

Michael Meyer, The Last Days of
Old Beijing. New York: Walker, 2008.

In the winter of 2005, the businesses on both sides of Front Gate Avenue were shuttered and their facades cloaked in metal sheets ten feet high. They displayed computer-generated drawings of the gray-brick, two-story buildings that were to come. In large characters, a slogan said PROTECT THE ANCIENT CITY'S APPEARANCE. In the drawing, the people strolling on the future, pedestrian-only Front Gate Avenue weren't Chinese, but white-skinned. The only depicted shop signs were for Pizza Hut and Starbucks.

Another slogan promised that the redevelopment of Front Gate Avenue and Fresh Fish Junction would RESTORE HISTORY'S CULTURAL PULSE. It did not say which period of history. Restoring Beijing to its past urban appearance meant selecting from eras that spanned eight centuries; visitors to Rome, for example, encounter a largely papal and Renaissance-era cityscape, built atop—or with—the rubble of the imperial capital. Judging by the old-fashioned trolley that ran down the center of the depicted Front Gate Avenue, the neighborhood would be remade to outwardly appear as it had in the 1920s. The intangible community fabric would be replaced by an open-air shopping center.

"If Front Gate Avenue forms a mall instead of being widened and reconstructed properly," cautioned a plan submitted by Tsinghua University's influential Urban Planning and Design Institute, "it shall cut the continuity of traffic and space, and lead to the blocking of the central axis."

That affected the capital's feng shui, the principle that once governed the construction of imperial Chinese cities. According to feng shui, a town's central axis should be unimpeded in the south due to the positive energy (yang) that flowed from that direction, and shielded in the north, to block out negative energy (yin) that originated there.

Beijing's central axis had already seen many of its nodes destroyed—the gates flanking the east and west sides of Tian'anmen Square, and the gate on the square itself, where Mao's mausoleum now squatted. Closing Front Gate Avenue to vehicle traffic would also require auxiliary roads to be sliced through the surrounding *hutong* neighborhoods.

"Building more roads only attracts more traffic and more congestion," warned a World Bank report urging the protection of Dazhalan. An urban planner whose scheme to construct a tunnel under Fresh Fish Junction had been rejected due to costs said, "The wider the road, the less 'human energy.'" She cited the new eight-lane boulevard on the area's southern edge. "It completely annihilated commerce there. It's really a highway. How can you build highways in the city center?" Additionally, the new streets bracketing Front Gate Avenue would destroy communities and architectural heritage.

The Hand drew them anyway.

The road through Fresh Fish Junction was not only affecting longtime residents such as Old Zhang, but also newcomers who owned businesses in the neighborhood.

The Liu family had migrated from their farm in central Shanxi province and opened a noodle restaurant whose interior held four tables. The mother greeted customers by name, remembered their usual order, and often sat down to chat. The father worked in the kitchen with their son, who had recently finished a tour in western Xinjiang province as a People's Liberation Army soldier. He was twenty-two and fretted about the matchmaking his mother had initiated back in their village to find him a wife.

The Lius' restaurant specialized in "knife-shaved" noodles (*daoxiao mian*), broad, thick pasta steeped in pork broth. Making knife-shaved noodles requires the cook to balance a board vertically against the inside of his forearm. A loaf-size lump of dough rests on the board. The cook uses a blade in his other hand to quickly scrape thick chunks of dough into a wok of boiling water. It is strenuous, hot work, but Soldier Liu retained his drill-ground physique. He didn't drink or smoke, and I never heard him swear. His usual customers did all three, with relish.

Soldier Liu often sat and tried to read aloud Mocky's latest misadventure

from my students' textbook. He worked from sunup to ten o'clock at night and lived with his parents in a shared courtyard near the restaurant. "I like to study and would love to learn English," he said, "but I never have any time."

He didn't know where they would go after Fresh Fish Junction was destroyed. "We will stay in the city, that's for certain." His younger sister was back home, training to become a math teacher, and they were paying her tuition and saving money. "Our village is very backward and poor, and there's nothing to do there."

"Except find a wife," I said.

"No mistake!" He laughed. "I don't like Beijing girls. They're shallow." He studied Mocky kicking a soccer ball through a window, then told the page, "And they would never date a guy who makes knife-shaved noodles."

When their shop was razed, the Liu family would receive no compensation. They would lose their livelihood, but as they rented the space, only their landlord was entitled to a settlement. It seemed incongruous that Beijing's self-starting entrepreneurs were the ones that would suffer from a booming economy. Now all business owners would be scrambling to find new spaces. "Our location right now is really great," Soldier Liu said. "People walk by all day long, and we're the only noodle restaurant on the entire *hutong*."

Soldier Liu often crossed Front Gate Avenue to troll Dazhalan's lanes, but not one of the hundreds of storefronts showed a FOR RENT sign. The Lius would have to move out before they returned to their village to celebrate Spring Festival—Chinese New Year—in 2006.

For the evictions around Fresh Fish Junction, the district government initially employed persuasion, rather than force. The goal was to avoid confrontations such as the one Old Zhang had witnessed, when the woman had been pulled from her home. In early December, on the gray brick wall across from the Lius' restaurant, a government notice printed on yellow paper said:

CHERISH THE CHANCE; GRAB THE GOOD FORTUNE
SAY FAREWELL TO DANGEROUS HOUSING

You of course know that in our district there are many mixed courtyards, a high-density population, and lots of old and dangerous

houses. Over the last decades of hardships, we on this old street all longed to leave dangerous housing as soon as possible. However, because of Front Gate district's architectural height restrictions and other reasons, many developers came here, took a look, shook their heads, and left. This not only broke everybody's heart, but it really pulled the heartstrings of the district government.

In recent years, through sit-down chats with residents and listening to their opinions, we came to understand that 95 percent of our district's residents desire—moreover, fervently want—an improved housing environment, and to say farewell to dangerous housing. To realize everyone's dream as soon as possible, the district government worked ceaselessly to make it happen.

Many years later, when you come back here and walk around, you will certainly say with pride, "My family once lived here, and to improve the area and protect the ancient capital's appearance, and contribute to New Beijing, New Olympics, we showed our collective strength!"

To realize this fifty-six-year-old dream, shouldn't we all cooperate with the district government? The excellent Party and government helps us, so don't we want to not miss this unbelievable chance?

That was the order: First the eviction notices were posted. Then, the houses of families who accepted the eviction payment were half-demolished, making them uninhabitable. Next, notices tried to convince the remaining holdouts to sign a settlement and leave. Finally, blue tin sheeting went up to conceal the flattening of the neighborhood.

In the rubble of a house near Old Zhang's, I picked up mail postmarked two days earlier. It was a circular for the New World shopping mall, which had replaced the *hutong* neighborhood just to the east. On the lane, a ring of men formed around a young woman. "You have to report the low compensation they are offering us!" one man yelled at her. "You journalists never write the truth! Pay attention to the common people!"



Destroyed houses at Fresh Fish Junction. The Hand spared the trees.

She was a reporter for the Beijing daily tabloid the *First* and had been assigned to write about the guildhalls—former guesthouses for itinerant scholars and merchants—that were being spared for display on the future open-air mall. The encounter had shaken her. “We’re not allowed to report on the controversy over settlement payments,” she told me as we walked away.

Her photographer shot pictures of courtyard exteriors, a woman wringing out hand-laundered sheets, a dirty white cat, and a child’s chalked drawings of the Olympic mascots. The four-page spread that ran in the paper included these photos and a map of Fresh Fish Junction that did not show the planned road. Separated from their lively context, the images seemed to depict just another *hutong*, whose buildings and residents were disconnected and interchangeable with other shabby lanes.

The designation in 2002 of the Twenty-five Historic Areas occurred as Beijing began a \$40 billion makeover to host the Olympics, adding new luster

to a city whose economy was already surging as the capital of the fastest-growing economy in the world. Most Olympic events would be held at sites outside the Old City, meaning that no *hutong* would have to be torn down to construct a stadium. Those innovative structures—with nicknames such as the Bird’s Nest and Water Cube—were going up in a district to the north, outside the Fourth Ring Road.

Old City neighborhoods were not immune from Olympic plans, however. A 2005 report authored by a leading government think tank titled the *Investigation of Urban Corners in Beijing* said, “In order to implement the mighty philosophy of ‘New Beijing, New Olympics’ in city planning, we cannot ignore and must solve the urban corner problem.” The term was a euphemism for slum. The report’s title page contained one photo. It wasn’t of a courtyard home or *hutong*, but New York City’s Chrysler Building.

The *Investigation* defined an “urban corner” (also called a “village in the city”) as an area of high-density housing with narrow roads, little green space, and a “chaotic environment.” For example, one unnamed *hutong* was lined with 167 beauty parlors, though only seven had hair styling equipment. The others dismissed the pretense and operated openly as “hand-job salons,” charging two hundred yuan (\$27) or less.

The *Investigation* tallied 343 urban corners that it said should be cleaned up before the Olympics. Some of the areas, such as Fresh Fish Junction and Dazhalan, were also among the Twenty-five Historic Areas the city had designated for protection.

The report described the neighborhoods in purely physical terms. The wood-framed homes of Fresh Fish Junction caught fire forty-eight times between 2000 and 2003; the *hutong* were not wide enough to accommodate fire engines. Houses were overcrowded, such as 275 West Grindstone Lane, home to twenty-two people. “Standing puddles form on the floors after it rains,” the *Investigation* said, “and residents have installed braces for fear of the walls collapsing. Moreover, flies and mosquitoes buzz in and out freely.” The cost of renovating buildings and installing sewage pipes would be astronomical, it warned. The neighborhood had 108 two-story wood-framed buildings and 2,440 courtyard homes—93 percent of which were substandard, and 47.5 percent outright dangerous.

The *Investigation* described the community through exacting statistics, not personal names or narratives. Nearly forty-two thousand people lived

in Fresh Fish Junction. Many had migrated to Beijing, the report said, lowering the neighborhood's "cultural level." Two thirds of the population had not continued past middle school. Criminal cases were on the rise; calls to the emergency operator at 110—Beijing's 911—increased an average of four hundred each month. The area's per capita monthly salary was a thousand yuan (\$133), half the city norm.

Like Dazhalan, Fresh Fish Junction was a short walk south from Tian'anmen Square. "Foreigners absolutely view China through our capital," the report reminded. "The capital's appearance influences China's appearance. Urban corners represent our dark side."

The world couldn't arrive in Beijing for the games only to find a slum at its center. 呸!

One night at Soldier Liu's noodle restaurant, Old Zhang took my pen and grabbed a napkin. He sketched a stick figure with a frowning face whose arms were being pulled by two other stick figures. "This guy is the demolition company," he explained. "This one is the construction company." The caption said, "I can only endure!" He quickly drew another that showed him bowing before a stick man. "If you are being demolished, you must kowtow to beg for a higher payment." A sly grin spread across his face. He was enjoying himself and took another napkin. The scene showed his severed head on the ground between two players. "I get kicked between the government and the developers. They are on the same team. I am just the ball."

A second open letter to the neighborhood appeared on the wall across from the Lius' restaurant. Old Zhang said its tone was like an adult's when attempting to convince a child to finish a meal. The notice read, "Many people say that they don't want to move because their relations with neighbors are so tight. But now you only have to go to the settlement office, sign the eviction agreement, and then you can choose an affordable apartment. Think about it: you and your family live in an old house, and now you finally have a chance to improve your living conditions. This is an extremely rare opportunity!"

The development company aligned with the district government was building apartment towers. "We should also warn you," the notice contin-

ued, "that this housing is reserved for our district's relocation." Other subsidized blocks in Beijing were under pressure to sell their vacant units to the public at market prices. "People in our district are already accepting settlements and clamoring to move out as early as possible into an affordable apartment. Therefore, you'll see that if you don't grab this chance, then other citizens will jump ahead of you, and then there will not be any good houses left for you. You and your family will lose out."

The site was in a comparatively good location, between the Second and Third Ring Roads in Beijing's southeast. I took a cab there and arrived at a vacant lot. The subsidized apartments earmarked for Fresh Fish Junction's evictees would not be finished for another year. Residents had to buy elsewhere, or to rent in the interim and put up money for homes that existed only on blueprints. It was standard practice in Beijing to buy an apartment before it was built, but just as common were the complaints over construction quality, management, and even the title-transfer process that followed.

The announcements posted overnight across from Soldier Liu's restaurant grew more beseeching as the eviction deadline approached. One printed on peach-colored paper argued:

Winter is here, and to heat your home, you cause a fire hazard. In summer you hear the sound of raindrops, but then you fear your walls will collapse on your head. If someone is sick in your home, when it comes time to call an ambulance, it can't enter your narrow lane. For decades, some families have had three people living in a small, decrepit room. Then you see a new community with central heat and a private room for each family member, but here you are in the old house, burning coal honeycombs for heat, and sharing one water meter with several families. The migrant population keeps increasing around you, and so does crime. Residents just want to get out of here as soon as possible.

The poster added that by doing so "they make a tremendous contribution to the 2008 Olympic Games."

Old Zhang said, "I'm not moving."

On December 10, 2005, twenty days before the deadline to receive a bonus of fifty-five thousand yuan for moving, a green poster went up across from Soldier Liu's restaurant.

The public notice of destruction due to the Front Gate district road project was posted on 11/21. Since then, with wide support of the masses, many citizens have grabbed the chance to move and netted the bonus. Presently 76.8 percent of residents have signed the agreement to move. However, certain citizens harbor the fantasy that if they put off moving, they can negotiate a much higher settlement. This kind of thinking is not only mistaken, it also impedes the government's project to fix the road to benefit the masses. To protect the project's smooth sailing and to protect the public's profit, we all have to support this policy. You cannot stand there with your mouth open, expecting to be fed. In other words, "Move early and receive profit, move late and you stand to lose."

You still have twenty days. We earnestly give you this suggestion: don't lose the chance, you can't stop time! Don't listen to rumors, and don't listen to others' instigations, because when you suffer the loss, will those people accept responsibility? The time is already short, you have to grab the chance to sign the agreement, move from your house, and then enjoy fifty-five thousand yuan extra. This is a good policy, and accepting it is really the correct and sensible decision.

Old Zhang said, "I'm not moving."

He had been in and out of the relocation office, which was set up in the vacated #223 Middle School. You could walk right in and listen to the clerks calmly repeat, nearly verbatim, the notices posted around the neighborhood. The people there treated him politely, he said, but he thought their offered price was too low. With the bonus, Old Zhang stood to be paid 240,000 yuan (\$32,000). "It's not enough to buy a house downtown, and if I move now, I would have to pay rent, anyway. I'm staying."

Fifteen days before the deadline, posters said that 83.9 percent of residents had accepted the settlement. The figure included one of the two other families that had shared Old Zhang's courtyard for decades. "They

didn't tell me they were leaving," he said. "People don't work together like they used to."

Ten days before the deadline, 87.8 percent of the neighborhood had agreed to move, including the other family that lived in Old Zhang's courtyard. Now, he was alone.

On Christmas Day, the Liu family closed their noodle restaurant. "We're going back to our village for the New Year," Soldier Liu said. "After that, who knows?" The family was not sad or angry. This was Beijing, and that's just the way things went. The mother served me one last bowl of noodles in pork broth. "Add more black vinegar," she said. "It's made in our village. It's really the best." It was. As I ate, she wrote down their address in the countryside. We said good-bye.

Six days before the deadline, 92.9 percent of the residents had agreed to move. Three days later, the posted figure rose to 95 percent. Old Zhang would still not budge.

As I huddled over my electric heater at home, he sat at my desk, looking unaffected and hale. "I think my house won't be razed until April 2006," he said. That was four months away. "I only pay seventeen yuan [\$2.26] a month for rent, because the house was provided by my work unit. I'll stay until the last possible minute and keep pestering them for a higher payment. I have nothing to lose."

The Widow walked in without knocking. She told me to add layers of clothing to my forearms, lest I catch pneumonia. I introduced her to Old Zhang, adding that his home was being destroyed. "Little Plumblossom," she said, "I am telling you, I will never move from here. Never! This courtyard is my home."

Fresh Fish Junction was now unlit and silent at night, making the empty lanes feel haunted. I wanted to see Old Zhang home. We left my house and biked down the brightly lit streets of Dazhalan, through clouds of steam billowing from restaurant kitchens. We dismounted at the rubble from the road being built to divert Front Gate Avenue's traffic.

Old Zhang motioned to my neighborhood. "These people," he said, "have no idea how their lives are about to change."