

The Temperament of a City: A Postscript to Post-Olympic Beijing

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There are two kinds of amazement in art and architecture: one relies on the ingenuity of artifice to arouse a feeling of enchantment, while the other causes an awe-inspiring ecstasy through the shock of the new. Beijing may have won the race in the latter: Who else in the world, in the current uncertain economic circumstance, might even contemplate the kind of spectacles as witnessed by the world at the Beijing Olympic Games? But do all these then prove that a new Beijing has been reinvented, as many critics have claimed? In this essay, I will dwell on the two kinds of amazement to read into two pairs of the showcase Olympic buildings in Beijing – namely the new Terminal 3 of the Beijing International Airport and the Olympic Tennis Centre as one pair, and the Olympic Stadium and the CCTV Tower as the other – to ask what they say about Beijing, and its temperament, if it has one. I shall question whether or not it is at all possible to reinvent a new city once its temperament is formed, and in what way this temperament may be related to the creation of public space, or place.

Amazement

Let me begin by making a generalization, which I will use as a tool in the following exercise, that is, to speculate on the temperament of a city, and in this instance Beijing. I shall then examine the relations between such temperament and the meaning of public space. Here is the generalization: there are two kinds of amazement in art and architecture: one relies on the ingenuity of artifice to arouse a

feeling of enchantment, while the other causes an awe-striking ecstasy through the shock of the new.

The ambience of the churches by Borromini, to take S. Ivo as one example, may well be the outcome of an ingenious manipulation of geometry. Geometry in architecture, among other things, can be seen as an abstraction of our biological make-up: we, for example, stand upright vertically, and we lie down horizontally.¹ This is a point to which I will return later. In S. Carlo (S. Carlino), the complex play of geometry is no longer visible; it is a heavenly synthesis that is no more and no less. The bodily experience, which is spatial and more potent than vision, has enabled us to retain these geometrical meanings, although they occur at the level of our subconsciousness. The amazement of Borromini's churches, we may conclude, is due to the virtuosity of the technique of its architect as well as the efficacy of such technique, which anthropologist Alfred Gell calls the technology of enchantment and the enchantment of technology coming together.²

The second kind of amazement, starting from its avant-garde days, has flourished mainly in art throughout the twentieth century. If Duchamp's notorious urinal (or *Fountain*) is not about the ready-made object itself, rather the reason of selecting it, Damien Hirst's diamond skull should not amaze gallery goers due to its technique, which at best is at the level of a commercial jeweller. But it amazes because of the sheer expense of the object.

Duchamp may be witty and ironic in a clever way, but the shock effect has become the only goal to be desired since Manzoni canned his own faeces and sold the numbered cans as *Artist's Shit*, which have labels to ensure the buyer that the 50 grams it contained were 'freshly preserved'.³

Pre-modern Beijing was not a city of amazement in the latter sense. Yes, there were magnificent buildings placed on the central axis in the imperial palace, and there were even monumental city walls and drum towers, but they caused no shock effect, for their purpose of existence had little to do with Aristotelian magnificence or the Burkean sublime. Rather, they were part of a legible microcosm that was artfully woven into the larger cosmos, that is, the Chinese Heaven. This Chinese cosmos, as materialized in the Chinese built world from a courtyard house to the cosmic city, remained unchanged for more than three millennia. What was achieved then by the Chinese (during, and a few hundred years after Confucius's lifetime), after a long search for the harmony in the human world, was a golden mean between Heaven and Earth (Earth is pertinent to family, society and the individual) that was to be applied to the rite of the state, as well as everyday life. The idea of the sublime, the strongest emotion analogous to terror in the Burkean sense, was to be ironed out by the Chinese in their persistent search for harmony. Over a long period of more than 3000 years' unbroken history, the Chinese have perfected, rather than continuously reinvented, their way of life. Pre-modern Beijing, at the dawn of twentieth century, was the culmination of this perfected artifice without any shock effect of newness.

Cities that Amaze

The relentless pursuit of novelty was, of course, the hallmark of the twentieth century in the West. The escalation of shock amazement has seen an increasing architectural and urban realization of city centres as gigantic sculptural gardens

in a beauty pageant since the turn of the twenty-first century. Cities – old and new, world centres as well as aspiring ones, from London to Moscow, and from Dubai to Beijing – are all in this contest of awe-inspiring amazement.

Beijing, despite its long and static urban history, ironically may have won the race for the time being; who else in the world, in the current circumstance of economic uncertainty, might still contemplate the kind of spectacles as witnessed by the world at the Beijing Olympic Games? Data and statistics, in addition, have surely suggested that the scale of urban transformation in Beijing, and indeed the whole of China, is unprecedented in human history. The transformation of Beijing's urban fabric started earlier, in the mid-twentieth century, against the wise counsel of some of the country's finest architectural historians and urban designers, such as Liang Sicheng, instead of building the new administrative centre outside the imperial city to its west, the new communist government inserted its vast state machine right into the core of the old city. The world's most expansive open field in a city – Tiananmen Square – was created; the magnificent 40-km-long city wall was demolished to give way to traffic. From this point onwards, the future growth of Beijing became a 'pancake', that is, with ever-increasing ring roads radiating from the same core ... But do all these then prove that a new Beijing has been reinvented, as many critics have observed? What is public space in the new Beijing?

The Temperament of Beijing

Writers often liken a city to a human person; there seem to be curious and yet persistent genetics once the temperament of a city is formed. What often fascinates me is that, despite the countless forces that make the city, or the numerous 'pulls and pushes' we may say, be they economic, political or sociocultural, great cities after all develop a character; the process of which, to my mind, is not unlike the constitution of a human character. New

York, Jan Morris observed in the 1970s, may have mellowed – an old ‘New World city’, so to speak, but its temperament is still neurotic. To take Sydney, the city where I reside, as another example, Morris painted a chilling picture of it in the early 1960s: its steely looking and unsmiling women were singled out! Although it took a full five years before the last letter of complaint reached the author from Down Under, Morris has never had enough of Sydney. In the 1980s Morris announced: ‘That’s it. There will be more Asians, and there will be a building here and there, but Sydney will remain unchanged.’⁴ Yet Morris has returned again and again, calling this strange appeal of Sydney ‘Australian distractions’, and her earlier essay on Sydney a ‘reckless foray’, though she does not want to entirely retract her judgments of 30 years before.⁵ All of this culminated in a book in 1992 simply titled *Sydney*, in which she says: ‘[...] not I think the best of the cities the British Empire created, not the most beautiful either, but the most hyperbolic, the youngest in heart, the *shiniest*.’⁶ Such is the enduring temperament of Sydney: you loathe it and love it (or *Topophilia and Topophobia*, the title of a book that I published with some colleagues)!⁷ As for Amsterdam or Hong Kong, I know everyone loves them.

Lin Yutang in the early twentieth century gave both Shanghai and Beijing a diagnosis of their quite different temperaments, which appears still to be eerily true despite almost a century’s change and turmoil. I hope the reader does not think this is merely a wayward sally of mine before I talk about Beijing. So please bear with me, and let us first hear what Lin had to say about Shanghai. In an essay titled ‘A Hymn to Shanghai’, Lin began with these lines:

Shanghai is terrible, very terrible. Shanghai is terrible in her strange mixture of Eastern and Western vulgarity, in her superficial refinements, in her naked and unmasked worship of Mammon, in her emptiness, commonness, and her bad taste. She is terrible in

her denaturalized women, dehumanized coolies, devitalized newspapers, decapitalized banks, and denationalized creatures. She is terrible in her joys and follies, and in her tears, bitterness, and degradation, terrible in her immutable stone edifices that rear their heads high on the Bund and in the abject huts of creatures subsisting on their discoveries from refuse cans ...⁸

Despite the Pudong development, the astronomical number of high-rise buildings that the city has built in recent decades, Xintiandi, the ‘One City and Nine Towns’ development (where you can find ‘Venice’ near Shanghai), and the World Expo ... has Shanghai really changed its temperament? The irony, however, is that Lin Yutang actually lived in Shanghai.

Now let us return to Beijing. Lin, in another essay written in the same period, described the city as:

[...] a grand old personality [...] generous, magnanimous, big-hearted, and cosmopolitan [...] Modern young misses in high-heeled shoes brush shoulders with Manchu ladies on wooden soles, and Peking doesn’t care. Old painters with white, magnificent long beards live across the yard from young college students in their ‘public hosteleries’, and Peking doesn’t care. Packards and Buicks compete with rickshaws and mule carts and caravans, and Peking doesn’t care.⁹

Lin singled out three things that make Beijing the ideal city to live in: its architecture, its mode of living, and its common people. It seems to me that that Lin ranked the mode of living as being more important than the architecture, for it makes Beijing so charming. And yet he said:

The greatest charm of Peking is, however, the common people, not the saints and professors, but the rickshaw coolies. Paying about a dollar for a trip by rickshaw from the West City to the Summer Palace,

a distance of five miles, you might think that you are getting cheap labour; that is correct, but you are not getting disgruntled labour. You are mystified by the good cheer of the coolies as they babble all the way among themselves and crack jokes and laugh at other people's misfortunes.¹⁰

I have wondered what Lin would say about Beijing's taxi drivers these days, who have been urged by the government to make sure they have brushed their teeth before work, and know how to say 'Welcome to Beijing' in English. Lin would not have said anything different, I bet, for you still hear the taxi drivers tell you their sad stories with what Lin called 'humour, refinement, and fatalistic good cheer' (if the taxi driver happens to be a local, which is becoming increasingly rare). Such is the temperament of Beijing, despite the fact that some of her taxi drivers speak better English than those of Sydney. The amazement of Beijing, I would like to conclude, lies in its artifice of good living and good life. This may explain the puzzle that some of the most hostile leftover urban junctions, the place beneath an elevated freeway for example, are happily occupied by people who gracefully practice their *taiji*, or ballroom dancing. That would be inconceivable in Chicago, for the purposefully designed and provided public space is seen as the precursor of a civic life.

What Do These Buildings Say about Beijing?

Let me now dwell on the two kinds of amazement, as alluded to earlier, to read into a few showcase Olympic buildings in Beijing – namely the Olympic Tennis Centre, the new Terminal 3 of Beijing International Airport, the Olympic Stadium, and the CCTV Tower – to ask what they say about Beijing and its temperament.

Among all the Olympic structures, the Tennis Centre designed by Australian architects Bligh Voller Nield, has not attracted much limelight. Yet there is something strangely robust about it.

Situated on the north of the main stadium site in the so-called Olympic Green parkland, the Tennis Centre is unaffected by the flaunting of its southern neighbours. Whether it is set against the grey smog in my amateur shots, or the dark blue sky as seen in the artistic photos prepared for publications, this structure appears like an alien UFO that has accidentally landed on the site, and yet it has been there forever. [figs. 1,2] There is a sense of permanence in this structure, but it does not come from any site specifics. Let me use this structure as a trigger of my readings of the other three buildings, which will be woven into my musings on the Tennis Centre. Three characteristics may have contributed to this robust sense of permanence: the concrete frame of the stadium, the *parti* of a room, and the image of flower symmetry. Each of them, to my mind, says something about the temperament of Beijing.

The heavy concrete structure – with inclined concrete blades – is firmly rooted into the podium and ground, which forms the 'bowl' of the stadium. The concrete structure itself may not seem extraordinary, but it says something different in the immediate context of the Olympic site. It is like a mysterious Stonehenge, which is neither current nor historical, but aspires to eternity. That the architecture stays the same and transcends time is the very meaning of its existence, which offers consolation to our transient mortality: one day we will die, but we have architecture that has registered our temporary occupation of this world.¹¹ The lingering voice of your grandfather in the quadrangle court of your family house of three generations is one example. The static nature, we may admit, is the common trait of pre-modern Beijing.

Other showcase Olympic projects in Beijing send out the opposite message: the fluid Bird's Nest and the dynamic 'Möbius strip' of the CCTV tower in Beijing record the ecstasy of glorification: they seem to capture a moment of joyful explosion,



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Fig. 1: Beijing Olympic Tennis Centre. © John Gollings.
Fig. 2: Beijing Olympic Tennis Centre. © Xing Ruan.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Fig. 3: The Bird's Nest – Beijing Olympic National Stadium – under construction. © John Courtney.
Fig. 4: Beijing Olympic Tennis Centre – the room. © John Gollings.



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

Fig. 5: The "Windows" in the Beijing Olympic Tennis Centre. © John Gollings.

Fig. 6: The Windowless Transparency, CCTV Tower under construction. © Xing Ruan.

like that of fireworks. [fig. 3] But instead of being ephemeral, these structures are very expensive static structures that will not change shape and dimensions according to circumstances. Here is the irony: these structures will look old-fashioned when they are outdated by new trends and advances in building technology. For us humans, a state of ecstasy never lasts very long, and there is always a chemical-emotional swing in the opposite direction. The Tennis Centre, which is perhaps the only one among its Olympic neighbours that does not seek to win this beauty contest, may have a chance to survive the verdict of time, for it wants simply to stay the same! It simply does not care, Lin Yutang would have said!

The static nature of the Tennis Centre lies also in its *parti* of a *room*. [fig. 4] It may be far-fetched to suggest all stadiums are large rooms, but the Roman amphitheatre certainly had an interior life drama. It was after all a theatre. Tennis is a game of power, technique, and drama; it demands to be watched in a theatre setting: the curtains are up and the lights are on. This 'black-box' intimacy in the Beijing Olympic Tennis Centre is not achieved by shortening the distance between the spectators and the court (there is only so much the architects can do when the size of the tennis stadium is pre-decided), but by creating a room-like ambience. The steep seating helps, but of more importance is the series of corner openings between each pair of the 12 segments at the junction of seating and roof. They are, experienced from the inside, in effect large windows. [fig. 5] Windows offer demarcation between the interior and the outside world. These large 'windows' frame the sky and enhance cross ventilation in the stadium. A window, more symbolically charged than a door, is to allow the person inside a room to view the outside, and to be viewed from outside. A door is a necessity, it allows you in and out. But a window is a luxury; you don't have to go out because you have a window to bring the world to you when needed. A window, therefore,

defines the room, and you are in the centre of it. Like a Shakespearean theatre, the Beijing Olympic Tennis Centre awaits a charged interior life to unfold.

When the window is dissolved in transparency, as seen in many of our modern and contemporary buildings, as well as in the CCTV Tower, for example, gone with it is the interior life that architecture must confine and enshrine. [fig. 6] This brings me to the architectural problem of engineering prowess. What does the architect actually do while the predominant structure is the work of an engineer? We may have reasons to become excited about the CCTV Tower; the advanced technology of the ingenious Arup engineers has enabled the building to stand up, while it looks like it should fall over. [fig. 7] Yet, the Beijing Olympic Tennis Centre shows that the artifice lies in the craft of an architect to consciously manipulate the felt qualities of a building that are determined by the degree of enclosure as well as its proportion and human scale. I have written elsewhere that architecture should be understood as 'flower architecture'; by that I mean, like a flower, good architecture must be universally admired.¹² Kant calls this 'free beauty'. To be precise, both the image and the metaphoric meaning of a flower are legible to everyone. There is, however, no guarantee that the figurative image and the meaning of a building can be deciphered in the same way as originally conceived by the architect. It often is a risky business where architects rely on culturally specific images in the hope of evoking an affinity with the inhabitants. Charles Jenks, who was on the jury panel for the CCTV competition, allegedly convinced the authorities that the Koolhaas loop is a Chinese 'moon gate', but it is now dubbed either as a pair of sloppy short pants, or, even more unfortunately, crutches. Yes, this is a very different building, but the very Chinese ideogram of the word 'difference' (*yi* 异) is a 'self' sitting on a pair of crutches.¹³ Needless to say this is a crippled 'self'! The Beijing Olympic Tennis Centre does not yet have a figurative nickname. It was, however, quite naturally, envisaged as a gigantic flower amid the



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

Fig. 7: CCTV Tower under construction. © Xing Ruan.
Fig. 8: Ceiling Detail, Terminal 3, Beijing International Airport. © Xing Ruan.
Fig. 9: The Interior, Terminal 3, Beijing International Airport. © Xing Ruan.

planted forest of the Olympic Green parkland. My sense is that it will be understood as such, for the 12-segment configuration of the tennis stadium is flower symmetry.

Modern and contemporary architects have often treated geometry and its consequential harmony and symmetry with disdain, which was once held dear by the ancients and by Renaissance architects. Yes, geometry and symmetry no longer hold the validity of a cosmic model for our Moderns, but they are still part of our biological make-up, for our body is essentially symmetrical. As mentioned earlier, a simple geometrical relation, the meaning of front and back, for example, is intrinsically linked to our restricted forward vision. We therefore look forward to the bright future, and turn our back on the dark past. Unlike a rabbit, we don't look sideways.¹⁴ The concentric flower symmetry must recall our primordial urge for centrality. This may explain why the flower is what Kant calls 'free beauty', for it is culturally independent. Such universality, however, does not necessarily erase any particularity, which is the essential ingredient of a temperament. The difference from the universal may be quaint or nuanced, but it is the circumstance that makes it pungent. The special meaning of a red rose on Valentine's Day is one such proof. Yet Beijing's geometry is paramount; even its cosmic meaning has not been entirely lost. Since we must stand upright vertically and lie down horizontally, what will the CCTV Tower do to our body and mind with its turns and twists, and hence to this cosmic city? It rejects the human occupation more so than the shelter created by an elevated freeway.

There was a hint of blue sky after a heavy storm the previous night. I arrived in post-Olympic Beijing at Norman Foster's delightful Terminal 3. To my great and pleasant surprise, I have noticed that Foster too seems to have come to the same realization: a robust *parti* of the clearest routes for departure and arrival. They are two Ys joined

together and read in the air as two humans in the Chinese ideograms. The subtle use of *poché*, which separates the external envelope and the ceiling, avoids showcasing the details of the roof truss. [fig. 8] Yet, the brightly coloured roof trusses in yellow, orange, and red are partially revealed where the skylights are bounced back by the slatted ceiling lattice. The result is a massive silvery wave of starry sky. [fig. 9]

Despite all the above-mentioned urban development, despite an entire century of turmoil, to my great gratification Beijing has still managed to let you arrive gloriously in the heart of its 'grand old personality', which offers a 'promise of solace'.¹⁵ Such is the true meaning of public space in a city like Beijing. If there are some oddities, such as the CCTV Tower and the Bird's Nest, in this 'generous, magnanimous, big-hearted, and cosmopolitan' city, that is okay, for Beijing simply does not care!

Notes

1. The author was reminded of this body geometry by Professor Yi-Fu Tuan in an email conversation in 2006.
2. Alfred Gell, 'The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology', in Alfred Gell, *The Art of Anthropology* (London & New Brunswick, NJ: The Athlone Press, 1999), pp. 159-86.
3. Joseph Rykwert, *The Judicious Eye* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), pp. 10-11.
4. Jan Morris, *Among the Cities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
5. Jan Morris, 'Australian Distractions', in *Pleasures of A Tangled Life* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1989), pp. 143-49.
6. Jan Morris, *Sydney* (London: Viking, 1992), p. 5.
7. Xing Ruan and Paul Hogben, (eds), *Topophilia and Topophobia: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Human Habitat* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).
8. Lin Yutang, 'A Hymn to Shanghai', in *With Love and Irony* (London and Toronto: William Heinemann Ltd,

- 1942), p. 53.
9. Ibid., pp. 45-52.
 10. Ibid., pp. 45-52.
 11. Yi-Fu Tuan, 'Time, Space, and Architecture: Some Philosophical Musings', in *Topophilia and Topophobia: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Human Habitat*, ed. by Xing Ruan and Paul Hogben (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 22-30.
 12. Ruan Xing, 'Flower Architecture', in *Bligh Voller Nieler Monograph* (Beijing: China Architecture and Building Press, 2005), pp. 14-21.
 13. I was reminded of this reading by Ma Qinyun at a panel discussion of the RAA National Conference, Sydney, April 2008.
 14. I was reminded of this by my conversations with Professor Yi-Fu Tuan (by email) and Ma Qinyun at a panel discussion of the RAA National Conference, Sydney, April 2008.
 15. I have borrowed this phrase from Jonathan Spence, who thinks that even the name of Tiananmen – Gate of Heavenly Peace – has the capacity to 'bring a promise of solace to the Chinese people dreaming of escape from current realities'. See Jonathan Spence, *The Gate of Heavenly Peace: The Chinese and Their Revolution, 1985-1980* (New York: Viking, 1981), p. 18.

Biography

Xing Ruan is Professor of Architecture at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. His recent books include: *Allegorical Architecture* (2006), and *New China Architecture* (2006); *Topophilia and Topophobia* (co-editor, 2007), and *Skyplane* (co-editor, 2009). Xing has published on architecture and anthropology, architectural education, Louis Kahn, and modern and contemporary architecture in China and Australia.

