

Social and Spatial Networks in Traditional Neighborhoods in Beijing, China

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Abstract

The spatial integrity of the street networks in the traditional neighborhood of Beijing has contributed to the strengthening of social ties by providing its residents controlled pattern of encounters in their daily lives, which is one of the key ingredients in building positive social bond in the neighborhood.

This paper looks at the traditional neighborhoods in Beijing both as geographical places and as setting of social relationships. What makes older neighborhoods possess qualities that not to be found in the newly constructed housing estates? This study will identify key spatial features that affect residents' social network. Results of this study can furnish Chinese urban planners and architects a base, on the problems they are confronting, to facilitate planning and design decisions, for both new residential area and the renovation of old neighborhoods.

Today, the co-existence of both old and new urban typologies in Beijing represents a unique opportunity to study the relations between different spatial organizations and their impacts on the socio-cultural values of the residents and their behavior patterns. The objectives of the study are:

1. To identify characteristics of local social networks in selected traditional neighborhood in Beijing. What is so unique about the social relations in traditional neighborhood? A "social network index system" will be established to "measure" pattern of face-to-face interaction in a neighborhood. The network analyses will be taken against Beijing's broader social and cultural background. It is through this larger framework that the behavior of individuals is constantly being constrained. In this paper, many basic assumptions about social behavior and social network that we take for granted in the US, will be examined against the social context in Beijing. For instance, unlike in many US or European cities, where interactive activities are welcoming signs of well-used streets, in Beijing, the residents who live in the "interaction overloaded environment" may seek for more simplified relationship. People may be satisfied with a rather superficial form of interaction, and depend on only a few individual neighbor oriented relations for support and comfort.
2. To identify characteristics of local spatial networks in selected traditional neighborhoods in Beijing. A "spatial network index system" will be established to "represent" both the physical and the morphological properties of the street systems. Streets in Beijing's traditional neighborhoods have created a fine grained, well connected, and diverse urban fabric. They are more than just pathways. They have provided the dwellers with public spaces right outside their houses. These neighborhoods have an enduring power to attract and a tendency to inspire new interpretations of their value in each generation. It is proposed that the street system and its important role

in supporting and strengthening social relations of the neighborhoods is an integral part of the dynamic and changing organism of the city.

3. To investigate the extent of spatial variables of the traditional neighborhood have contributed to the formation of the unique social networks in the neighborhood, and the generic mechanisms through which social activities put their imprint on the spatial form of the city. All social phenomena have an important spatial component. The pattern of human interaction in a neighborhood- who interacts with whom and how much - is not just a matter of individual choice on the part of those involved. The spatial context of the neighborhood is one of the most important conditions that have the potential to facilitate or inhibit interactions among people.