On Public Toilets in Beijing

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Public Toilets in China, as in most parts of the world throughout history, are stigmatized as unclean, associated with illicit activity, and joked about. But they were conceived by the Communists in China as symbols of cooperative living. Although they still pose grave sanitation problems, they exemplify communist ideals of simplicity, functionalism, and working-class sensibilities. They employ sound architectural principles of lighting, ventilation, and urban situation, and are playful in design. Communist Urbanism, defined as the spatial order of communal living, reserves a place of honor for the public toilet.

BEIJING'S PUBLIC TOILETS, LONG THE OBJECT OF public scrutiny, are now also beginning to attract the eyes of the art and architecture communities. Beijing has more public lavatories than, for example, New York, and with a far richer variety of sizes, styles, and shapes. In the "hutong" neighborhoods within Beijing's second ring road, in an area about half the size of Manhattan, there are over two thousand of these conveniences, bringing them to a density of about one per acre. A large percentage of Beijing's hutong-dwelling population still uses only these facilities, since most of their homes are not equipped with plumbing. The public sewage lines generally do not branch into the hutongs; each public toilet has its own refuse pit, which must be manually emptied periodically.

Historically, the unpleasant job of collecting the contents of the hutong's toilets was given to those in the lowest rank of Imperial china's social hierarchy. At that time, the toilets were not public, but belonged to the clans of the famous courtyard houses ("si he yuan") that originally made up the neighborhoods of central Beijing. In southern China, most wealthy households had several bronze or earthen urns that could be collected by servants and hauled to some remote location. But in Beijing, holes were dug in the ground for the waste, which would be scooped out and piled into delivery carts in the wee hours of the morning. Each standard courtyard house had its toilet in the south-west corner of the plot, on the opposite side from the main entrance, which was always in the south-east corner (Figure 1).

During the twentieth century, upheaval changed forever the social order in China. The Chinese working class, led by Mao Ze-Dong, carried out the imperative of the Communist Manifesto to overthrow the bourgeoisie and all archaic institutions, including the single-family courtyard house.[1] Common laborers began to be elevated in rank to the level of model citizens, then to stardom. Everyone was encouraged to emulate the lowliest of China's faithful, tireless, virtuous laborers.[2] It is not surprising, then, that one of the most admired of these, publicly greeted with a handshake by Liu Shaoqi and praised by Mao himself, was a lavatory maintenance worker, named Shi Chaun-Xiang (1913–1987), who from his twenties until his death attended to the facilities in some of Beijing's busiest alleyways, day after day faithfully scooping the shit of his fellow workers and their families.[3]

The speech on that day was not the only instance in which Chairman Mao used scatological reference to make a point. As a rhetorical device, such reference had the capacity both to shock the audience to attention, and to give his speech a down-to-earth, backwoods flavor, reminding people of his roots in the countryside: "In a speech made to his Lushan colleagues, Mao took a bellicose and self-justificatory position about the Great Leap and the communes. . . . 'The chaos caused was on a grand scale, and I take responsibility. But comrades, you must evaluate your own responsibility. If you have to shit, shit! If you have to fart, fart! You will feel much better for it."[4]

One well-known Chinese professor, known to the writer, is also not at all shy about using this kind of "kouyu" (slang) on public occasions. When she wants her colleagues to get down to business, she might use the phrase "Wipe your butts clean and get on with things!" or "It's gotten to the point where they don't even know where to piss anymore!"

This kind of casual attitude can be seen in Chinese nonverbal behavior as well. Westerners visiting China may be surprised by the common sight of both men and women belching, coughing, and spitting in public.[5] Tai He Park, outside of Wuxi (near Suzhou), features one exhibit depicting a life-size cave dwelling Neanderthal family whose little boy gleefully urinates real water over the cliff toward the visitor. This is vulgar to today's sensibilities, at least in the West. Note, however, that Renaissance fountains such as Falda's "Fontana di Venere" in Rome include literal representations or suggestions of urination. The earliest Western example is probably of Alexandrine or Syrian origin: a hermaphroditic urinating statuette on display at the Capitoline Museum in Rome.[6] Equally shocking to some is the fact that Chinese toddlers generally do not wear diapers, but instead have ingeniously simple pants that are open at the crotch, allowing them to freely relieve themselves whenever necessary. Chinese parents may express some revulsion at the smell and mess, but take a matter-of-fact attitude toward mopping up. "It's easier and cheaper than changing and washing diapers," says one mother.

Likewise, most of Beijing's public lavatories are appropriately placed near or in centers of community activity, which were historically located where narrow alleys widened to make suitable locations for small buildings.[7] The classic 1950s brick toilets were humble, almost cozy little structures

Journal of Architectural Education, pp. 216–219
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that worked well in the neighborhood setting (e.g., Figure 2). And since the open spaces were in many cases the only outdoor social centers in a neighborhood, the public toilets also became settings for interaction, where neighbors would naturally rub elbows and chat about neighborhood news. Some of the structures themselves, despite the unpleasant odor, have quite friendly atmospheres inside as well as out, with inventive skylights and doors with exotic shapes. Many also have no dividing walls between toilet holes, making casual on-the-stool chats quite convenient. One colleague jokingly terms this type of toilet the "Ni hao! cesuo" ("Hello, there! toilet").[8]

The public toilet since its formal inception in the 1950s has given rise to a number of figures of speech, riddles, and jokes. One example is "A public toilet with only one hole—guess the name of a place." (Hint: A capital city). The answer is "London," which in Chinese is homonymous with two syllables that mean "waiting your turn to squat."[9] Common figures of speech include "zhanzhe maogeng bu la shi," which means "Don't stand over the hole if you're not going to shit."[10] "Wo qu shang yi hao" means "I'm going to #1," the universal street address of lavatory buildings, possibly referring to the public toilet on Tiananmen Square, which actually had that address until it (along with the "'Thousand Paces' Arcade") was torn down to make way for Chairman Mao's tomb.[11]

Such conspicuous elements in the urban landscape and in the minds of the people could not long be ignored by the central government. During the early 1980s the appearance and maintenance of the public lavatories became a central concern of the government as it spruced up China's public image in preparation for the dignitaries and other foreign guests who were bound to be pouring in after China opened its doors in 1979. The Construction and Sanitation Ministries rebuilt hundreds of the small buildings, employing thousands of laborers. One colleague remembers the reconstruction projects, which took place during her high school years: "Every neighborhood had a construction site."[12]

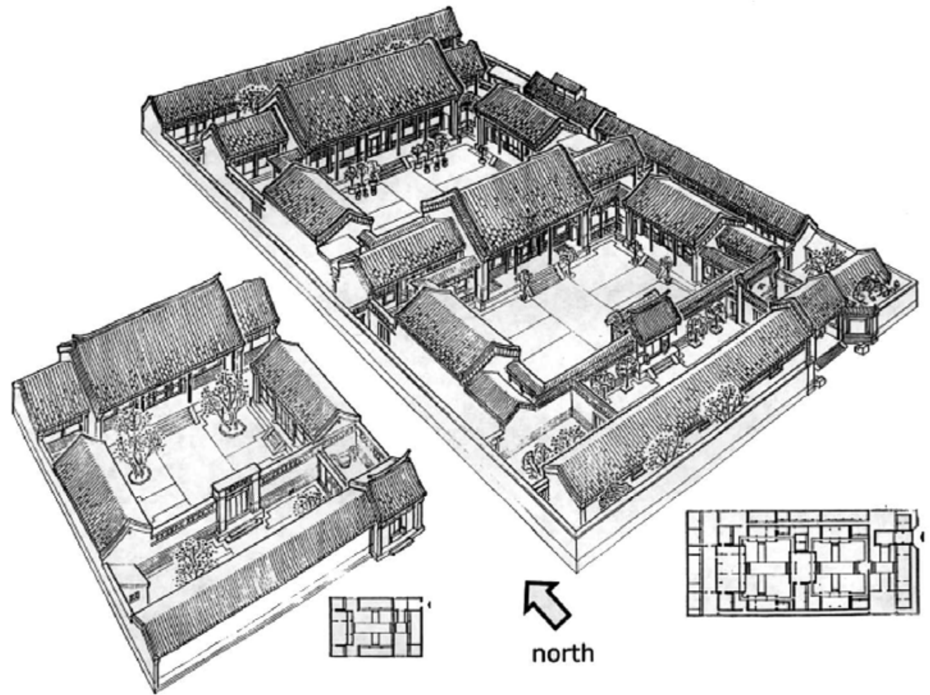

Fig. 1. "Si he yuan" (typical traditional Beijing courtyard houses), by Fu Xi-Nian, 1985. Courtesy of Fu Xi-Nian and the Institute of Architectural History—China Building Technology Development Center. North arrow added by the author.

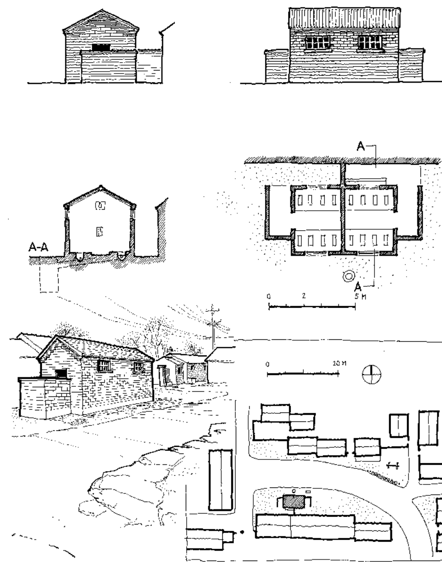

Fig. 2. Traditional 1950s toilet near Beijing University, 1/94.

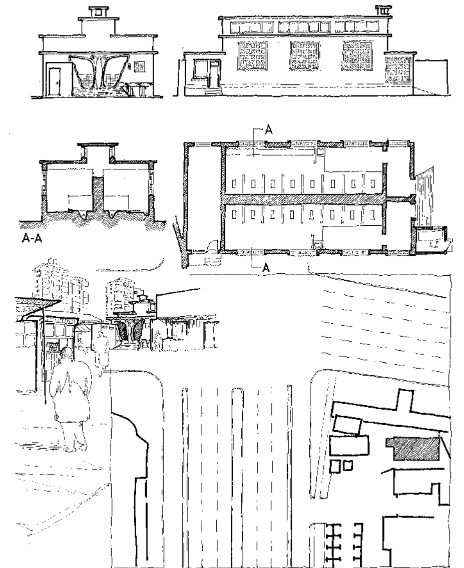

Fig. 3. "Bisected Basilica" style toilet near Friendship Hotel, 2/94.

The 1980s successors to the classic 1950s toilets are perhaps most surprising in that they do not all come from a uniform, government-issue design. Instead, they show great variety in style, and imagination in contextual reference. There is the "bisected basilica" style (Figure 3), the "Greek" style

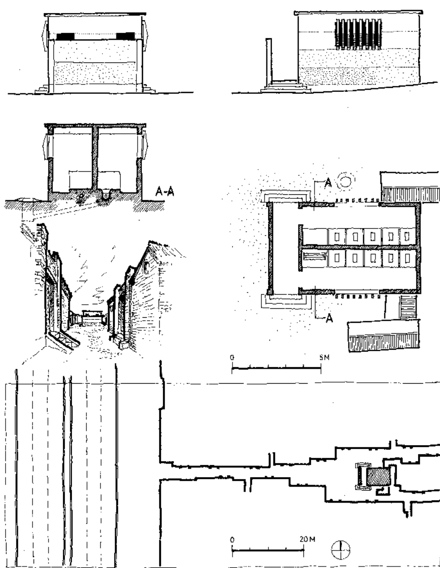

Fig. 4. "Greek" style toilet building, Baotou, Inner Mongolia, 1/94.

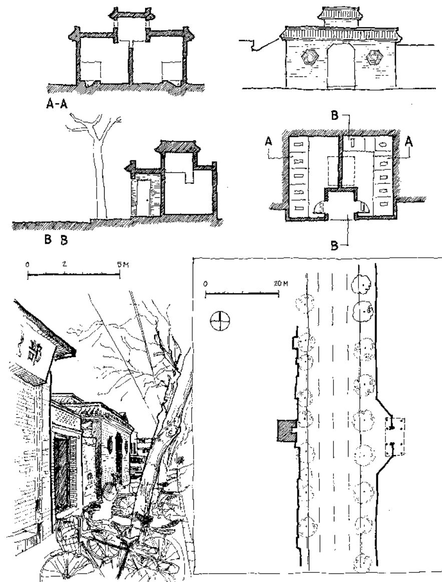

Fig. 6. "Imperial" style toilet near Lama Temple, 1/94.

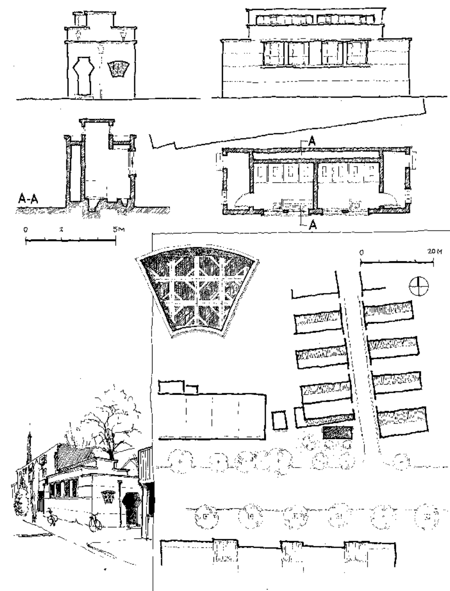

Fig. 5. "Suzhou Garden" style toilet in Zhong Guan Cun, 2/94.

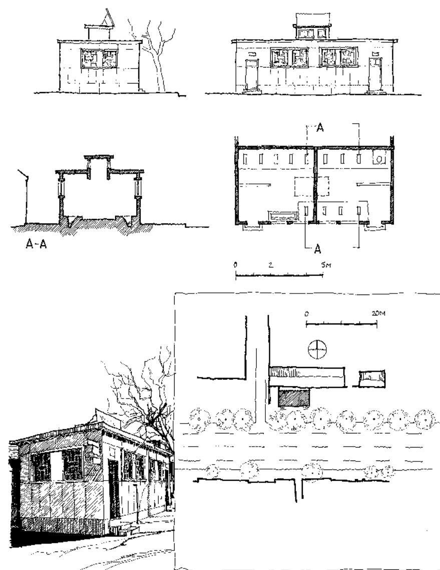

Fig. 7. "Modernist" style toilet near West An Ding Men Avenue, 1/94.

Fig. 8. Public toilet near the Lama Temple, after refurbishment, 5/95. Photo by Tim Geisler.

(Figure 4), the "Suzhou Garden" style (Figure 5), the "Imperial" (Figure 6), and the "Modernist" (Figure 7). Almost all are constructed using precast concrete panels, but their builders took every opportunity for architectural expression. They are remarkably inventive for something so purely functional. Some are so attractive, with their moon-gate doors and tile roofs, that tourists who cannot read the sign identifying them as lavatories often stop next to them to take pictures. Examination of their urban context reveals that each cesuo, whether crammed into a neighborhood alley or positioned at the entrance to a palace, is sure to have a unique relationship with its surroundings.

Now, once again, as in the early '80s, Beijing's public facilities are attracting public attention, this time under much different circumstances. For the first time in years, the funds are available to conduct a vast campaign to improve housing and sanitation, first in major cities, then throughout China.[13] Twenty new public toilets have been built and seventeen refurbished in Beijing since the kickoff in 1995 of what has been called China's "public toilet revolution."[14] Technical upgrades typically involve new aluminum-frame windows, glazed tile and glazed brick veneer, a new roof, a paint job and new fixtures (Figure 8), and the new

structures range from a 400 sq. ft. pagoda-style facility to a 1300 sq. ft. extravaganza of curved walls, white tile, generous glass block, soaring roof lines, high windows, central heating, modern sewage lines, a full-time attendant with sleeping quarters, and a five-cent fee. Launched in tandem with the construction projects was a design competition sponsored by the *Beijing Daily* newspaper and Beijing's Foundation for Civilization Research. The winning entry, by one Ms. Wang Xiao Hong of the Beijing Design Institute, is a pinwheel scheme placed at the focal point of a park and including outdoor benches, pay phones, and a news stand.[15]

The foundation is being laid for a more sanitary, more prosperous China. Every new housing development is required to provide a private toilet with running water for each unit, so that most of the aging and less sanitary public toilets that now adorn Beijing and other Chinese cities will soon disappear, marking the end of a crowded, trouble-stricken chapter in China's history.[16] But the memory of them, the anecdotes and quips, the political rhetoric, and the social habits of the Chinese people will live on long after these curious little architectural urbanites have returned to dust.

Notes

Note: All measured drawings of public toilets are by Tim Geisler.

Translations in the text of Chinese terms and phrases are by Tim Geisler.

1. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "The Manifesto of the Communist Party," in David Fernbach, ed., *Karl Marx: The Revolution of 1848* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), pp. 70, 98.

2. Johnathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), p. 472.

3. Prof. Tau Tau, Tsinghua University School of Architecture, interviewed Jan. 28, 1994.

4. Spence, p. 582.

5. Note: Spitting is illegal in some popular tourist places, like in the gardens of the Forbidden City, and violators are fined, but it continues to be common practice, especially in large cities, where air pollutants cause bronchial irritation and phlegm.

6. Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (New York, 1938), V. II, p. 401.

7. Tan Ying, Ph.D., Tsinghua University School of Architecture, interviewed Jan. 23, 1994.

8. Naomi Inoue, Ph.D., Tsinghua University School of Architecture, interviewed Jan. 25, 1994.

9. Daniel Abramson, Ph.D., Tsinghua University School of Architecture, interviewed Jan. 15, 1994.

10. Ibid.

11. Prof. Yu Xue-Wen, interviewed Jan. 28, 1994.

12. Zhou Dong, Chemistry teacher, Tsinghua University Middle School, interviewed Jan. 6, 1994.

13. Ann Scott Tyson, "China Plans to Rebuild Key Policy," *The Christian Science Monitor* (July 19, 1990): 11.

14. *Beijing Youth* (Jan. 12, 1996): 6.

15. "The Capitol City Public Toilet Design Competition Announces a Winner," *The Beijing Daily* (Dec. 24, 1994): 1A.

16. *The China Daily* (Aug. 21, 1995).