

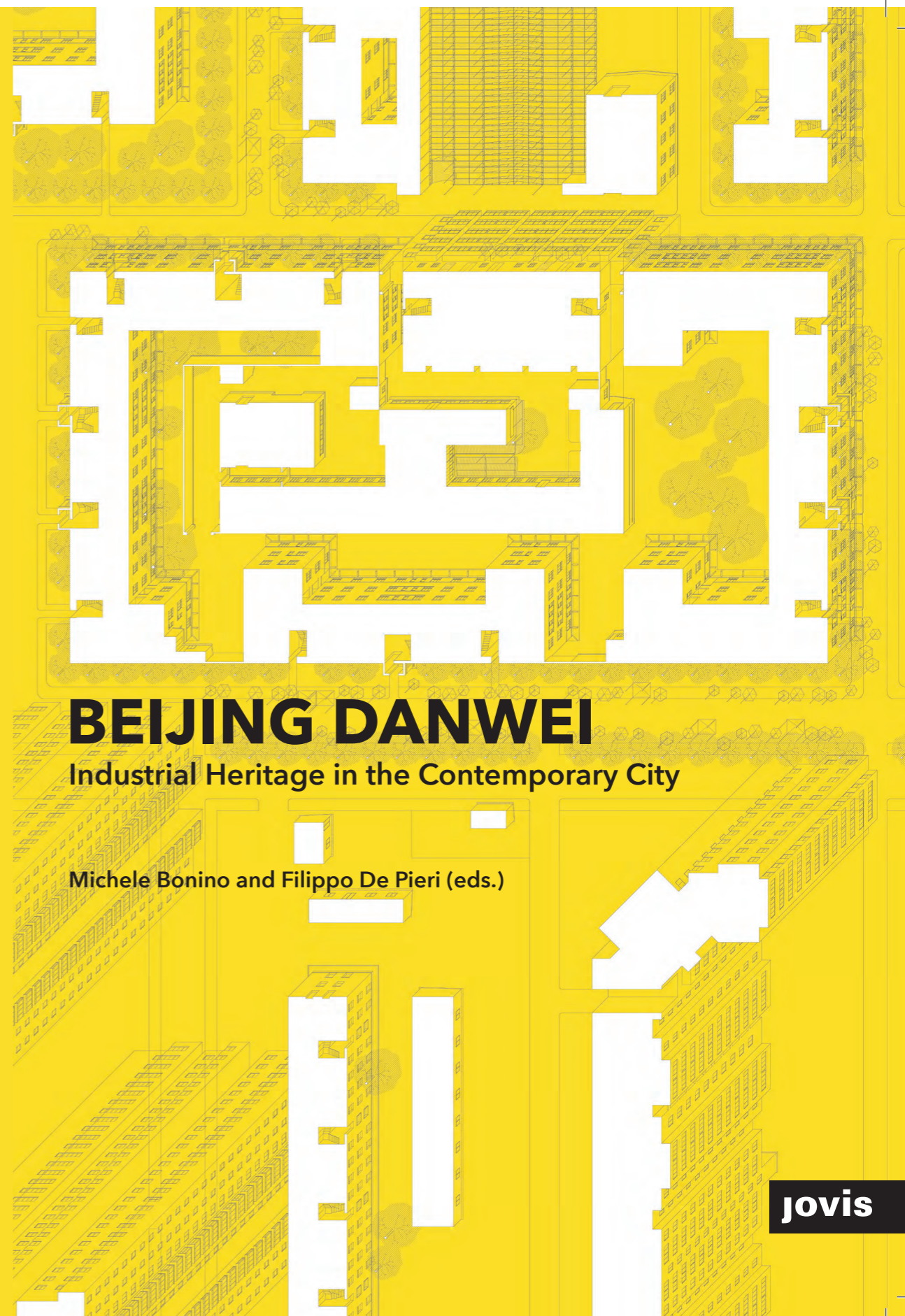
Danwei—these were urban sectors in China that were characterized by close links between work, residence, and social facilities. They are the material product of socialist city planning and therefore provide an urban experience that forms a stepping stone between the *hutongs* of the imperial capital and the superblocks of the present-day metropolis. Contrary to the disused industrial sites in western cities that often disrupt the continuity and scale of the urban fabric, the *danwei* have a much closer relationship to the historical, as well as the contemporary city. In modern-day Beijing, the *danwei* represent a unique experimental field of urban design. *Beijing Danwei* looks at the history and future of former *danwei* and presents exemplary strategies for dealing with industrial heritage. Case studies show the problems that go hand in hand with transformation and present perspectives and potential with regard to usage and the urban regeneration of Beijing.

The book includes essays by the editors, as well as by Pierre-Alain Croset, Gary Hack, Thomas Herzog, Li Weidong, Liu Boying, Liu Jian, Lu Duanfang and Zhu Wenyi. With an illustrated essay by Jia Yue and Maria Paola Repellino.

M. Bonino and F. De Pieri (eds.)

BEIJING DANWEI Industrial Heritage in the Contemporary City

Jovis



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The Palimpsest and the Archipelago: The Danwei as a New Urban Project

Pierre-Alain Croset

After three decades of political and economic reforms that have deeply changed the urban form of Beijing, many industrial danweis still remain physically recognizable within the city. Although we lack a critical and systematic inventory that allows us to assess their real consistency, the danweis that have survived the unbridled *tabula rasa* policy represent a unique opportunity to test innovative urban projects, as alternatives to the planning policies based on zoning and the strict segregation of functions. To enable this, however, we must insist on the need to slow down the decision-making processes regarding these urban fabrics, which are so unusual and were born during the industrialization of the nineteen-fifties and seventies. These urban fabrics are fascinating to the eyes of an architect, precisely because they are characterized by a very particular way—a specifically Chinese one—of mixing workspaces, housing, and services in one enclosed place.

The essays collected in this book explain how the industrial danweis pose extremely complex problems in the relationship between urban form, social structures, and historical memory: that is exactly why it is necessary to slow down the decision-making processes, in order to avoid irreversible simplifications and destruction. Real and proper “cities within a city,” the danwei used to be “self-sufficient” places in certain aspects, and this strong urban value still impresses the visitor who discovers—once passing within the boundaries—a spatial and social identity that is profoundly different, almost secret in its way of hiding from the immediate view. There is, however, a strong risk of idealization by a foreign architect: what appears to his eyes like an urban Arcadia—the image of a harmonious relationship between working and dwelling—was in fact an instrument of fierce social and political control, as the danwei was “the basic organization of a totalitarian society.”¹ Thus, we cannot ignore this negative political and social connotation of the danweis, even if their rapid disappearance as a “workers’ organization” has led to serious social exclusion problems of the most underprivileged layers of the population (particularly the elderly, the poor, and the new immigrants denied of rights of residence), as many social studies scholars have pointed out.² To replace the danwei, a new organization is being slowly formed—that of the “neighborhood communities” (*shequ*)³. The shequ is a concept that is more geographical than sociological, because it defines the area

in which the person resides and not the social group to which they belong. All of this raises complex and serious problems regarding the urban population's social identity, in connection with the growing claim of a real citizenship that is no longer based on the identification between workplace and place of residence.

The combination of industrial activity and residential space has proved increasingly problematic, leading to the necessity of moving the polluting heavy industries increasingly farther from the center of Beijing. This occurs not only in a logic of urban planning, but also as a policy based on a paradigm shift: from "industrial city" to "city of services," with a conversion from heavy industry to high-tech industries and advanced tertiary functions. For this reason, the industrial part of the danwei has often been abandoned and restored, while the residential part has shown a greater capacity for inertia, which slows down the transformation and replacement process. This has produced an apparent paradox: while the most architecturally significant buildings have been razed to the ground—in the absence of the means of protection and enhancement of industrial heritage that have emerged in China only in recent years—the minor architecture of the residences and services has been preserved for legitimate reasons of social protection, even though the terrible condition of these buildings makes any future restoration quite unlikely. Hence, in these structures that are apparently quite fragile and often inhabited by needy populations, it would be necessary to promote the preservation of a more immaterial than material heritage: a heritage linked to the memory of the social workers, to the relationship between solid and void that characterizes the particular urban design, to the crossing paths, rather than to the preservation of buildings without any material quality.

Among the case studies in this book, the Beijing No. 2 Cotton Textile Factory and the Xinhua 1949 Cultural Creative Industrial Park show how in more recent years, due to the progressive albeit belated realization of the assets of the industrial architecture, it is possible to overcome abstract planning models, without any connection to the urban memory. As in the best European examples of creative reuse of industrial heritage, they highlight the emergence in China of urban design practices that are more careful about the specificity of places, whose memory is not erased but enhanced: what stands out in this case is a specifically *dialogic* quality of the architecture and the urbanism. There are, however, significant time differences: while in Europe *dialogic city planning* is based on a tradition of at least thirty years, China has only recently started to witness the emerging of a new sensitivity for the *total* patrimonial assets of its consolidated urban fabrics, and not just for its historically or artistically most significant monuments.⁴ The two examples mentioned above, with obvious urban but also architectural qualities, essentially concern the *productive* part of the danwei, while the residential parts have not been the subject of such a careful

planning process. Is it possible, in the future, to imagine planning proposals that would manage to take into account the *total* patrimonial assets of the danwei?

Even though each danwei used to present physical, social, and productive characters that were extremely diversified, developing a planning strategy based solely on each "specific case" might provoke the loss of an extraordinary *urban* opportunity for an overall transformation: the danweis should thus first of all be classified as "transformation areas" with an entirely specific urban status, to avoid them being simply incorporated within the ordinary zoning, with the application of a floor area ratio that is so high as to almost automatically require the cancellation of what remains. This particular urban statute could be proposed in analogy with what exists in the best practices for the protection and enhancement of the historical fabrics, requiring careful and detailed planning, based on a thorough fact-finding investigation: hence the need to significantly slow down the decision processes. However, this is not just a matter of urban planning procedures. The danweis of Beijing could offer the opportunity for an interesting planning experiment, which on an urban scale could recall the "urban archipelago" concept proposed in 1977 by Oswald Mathias Ungers in his exemplary project for Berlin entitled *The City in the City—Berlin: A Green Archipelago*,⁵ developed with his young assistants at Cornell University, including Rem Koolhaas and Hans Kollhoff. Recognizing the impossibility, both theoretical and practical, of proposing a unified "reconstruction" of Berlin, Ungers allocated a value of urban identity to individual fragments, while the remaining urban voids played an intermediary role between the individual "islands," thus characterizing the entire city as a "green city." It might be useful to apply this theoretical model of the archipelago to the case of Beijing: an archipelago of danweis turned into "local civic centers," each with its own shape, but also its own way of reinterpreting the mixture of the different functions of work, residence, and services that used to characterize the more urban quality of the danwei. On the architectural scale of the intervention, however, each danwei should be interpreted in its *palimpsest* dimension, thus reversing the hitherto prevailing strategy of *tabula rasa* to adopt a dialogic attitude toward the urban materials present on the site: choosing what to keep and what to demolish, asserting new architectural forms able to dialogue with the ones already existing, in order to create a significant tension between spaces, objects, functions, and diversified uses. Álvaro Siza, who, maybe more than any other contemporary architect embodies the figure of the dialogic architect, likes to say that "the idea is in the 'place' rather than in each person's head, for those able to see, and it therefore can and should appear at first glance; more looks, theirs and others, will keep being added, and what begins as simple and straightforward will become complex and close to reality."⁶ To truly become "complex and close to reality," a good urban project cannot and must

not be restricted to a morphological dimension, but must incorporate a reflection on its economic, social and political contents. The danweis offer an extraordinary opportunity not only for an urban and architectural test, but also for a social and political experiment. Their transformation should not just follow the logic of the market, which seems to justify a tendency to reuse industrial buildings mainly for functions related to the economics of culture, the so-called creative districts, leisure, or shopping. Under the guidance of a public planning that is attentive to the interests of all, the danweis should also become exemplary places to experiment with new forms of social integration: not only art galleries, cultural spaces, and shops of international luxury, but also social residences for the young or the elderly, temporary accommodations for new migrants, neighborhood services needed to establish an inclusive and no longer exclusive urban identity.

Our hope is that there will also be room for social—not just architectural—creativity, which is able to invent new forms of community and sharing, new ways to enclose workspaces and residential spaces in one place: the danwei also as a social laboratory of a new urbanity.

Notes

1 Nguyen, Thao: "Governing through shequ/community: The Shanghai example," *International Journal of China Studies*, 4, 2, 2013, pp. 213-231.

2 Gaubatz, Piper Rae: "Urban transformation in post-Mao China: impacts of the reform era on China's urban form," in Deborah Davis (ed.), *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China. The Potential for Autonomy and Community in Post-Mao China*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995, pp. 28-60; Heberer, Thomas / Göbel, Christian: *The Politics of Community Building in Urban China*. Routledge, Abingdon 2011.

3 Nguyen, Thao: "Governing through shequ/community."

4 Appleyard, Donald: *The Conservation of European Cities*. The MIT Press, Cambridge 1979; Beijing Municipal City Planning Commission: *Conservation Planning of 25 Historic Areas in Beijing Old City*. Beijing Yanshan Publishing, Beijing 2002.

5 Ungers, Oswald Mathias (edited by Florian Hertweck / Sébastien Marot): *The City in the City—Berlin: A Green Archipelago. 1977*, Lars Müller, Zürich 2013.

6 Siza, Álvaro: "Notas Sobre o Trabalho em Évora," *Arquitectura*, 132, 1979, pp. 36-44