The Traditional Courtyard House in China: Its Formation and Transition

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The courtyard house, a residential compound with buildings surrounding a courtyard on four (or sometimes three) sides, has been representative of housing patterns for over one thousand years in China. It has been a historical heritage deeply rooted to the specific Chinese traditions and culture. From the collapse of the last imperial dynasty (1911) to the establishment of the People's Republic of China (1949), China underwent a series of wars which entailed destructive impacts on the development of the courtyard houses. Due to some inappropriate policies after 1949, most traditional houses faced changes and deterioration. In addition, there has been a tendency since the 1980s to excessively replace the traditional courtyard houses by multi-storey buildings. All of this has seriously affected the cultural continuity of the traditional Chinese housing form.

From the 1990s, some housing projects have been initiated in Beijing and are called redevelopment and renewal of dilapidated traditional residential areas. Some new types of courtyard houses have been explored in an attempt to balance the house shortage and the social inheritance due to the rapid growth of population. The construction principles of traditional courtyard houses are being utilised to set the new courtyard house system. Having outlined the above, the purpose of this paper is to examine the following issues: (a) the various aspects of the traditional courtyard house and its transitions; (b) the impact of social changes and the influence of national policies on the transition of the traditional courtyard houses; and (c) the identification of the main characteristics of the new courtyard house system.

Keywords: courtyard houses, Beijing, formation, transformation, ancient Chinese philosophies.

TRADITIONAL COURTYARD HOUSES IN CHINA

The traditional house form in China was a courtyard dwelling. Although the courtyard house was not the only house type in China, it was the typical form used by the majority of the population from north to south. During the evolutionary process of vernacular dwellings, the form of the courtyard house was not selected by coincidence as an “ideal form” to be improved through the efforts of generations. From the point of view of the shape of traditional vernacular dwellings, the form of the courtyard house is more suitable than other vernacular dwelling types to adapt to the natural environment and to meet the needs of living in most areas of China. It may be assumed that physical forces such as climate and natural environmental conditions and socio-cultural forces are the main determinants that dictated the growth of the courtyard house form and the development of its style.

The formation of the traditional courtyard house

A courtyard house is a residential compound with a set of courtyards enclosed by the surrounding buildings and high walls on four sides. The characteristics of the physical form of the courtyard house compound have been mainly determined by climatic and socio-cultural factors.
Situated in the Northern Hemisphere, the Chinese mainland is to the east of Europe, on the west coast of the Pacific Ocean. Such a geographic position enables monsoon circulation to form easily. As a result, China is one of the regions in the world where a strong monsoon climate can be observed. The direction the wind blows changes periodically at different seasons of the year.

During the winter and early spring, most areas in China are subject to a cold wind from the north (the strong wind from the north and north-east or north-west). This always happens in the loess regions and desert zones. These areas are located along the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River, where the largest group of Chinese nationals, the Han people, were first scattered. The howling wind coming from the north carries yellow dust that darkens the sky and obscures everything. As a practical solution, the form of courtyard dwelling with high walls forming an enclosure on four sides was developed (Cheng, 1994).

In the summer, the regions along the Chinese south-east coastal areas are frequently struck by typhoons produced by tropical cyclones in the western part of the North Pacific Ocean and by tropical monsoons from the south-east and southwest Indian Ocean. The southern tropical windstorms and floods destroy plants and houses and kill people every year in the areas on the southern side of the Yangtze river. Under such conditions, multi-storey courtyard housing complexes were constructed on the hillsides in many of the southern areas of China to provide an ideal refuge and protection from typhoons and floods, while livestock was kept inside the courtyards to lessen the damage (see Figure 1).

The courtyard, enclosed as it is by the walls or buildings around it, takes on a special introverted quality. The seclusion of the courtyard, separated from the outside world, is an important feature of Chinese architecture. From the imperial palaces left by past dynasties down to the dwellings of the common people, the walled-off compounds with their own courtyards inside have remained to the present time. This architectural tradition of enhancing a small introverted world by building ensembles can be explained by the social conditions of Chinese political history. The course of historical development in China has not remained static, but has been full of changes politically, socially and culturally. More than 20 dynasties have come and gone over the past 2,000 years. Invasions of “barbarous or semi-civilised tribes” swept through now and then to disturb the established order. To add to the confusion, internal dissension and factional strife broke out periodically. It is natural that the thoughtful came to withdraw, becoming entrenched within the safe barriers of an inner life protected against outward misfortunes, making true happiness depend entirely upon their own inward state. Thus the communal character of the family system and the inward feeling of withdrawal from the outside world did not only stimulate the people to construct physical boundaries as defences against outside forces, but also to remain in the enclosed form of courtyard com-
pound without any essential changes for several
centuries.

**The philosophical implications of the traditional
courtyard house**

The physical design and spatial organisation of
the traditional courtyard house compound are also
rooted in the ancient Chinese philosophy. During
the **Han Dynasty** (206 B.C.–A.D. 220), the de-
velopment of the Chinese philosophic system
reached its peak. At the same time, practical expe-
rience of house construction accumulated and a
basic courtyard house form was gradually ac-
cepted as a dwelling style for ordinary people.
These two separate streams had followed their
own routes and now began to converge. On the
one hand, the philosophical ideology provided a
theoretical guidance for house building practice.
On the other, the builders tried to express the ide-
ology through the design of the house. Therefore,
the traditional philosophy and the house patterns
began to be integrated with each other. As a re-
result, the form and spatial organisation of the
courtyard house specifically reflected features
which the ideology embraced.

It is commonplace in China, of two thousand
years’ standing now, that ancient Chinese phi-
losophy is divided into two parts: Daoism and
Confucianism. Daoism represents the philosophy
in its original purity. The basic fundamental value
of Daoism favoured common people. For in-
stance, the poise and inner calm that may be de-
rived from the attitude of contemplative Daoism
elevates he who holds it above the struggling
mass of harried men, and may even give him a
psychological advantage in dealing with them.

Differing from Daoism, Confucianism contributes
to norms of social behaviour. To most Chinese,
they appear capable of holding one attitude one
day and the other attitude the next or even of
holding divergent attitudes at the same time.
Many Chinese feel that every “Chinese soul” is
really half Confucian and half Daoist (McNaughton, 1974).

Such a “Chinese soul” is also embodied in
Chinese architecture. Comparing Daoist with
Confucian influences on Chinese architecture, it
can be observed that Daoism stressed a harmony
between buildings and their environments, finding
architectural expression in beautifully sited
buildings and romantic ensembles, and develop-
ing artificial landscapes and ideal man-made envi-
ronments. The qualities of Confucian architec-
tonics emphasised the importance of hierarchical
order, axis and symmetry to control spatial or-
ganisations (Needham, 1971). In other words,
Confucianism dealt with the connection between
man and his society, while the emphasis in Dao-
ism was on the holistic and harmonious rela-
tionship between man and nature.

**Feng-shui theory**, a Chinese concept of living
environment, was an application of Daoist phi-
losophical ideology to housing in practice. It was
concerned with the relationship between man,
house and universe, providing builders with theo-
retical guidance, helping inhabitants to find a
good living environment to build their ideal
home. In Feng-shui theory, it was believed that an
ideal site should be surrounded on three sides by
higher land or mountains, like the crook of the el-
bow in a curved arm, to provide protection from
inclement weather or an enemy.
Figure 2. An ideal model of Chinese traditional dwellings.

The lie of the land should be gently sloping and, if possible, there should be a river or valley nearby to allow surface water to drain off easily. The layout of the site should be enclosed to form a container, allowing the site itself to be filled with lively Qi (Breath). On plains, main streams and their tributaries can also enclose a site and convey Qi to it in the same manner as the mountain ranges. The concept of Qi derived from Daoist philosophy. Qi was defined as an essential element forming all existence in the world. It was also believed to be responsible for the quality of a residence. This idealisation of the natural environment can be seen from the biological point of view. The mountain range or main stream can be compared to the powerful trunk of a tree, through which nourishment (Qi) is sent to the end of the branches for flowers to blossom. If the pistil of the flower is the ideal residential site, then the foothills or small streams enclosing it can be regarded as the petals of the flower, protecting the pistil from the harsh winds (Cheng, 1994). In the same manner as the flower needs the sun to blossom, the site needs the addition of Qi to be able to flourish (see Figure 2).

In reality, it is usually difficult to obtain such an ideal site in the towns and cities. Consequently, in order to achieve a desirable living environment, the form of courtyard house compounds has been selected as a symbolic ideal model. As a recreating model, the layout of the courtyard house and its spatial organisation were developed, fixed and given many cultural meanings through symbolic interpretation. From the point of view of Feng-shui, a basic courtyard unit is not only a house for dwelling, but also a structured vision of the universe and an ideal container of Qi, being a reflection of the cosmos of Heaven and Earth. For instance, the courtyard, the important feature of traditional Chinese architecture, as the soul of an enclosed group of buildings, naturally took on a square shape. It may be explained by the influence of simple, geometric plans in ancient architecture. In the minds of the Chinese, the square figure corresponds to a cosmic symbolic representation because they believed that the “sky is round and land is square”. This ideal form conforms to the Chinese people’s “close to the earth” idea, or the belief that when man is close to the earth, health will prevail. Among vernacular dwellings, the growth of the form of traditional courtyard house comes mainly from adapting it to the natural environment and climatic conditions and is also based on social conditions. On this basis, the form is able, as an ideal model, to represent the harmony between the universe, building and man, of the utmost importance in the building of the Chinese.

For over one thousand years, Confucian philosophy has dominated every aspect of Chinese feudal society. The central concept of Confucian philosophy was a system of moral principles, which was given interpretations on the orderly arrangement of affairs and emphasised by the feudal rulers, who laid down precise rules for human beings to follow in their conduct and their thinking. In the Chinese family, for instance, there was a series of regulations for its members to follow. These family rules, based on the teachings of Confucius, not only helped to keep order within the family, but also erected a rather rigidly feudal family tradition. To reflect the family hierarchical nature, the form of axial, symmetrical courtyard houses was developed to symbolise the authority, expressing the power elders had over the younger generations. The spatial organisation of a house compound and the arrangement of the important buildings were designed in the following way. The most honoured buildings were located in the core quarter with the highest roof and biggest size in the whole compound and were placed to the north of a central axis. The core quarter was provided for the older generation. Following the order, the building for the “executive” householder was in the inner quarter before the core quarter. The outer quarter was built for servants and guests and was open to all family members. Under the influence of Confucian rules, the arrangement of the traditional Chinese courtyard houses strongly reflected the hierarchical order prevalent in Chinese society and strictly governed human relationships in feudal society. Conversely, the form of the courtyard house influenced and reinforced the rigidly patriarchal life-style and the thoughts of all the family members, and also encouraged emphasis and enforcement of the Confucian idea regarding the importance of the orderly family as the basis for a harmonious and peaceful world. (see Figure 2).

Through one thousand years of housing development, the courtyard house had been set up as an “ideal model”. In practice, this model protected people from outside forces and disturbances. In essence, it expressed the Chinese philosophical ideology through the construction of an ideal form of a house representing the social and family hierarchy and enhancing harmony between man, house and nature. For a long time, the form of the courtyard house remained without any considerable changes due to the stability of Chinese feudal society, conservative ideas and fixed design concepts. There may be differences in size, scale and spatial organisation in different regions in China, but the main characteristics have not been
changed. Thus the courtyards, the enclosure of space by buildings and walls, representing the heart and soul of dwelling units, and the use of axial and symmetrical planning principles have been the most distinctive characteristics in the design of traditional Chinese dwellings.

THE TRADITIONAL COURTYARD HOUSE IN TRANSITION

Courtyard houses as an important component in shaping the main features of Beijing

Courtyard house patterns could be found in many parts of China, but the most typical forms are those located in the Old City in Beijing, the capital of China for over eight hundred years. In the twelfth century, Mongols (Yuan Dynasty, 1279–1368 A.D.) established their capital in Beijing and made great efforts to build it. They referred to all the previous experiences and rules for setting up capital cities in Chinese history, and this gave the embryonic form of Beijing today. With the grand-scaled construction projects started at that time, the courtyard houses, being the “ideal model” of Chinese dwellings, began to appear simultaneously with the palaces and offices in the city. The next dynasty, Ming (1368–1644 A.D.), built their new capital on top of the old one, through restoration and adaptation to the exigencies of the times. The construction of Chinese classical cities reached its peak at this time.

Even today the structure and quality of Ming Beijing can still be felt. During the last imperial dynasty (Qing, 1644–1911 A.D.), the capital was expanded and improved upon further, with the combined cultures of the multi-nationalities. Through the construction and reconstruction of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, courtyard houses have been the dominant form of Beijing dwellings and also an important component in shaping the main characteristics of traditional Beijing, the Old City of Beijing. Other than the magnificent layout of the imperial city and its palaces (the Forbidden City, for example) with all the impressive walls, the city’s main features probably lie in the residential areas with the courtyard houses and the hutong (residential lane) neighbourhood. To sum up, the courtyard houses in this city have represented one of the most typical and most integrated housing forms in the whole country. From the Forbidden City down to the ordinary dwellings, the context of the courtyard house can be observed.

Traditional courtyard houses in transition during the impact of changes in society since 1911

With the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty at the end of 1911, the last of the twenty-five historic dynasties of China came to an end. That was also the end of the 3500 years of slave and feudal societies. Since both the society and the economy of China were agricultural, the collapse of the old structure of traditional China was accompanied by the bankruptcy of Chinese agriculture and the decline of the traditional Chinese ideology (Pye, 1991). The early years of modern China were, therefore, characterised by revolutions and rapid social changes, all of which had a radical influence on the emerging form of the traditional courtyard houses.

Since the formation of the city until 1911 in traditional Beijing, known as the Old City in Beijing today, formal residential settlements were mainly built for nobility, wealthy merchants and bureaucrats. Shortly after the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty, although the people who had been nobility, wealthy merchants and officials in the Qing government were allowed to live on their own properties — which usually dominated the formal traditional dwelling areas, being of good housing quality and of large or medium size — their social position and living standards declined due to the collapse of the old social and economic order and their loss of income. The traditional upper-class houses were designed to accommodate extended families. A large compound house consisted of two or more basic housing units with their own courtyards and each housing unit could hold one or more family units. Due to the economic pressures, the extended family — its structure which normally consisted of three, four or even five generations living together, i.e. the achievement of the ideal Chinese cultural model of a family — began to break down and was replaced by the nuclear family consisting of parents and children or just a husband and wife. In most extended families, the middle generation went out with their own families and members of the grownup younger generation drifted away to seek their own fortunes. To generate income for their survival, the owners of courtyard houses had to rent out portions of their house compounds with the household furnishings.

On the other hand, urban housing was unevenly distributed and located. Most of the ordinary and low-income people who engaged in service functions were crowded in simple and crude hutong neighbourhoods far away from the centre of the city along the site of the Old City wall. The continual internal war with constant changes of government, famine, disease and poverty forced large numbers of landless peasants to seek refuge in the cities and towns, and brought about a rapid increase of the urban population with the expansion of low-income housing settlements and their impact on the city. These environmental problems and the deteriorating eco-
nomic situation resulted in a lack of investment in the city construction and to a general housing shortage. The serious problem of the urban housing shortage was completely ignored. The courtyard house compounds, once the pride of the people of Beijing, have been forced to transform from single-household into overloaded multi-household compounds.


courtyard houses in transition under the strong influence of national policies after 1949

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, dramatic changes took place under a series of national policies with the guidance of Mao Zedong’s Communist ideology and political influence. The early national policy followed the Soviet pattern of stressing heavy industrial development and urbanisation.

The operation of socialised industrialisation and the state-supervised planned economy was carried out with a decisive priority in the allocation of state investment funds given to urban industry rather than agriculture, and to “productive” investment like heavy industry rather than to “non-productive” investment such as housing construction. On the one hand, the emphasis of national policy on industrialisation and urban development stimulated the rapid increase of the urban population, which brought the expansion of large cities. A report shows that the agriculturally non-productive urban population had grown from 58 million in 1949 to 92 million in 1957 (Pye, 1991). On the other hand, the urban policy was initiated to encourage a common living style with a low level of consumption and consequently the low level of investment in urban housing construction remained.

Faced with the pressure of an acute housing shortage, the government used the old housing settlements as a flexible housing stock to absorb the severe pressure of the housing shortage. Under the movement of the socialist transition of housing ownership, those old private houses were converted as a form of public property and restrictions on living spaces for each household were put on the old dwellings by the government.

In the case of Beijing, the most traditional single-household courtyard houses were completely converted into multi-household compounds and those multi-household compounds were further subdivided. This conversion was regarded as a good approach, which could not only relieve the new government quickly from the urgent headache of the housing shortage, but could also execute the government’s housing policy of abolishing private housing ownership, which was in line with the movement of the nationalisation of ownership.

Meanwhile, this approach helped the government to alter the structure of the traditional Chinese family, which had been inherited from the old ideology of Confucian family ethics. It was criticised by the government as a feudal and corrupt way of life, since the old family ethics of the hierarchical society were considered contradictory to, and in conflict with, the new proletarian and classless society.

During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1964-1976), the form of the traditional houses had undergone a special transition: destruction. The most dramatic and radical conversion of traditional courtyard houses came at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, when the Red Guards destroyed the “Four Olds” (old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits). Later, the movement of destroying the “Four Olds” turned into violent destruction of traditional objects in all aspects of daily life. Anything involving tradition was labelled as anti-revolutionary and hence it was treated as a crime.

Beijing, a traditional city with many historical buildings, was destined for large-scale deliberate destruction. The form of the traditional courtyard house, which was identified with traditional cultural artefacts and decoration and the residents’ traditional life style and living patterns, became the prime target of the movement. Old houses were defaced.
Decorations, carvings, wall paintings and even old furniture, old photographs and old books were destroyed under the force of the movement. The stone dogs in front of the front doors of every courtyard compound, a very common feature for a Beijing family, had their heads chopped off for they stood as leftovers from the feudal society. To protect their homes, families possessing anything of historic value would paint on their doors and walls slogans by Mao Zedong in the hope that this might save them from destructive visitations by the Red Guards.

In order to cope with the further increasing housing shortage without the necessary investment in housing construction, private homes were invaded and thousands of families were given license to share the premises of other families. The traditional courtyard houses were divided up so that one family rarely occupied more than one room. The invasion was not only confined to the few single household courtyard compounds that were left, but it also spread to the multi-household courtyard compounds as well as multi-story apartments elsewhere. Even the inhabitants of the crowded houses had to make way for other families, turning over bedrooms to them and sharing the use of cooking space and toilet facilities. This situation made the already crowded nature of life in cities worsen. Otherwise, with the rapid growth of the population, the housing policy in the old housing settlements encouraged residents to solve the housing problem on their own. The dwellers, therefore, have more freedom in transforming the physical environment in their residential areas. The state of intensified use and lack of repair coupled with the deteriorating housing conditions have been a commonly observed and reported feature of these traditional settlements (see Figure 3).

THE NEW COURTYARD HOUSE SYSTEM

As the capital of new China (1949) is located on the site of traditional Beijing, the conflict between the modernisation of the national capital city and the preservation of the Old City of Beijing has been coexisting in the urban redevelopment projects. The rapid urbanisation and modernisation of traditional Beijing, which have not taken due cognisance of the cultural identity in and around the Old City, are now a source of great anxiety. These discussions and debates focus mainly on the question of how to strike a balance between the preservation and the modernisation of the Old City. At the same time, there is an urgent need to deal with the large-scale redevelopment of the increasingly dilapidated old residential quarters.

Since 1990, some new housing designs and experimental projects have been initiated for redeveloping the old housing quarters. The key aim of the new housing designs in the old housing quarters is to achieve a high building density and a better living environment, subject to the strict requirement in building height and floor area ratio.

A straightforward task is to rehouse the existing population in overcrowded old housing quarters and to protect the horizontal planning feature of traditional Beijing. The new courtyard house system has three main characteristics:

1. It makes a transition from the traditional single-household courtyard housing form to a contemporary multi-household courtyard housing form. In order to conform to the tra-
ditional urban fabric of Beijing featuring courtyard housing, the patterns of new courtyard houses are made to follow the basic design principles of traditional courtyard houses.

2. It utilises contemporary housing design, construction and technological systems, and has the advantage of achieving cost-efficient “low-rise and high-density” or “medium-rise and high-density” apartment dwellings.

3. It keeps the privacy of walk-up apartments and the features of neighbourliness in shared common living spaces, and meets the requirement of raising living standards. Thus the social and physical transition is made possible within the unique architectural tradition.

**Two types of new multi-household courtyard houses**

The new courtyard houses could be classified into two types based on two different approaches. One approach is based on the concept of urban renewal. This involves the demolition of old housing quarters and their replacement with new.

The second approach is based on the preservation, renovation and rebuilding of the old courtyard system within a single project. These new courtyard houses may differ from traditional courtyard houses in size, scale and spatial organisation, but the development of the new courtyard structure maintains the basic form of the traditional courtyard house, the use of axial and symmetrical planning principles to organise housing groups and the symbolisation of the traditional courtyard house style.

**The courtyard structure in a new courtyard residential community**

The planning of new neighbourhood clusters is generally based on the traditional courtyard structure. The modern high-density apartments are used to form the courtyard spaces at the neighbourhood level. Normally, an enclosed courtyard, surrounded by apartment buildings and walls, makes a neighbourhood group a basic unit. A desirable integrated community is provided through composing a number of the basic neighbourhood units in different patterns. In the central area of the sections within a community, a large open space is enclosed by surrounding neighbourhood group clusters for social interaction among the community (see Figure 4).

From the present projects of new courtyard housing communities, a hierarchical order of the new courtyard structure could be found. The physical organisation of courtyard spaces is divided into three levels: the community level, the neighbourhood level and the family level. Each courtyard space level contributes to the development of different degrees of social interaction between the community, the neighbourhood and the family. A network of roads is laid out to respond to the hierarchical order of the new courtyard structure and to promote the identity of physical characteristics in each level for serving different sizes of population with their specific social activities (see Figure 4).

![Figure 4. Examples of new courtyard house communities](image)
The courtyard structure in new courtyard neighbourhood compound

The experimental project of the new courtyard compound is the development of designs for old large compact courtyard house complexes in southern China. The large old house was built for joint extended families in places where building density was high and surrounding buildings could reach two or three storeys. In fact, it is a multi-household and multi-storey compact courtyard complex which can match the requirements of the new housing designs in the old housing quarters of Beijing.

Therefore its compositional principles are utilised to set a new courtyard pattern compound system. The normal old house complex consisted of three groups. The main group was located at the centre of the complex with axial and symmetrical layout and two south–north main passageways on both sides of the main halls to avoid passing through the main halls when entering or leaving the house. Two other groups were placed parallel to the main group with their own main passageways leading to the outside. In the complex, longitudinal and latitudinal passages formed a circulating interaction network in the complex. Each passage was widened partly by courtyards along the line, functioning as a space for social interaction or children’s playgrounds at the neighbourhood level. The characteristics of the main passageway system in large compact house complexes can also be observed from a fishbone styled street and lane system in the urban tissue of traditional Beijing. In the urban spatial planning, most of the lanes or hutongs run from east to west, while commercial streets run vertical to the lanes in the south–north direction. This system of streets and lanes can provide easy access to transport and shopping centres and it can keep residential areas away from noisy traffic. This tradition is utilised and manifested in the designs of new courtyard pattern house compounds as linkages between new residential environments and the traditional urban tissue (see Figure 5).

At the beginning of the research on the new courtyard compound system, a proposal design in Shishahai area showed that the new housing pattern and its basic principles of composition came mainly from that of the old southern courtyard complex (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. The formation of new courtyard compounds

As the research continued, a basic courtyard house unit with its flat unit models was set up. The basic courtyard house unit was formed by a courtyard and a number of surrounding flat unit models — a pattern it takes from the traditional courtyard house unit in Beijing. The basic unit can be expanded and repeated along a longitudinal or horizontal axis to form a series of clusters of courtyard houses in one group, basing on the axial and symmetrical planning principles of traditional Chinese architecture. A number of groups are connected by a fish-bone styled passage-way.
system known as new neighbourhood lanes, a concept adopted from the large compact courtyard house complex in southern China and from the urban fabric structure in traditional Beijing (see Figure 6).

The advantage of the courtyard compound system is that the basic compound can be expanded, repeated or detached in order to form either an independent neighbourhood compound or groups of neighbourhood compounds. Their flexible sizes could fit any available plot as a plug-in courtyard compound (Wu, 1991a). The flexibility of the plug-in courtyard compound has been demonstrated in the Ju’er hutong neighbourhood project (see Figure 6). The reconstruction project of the Ju’er hutong neighbourhood has been regarded as a successful example among the experimental redevelopment projects of the dilapidated housing quarters in Beijing.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The traditional form of Chinese houses is represented by the courtyard house. This paper has analysed factors responsible for the formation and development of courtyard houses. They include the specific climatic system, the natural environment, social and political conditions, cultural and philosophical beliefs. As an accepted “ideal model” of Chinese dwellings over several ancient dynasties, courtyard houses embodied the attempt of Chinese people to identify the relationship between the environment and themselves.
Beyond the basic need to shelter people and their possessions from outside disturbances, courtyard houses performed other two important functions: to stress the social identity and status of the inhabitants within the social and family hierarchy, and to enhance harmony between man, the house and nature. In this century, continuing wars and political turbulence have imposed a devastating impact on the healthy development of the courtyard house. Yet, deeply rooted in the long historical stream of social, cultural and ideological contexts, courtyard houses with major traditional features are here to stay. The only exception is that some changes are being (or are about to be) made to the old style of the courtyard houses, which is a reflection of the social and cultural changes.
REFERENCES


