization process of inhabitable mesh densification evolves over time. 4. Fully urbanized urban fabric around monumental types re-fabricates the city. Image courtesy Laurence Liaw, Ray Wong, Andrew Yu, 2008



*Dissolving and refabricating Beijing Olympic Park back into the city. Variable type fabrication as urban strategy for sustainable development. Image courtesy Laurence Liauw, Ray Wong, Andrew Yu, 2008*

has now a golden opportunity to fulfill its potential again through sustained urbanization, as long as it can coherently accommodate differences in scales, types and programs.

### **Dissolving and Refabricating Beijing—Urban Manifesto As New Idea of City**

In response to this Post-Olympic challenge, I have produced a collaborative project proposal (with Ray Wong and Andrew Yu at the Chinese University of Hong Kong) to dissolve the Olympic Park back into the city (as landscape catalytic infrastructure) and fully urbanize the Olympic Green as a new district for mixed income living-leisure.<sup>21</sup> With our intensification strategy on re-fabricating the Olympic Park as city through evolved typological transformations and variable proliferation, public land and green space is freed up to be redistributed to much needed areas in other parts of Beijing. We are fundamentally opposed to the idea of concentrating so much open space in one Olympic Green area whilst the rest of the city is choking, for the sake of preserving a monumental dream. Through multiple strategies of density exchange, public green space creation, environmental infrastructure,

neo-mat urbanism,<sup>22</sup> multi-scalar renewable types, anti-monument, variable courtyard fabric as new landscape, accretion and open participation, we believe that Beijing can sustain its current development path to overcome some of the urban problems that have plagued it since the 1990s. This project proposes an urban manifesto that can once again ideologically influence the course of urbanism in Beijing beyond mere market dynamics. Beijing will evolve (as Rome has over time) into a new polemical idea for the city through continuous, variable and catalytic development that recognizes the limited lifespan of the Olympics and recharges the People's City for future generations.

Do the 2008 Olympics represent the apex of Beijing's current development or will the inevitable expiry of unsustainable Olympic types lead Beijing down the path of Ancient Rome. Reformulating long-term prospects of post-Olympic Beijing must start with the premise of questioning of how Olympic urban fabric and landscape was made in China—at rapid speed, iconic, symbolic, generic, political and decorative—without much concern for the social, cultural and architectural qualities of the city. Our proposal's new urban paradigm of dissolving landscape and variable type fabrication could be implemented over

the next 30 years as Beijing becomes a truly global city having the ideological power to influence the development of other cities. This would close the chapter on the 2008 Beijing Olympics and start a new page in the future of contemporary Chinese urbanism.

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22. Mat Urbanism refers to a 1960s movement in architecture that uses thickened 2D mat surfaces as a primary device to generate 3D form. Typified by projects such as Le Corbusier's Venice Hospital and Candilis, Josic, Woods' Berlin Free University, this way of conceptualizing architecture as continuous mat form is currently enjoying renewed interest in contemporary architecture.

**Laurence Liauw Wie-wu** is an associate professor at the School of Architecture, Chinese University of Hong Kong, a UK-registered architect who practiced in the UK, Malaysia, Mainland China and Hong Kong after graduating from the Architectural Association School in London. His main area of interest is contemporary Chinese urbanism, typological evolution and post-generic cities, through research publications, and consultancy work. Professional practice has included building arts and social institutions, residential and planning projects in UK, China and Malaysia. Published internationally, he researched-produced with the BBC a program on the rapid urbanization of the Pearl River Delta in 1997. He was guest-editor of 2008 publication AD: New Urban China and 2007 World Architecture publication Hong Kong Good Bad and Ugly 1997-2007. Liauw has won competitions and awards for his architectural projects, and has exhibited internationally, including at the 2006 Venice Architecture Biennale, the 2007 Shenzhen-Hong Kong Biennale, and at the New York Skyscraper Museum, 2008. He has lectured at AA London, Columbia University, Harvard GSD, China-India Institute New York, Tsinghua University, Central Academy of Fine Art, and was an invited jury critic to AA London, GSD, Columbia GSAPP, Cooper Union and MIT.