

Urban Transformation  
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Located in a metropolitan area of Xi'an, ancient capital of several major dynasties in China, is the famous Great Mosque. This edifice, in the heart of the Hui district, provides one of the more important tourist sites of Xi'an. The resulting wealth of the district, also adding to the economic vitality generated through commerce, lies at the origin of a remarkable architectural transformation. This study focuses on the Hui people, whose centuries-old Muslim identity has recently come to express itself through contemporary vernacular architecture.

Transformation of urban form. The beginning of the transformation on the narrow parcel network. Some 'Chinese' houses still remain between the new houses.

The great economic power of the Hui Muslims, when considered in conjunction with the fact that there is a total lack of building regulations (uniquely within the Hui district), is conducive to the development of an uncontrolled transformation of the 'urban form'. Observing this local 'out-law' situation offers an excellent context in which to analyse what is called 'contemporary vernacular architecture'. This term consists in two parts: Vernacular architecture refers to architectural work by the local people, without any institutional or professional help. The process is based on the cultural background of the residents, as well as their technical and economic resources. 'Contemporary' refers to the architecture of today, made of modern material and techniques such as reinforced concrete, glazed tiles, modern metal windows, and includes the invention of new solutions for plan and design, in other words, new types of houses.

#### The beginning of transformation

From the eighties, a great change occurred in the 'urban form' of the famous Drum Tower (emblematic monument of the Hui district) area. This change was relatively progressive at the outset (1985-90), achieving greater momentum with the strong economic development in China from 1990 onwards. It is in this last decade that one can speak of a 'new urban form'. This form is mainly characterized by three, four or five-storey houses and flat roofs with accessible terraces. The district now has many common traits with medinas – in the habitual typology of urban form.

The transformation can be observed at two levels: urban structure and public space; and architectural form (the emergence of a new architectural type and new terminology). The new type of architecture is based on the inhabitants' large capacity to invest, which has led to the transformation of the ancient traditional Chinese town. This latter term signifies the regular city inherited from the ancient urban network of structures consisting in low courtyard houses (one or two floors), with tiled Chinese roofs. These Hui houses, which once composed the urban fabric of the district, were identical to the Chinese houses (often cited in literature as 'traditional house' from the North of China). That is to say, they expressed the Chinese ethnic identity rather than the Muslim religious identity of the Hui.

The ancient urban network maintained a plot of greenery in the empty spaces, such as in the main courtyards, back yards with gardens, and public spaces with trees lined along the streets. The present rebuilding process in this area has saturated these former empty spaces by, for example, filling up the courtyard with additional constructions. Complete saturation of the urban network was attained at the end of the seventies, the first observable consequence of the lack of space. Of course this did not concern only the Muslim district, but rather all the Xi'an districts inside the perimeters of

# Transformation of the Hui district in Xi'an



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the city wall and all Chinese cities during this period. The great economic vitality of the Hui, however, made the transformation more rapid and precipitated the move to yet another phase: substitution of the ancient courtyard house by an altogether new type of dwelling. The narrow parcel of land of the former is taken up and used to build the latter. From a professional point of view (of an architect or an urban planner), this narrow patch is generally thought too narrow to be used. If the new rebuilt district needs three, four or five-storey houses in order to accommodate increased density, an architect would usually suggest grouping several parcels together, allowing for more efficient use of the land and a more rational plan of housing. With the urgency of housing problems and, as mentioned before, the fact that there is no housing regulation, the inhabitants simply cannot wait for a solution. They thus take matters into their own hands.

The narrowness of the parcel necessitates new organization of space, new geometry for the rooms with new proportions which professionals such as architects could never normally accept. The constraints of shared property and local agreements amongst neighbours are at the origin of what we call 'invention', which in this case can be considered a successful process of densification. With three, four or five-storey houses, accommodation of a higher population density is obtainable. But the challenge for the authorities in charge of rehabilitation or rebuilding programmes is to make it sustainable.

Accessible terraced roofs characterize the new architecture, with annexes like storage space, cellars, and shelters for animals. Certain prior uses of the courtyards are now found on the terraces. The new multi-storeyed house is organized around a patio, smaller than the ancient courtyard and used mainly to provide light and to distribute the various flats. The level of sanitation equipment has increased considerably. Sanitary installations and toilets appear on the first floor with a water point at each level.

#### The turning point

By 1997, 60 to 70% of the district area was estimated to have been transformed according to new vernacular architectural design. Though not respecting the habitual architectural figures, the new architectural type offers solutions where the authorities in charge of urban issues fail to do so. But this is not all.

Until recently, the Hui people were wary of expressing their Muslim identity by way of architecture. One could not observe differences between Han houses and Hui houses. The revival of pilgrimages to Mecca, authorized since the eighties, and the increased contacts of the Hui with other Muslims in the world, has opened them up to new architectural references. The Hui have now experienced the Arabo-Islamic architecture found in many countries of the East. They take these references and imitate the figures. After centuries of simply producing typically Chinese architecture, the Hui architecture now emphasizes differentiation. In this way, the Hui affirm their identity and reinforce their distinct characteristics.

The current period represents a fundamental turning point in the history of Hui architecture, and is not limited to housing. In several mosques, domes and cupolas are erected instead of the tiled roofs of ancient Hui mosques. A progressive transformation of these mosques has occurred. In the past, they were organized according to norms of the Chinese temple. There is a new urban scenery: arches incorporated in the design of windows and doors, vaults, and cupolas. These signs clearly manifest that one is in an Islamic space.

It seems paradoxical that inside of this Muslim district of Xi'an, all Chinese authority in the field of urban regulation and control is disappearing. Perhaps the delicate situation between Hui and Chinese municipal authorities explains the fact that regulation stops at the limits of the district. Building licences do not exist in this zone and there is no control over, or even knowledge of, how many square metres are built each year. Such a phenomena merits further research

by anthropologists and architects in terms of the anthropology of space as there are many more general questions remaining to be answered. What type of space do people create when there is no control? What patterns or foundational structures do people choose under these conditions? What is the place of architecture in (in this case Muslim) group identity? Vernacular modern architecture offers a most fertile terrain for further research into these questions, in this case concerning identity and the expression thereof through the re-forming of urban space by a Muslim minority group. ◆

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