

A HISTORY OF ERASURE SZE TSUNG LEONG

History is composed as much with the buildings of a city as it is with the words on a page. The writing of history in built form takes shape as a complex sedimentation of time resulting from a slow, dense accumulation of construction. A culture's development can be read through the layers of previous buildings that together form a geological summary of history. The evidence of decades, generations, and centuries becomes part of the city's daily life, making the experience of the present simultaneous with the past.

As slowly as the writing of history accumulates, it can as rapidly be erased. The erasure of built history can happen unintentionally, as with natural disasters, but also occurs intentionally, as with the destructiveness of warfare, the forcefulness of regimes, or the unpredictability of turns in the economy. In all of these cases, history is forced to take sudden changes in course, and the slow sedimentation of buildings—the painstaking accumulation of urban form—is interrupted by their sudden eradication. In the environments we live in, history has the potential to be substantially rewritten.

In China, history has been defined by the successive erasures and rewritings of the past. These alterations of history have occurred when the country has shifted from one highly antithetical, contradictory era to another—from dynasty to dynasty, from imperial rule to communism, from communism to the market economy. Each new era attempts to redefine its relationship to tradition, with the hope of shaping an ideal present legitimized and supported by an idealized and carefully formed past.

For the Imperial dynasties, the erasure of the past was a way to enforce the continuation of tradition. Emperors would commission their own official histories, rewriting the history of the past then writing their own history, to reinforce the inevitability of their place in the lineage of their predecessors. This practice was

not so different with cities, as emperors destroyed conquered cities and replaced them with new ones. This starting anew established the absoluteness of their power by demonstrating their ability to construct entire environments patterned on and legitimized by the urban forms established by history. For the emperors, the shaping of cities provided a means to enforce an absolute order on society and, ultimately, on history itself.

For the communists, the erasure of the past was a way to establish ideological superiority over tradition. History was the antithesis against which to form a new reality, providing the rationale for discrediting past society and destroying its achievements, both social and material. The past was regarded as an enemy to be defeated, humiliated, and obliterated. In the urban realm, this was first realized by Mao Zedong's destruction of Beijing's Ming-era city gates and walls, and his unrealized wish to destroy the capital's Forbidden City. This attitude was the most extreme during the 1966–76 Cultural Revolution, whose goals were encapsulated by the movement, "Smash the Four Olds"—old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits. A new society was called forth in the slogan, "Smash the Old World, Build the New World." Yet the Cultural Revolution's enforcers only had raw ideology, not economic or material resources, to drive their revolution. They vandalized and wrecked cultural artifacts, ruined lives, and dismantled social traditions, but their desire to destroy the old world by razing urban environments did not reach the extent that their slogans demanded. Instead of demolishing cities and replacing them with a new world, the communists let their urban fabrics degenerate into slums. The revolutionaries' disdain of their own history was mostly actualized through the deterioration of their cities.

Ironically, China's current economic revolution is completing the physical

destruction of history that was called for during the Cultural Revolution. Today, the erasure of the past is carried out simply because much of the traditional past is no longer relevant to the market economy. Scores of traditional neighborhoods, decayed as a result of poverty and imposed ideology, are now defined by the state as “dangerous” and “dilapidated.” Considered impediments to development, these areas hold little economic value except as potential empty land. The new world aspired to by the Cultural Revolution has arrived in the form of developers bearing names such as “New World” (*Xin Shijie*), and commercial developments suffixed by the phrases “New City” (*Xin Cheng*) or “Century City” (*Shiji Cheng*). When an area is developed, it is almost always cleared of all traces of the past: buildings, streets, residents. The result is an absence of history, within which the components of China’s new cities are built out of nothing: luxury apartments, shopping centers, supermarkets, widened roads, tennis courts, office blocks, parking lots.

The motivation for erasing history is ultimately rooted in the drive to shape and manage society. A principal tool of this drive is the design of cities—an activity that involves demolition as much as construction. For the majority of China’s history, the destruction of a diverse past enabled the construction of highly planned, rigid urban spaces that facilitated the establishment and administration of social hierarchies. Through urban planning, governing powers could fit society into a fixed order.

The imperial dynasties planned their cities as monolithic, complete entities reflecting the heavenly order with the palace, which symbolized the emperor as the enforcer of the mandate of heaven, placed in the center of the urban plan. Surrounding and radiating from this center, society was structured according to an established hierarchy into strictly defined classes contained within walled and gridded wards. For the communists, erasure was a tool used to suppress any ide-

ology outside the dominant one, and was a method to fit society into a prescribed way of thinking. They believed that society had to be protected from unwanted influences through strict policing. To ensure order, they destroyed buildings and widened streets to facilitate military movement, as in the case of Chang’an Jie, the main east-west axis on the northern edge of Tiananmen Square. To ensure unpoluted thought, they defaced or tore down the evidence of past societies, and to ensure productivity, they organized and supervised society through its partitioning into work units. In present-day society, erasure is used as a strategy to generate and accommodate new wealth. As traditional neighborhoods yield to private developments, a new but globally familiar urban pattern emerges, based on spatially delineated polarities of income, contoured by the swells of an engulfing economy: former residents of the urban center are pushed to the fringes of the city because they can no longer afford their former neighborhoods; large-scale gated clusters of commercial housing blocks are segregated from the rest of the city; new buildings are left empty or unfinished because of over-construction.

In the photograph *Chunshu, Xuanwu District, Beijing* (page 17), a neighborhood dating from the thirteenth-century Yuan Dynasty, but completed during the Qing Dynasty, waits to be destroyed while its condemned and partially destroyed structures still house the area’s remaining residents. *Xihuashi Nanli Dongqu, Chongwen District, Beijing* (page 95) depicts an area that had been entirely cleared of structures and streets, and replaced with commercial housing blocks that surround one remaining rebuilt traditional structure. The same process of urban clearcutting is seen in *Nanshi, Huangpu District, Shanghai* (page 83). *Old Fengdu I, Chongqing Municipality* (page 31) shows a town on the banks of the Yangtze, with a history dating from at least the second century BCE, completely destroyed as a result of

the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, now considered the largest dam in the world. *New Fengdu, Chongqing Municipality* (page 33) shows the replacement of old Fengdu across the river. *Hefang Jie, Shangcheng District, Hangzhou* (page 101) is a newly renovated traditional-style tourist area nestled in a city once chronicled by Marco Polo as the most beautiful and magnificent in the world, but later destroyed by the Taiping Rebellion of 1861–63. *Xinjiekou, Xuanwu District, Nanjing* (page 127) portrays the dismantling of China's historical sedimentation by revealing three periods of China's history in varying conditions, layered one on top of another like geological strata: the ruins of houses dating from the imperial period occupy the foreground, partially demolished housing blocks from the socialist period stretch across the middle ground, and new office and residential towers from the latest, capitalist period preside high over the remains of the former two.

Caught in the tenuous period after the end of one history and at the start of another, these landscapes parallel the experience of cities in other locations and other times that have witnessed sudden turns in the writing of their built histories: the extensive reconfiguration of mid-nineteenth century Paris, where wide strips of the city were demolished to create unimpeded boulevards as symbols of an emperor's command over a city; the wartime reduction to rubble of European cities, where centuries of history disappeared within the span of a few years; the listless spaces resulting from the postwar suburban attenuation of American cities, which were the outcome of efforts to prepare the environment for a new economy. In China, the forces behind the transformation of its cities are similar: a powerful government ruling with almost limitless authority, seeking to realize its vision of an urban order; the sweeping destruction of historic urban areas on a scale and suddenness equal to warfare; and an abrupt change in the economy

having substantial repercussions on the environment as land is transformed into a means for profit. It is the confluence of these three forces that makes China's current erasure of the past so swift and extensive.

In these cities and periods, the rationale for these changes has often been modernization, which is principally the planning of the new, but as importantly, defines the relationship between the present and the past. How modernization can coexist with history was the challenge facing the cities recovering from the ruins of the Second World War. The bombing of London destroyed large portions of the urban fabric and left the streets, once defined by continuous walls of buildings, instead encircling flattened blocks littered with building remnants and debris. The new buildings that eventually filled the voids were modern, but arranged within the framework of the history provided by the city's street patterns. Even Tokyo, whose built fabric was almost entirely eradicated by firebombing, relied on its historic urban patterns to rebuild: the new was constructed within the preexisting streets, according to building scales outlined by history, rather than from a reconfigured urban layout. Tokyo's buildings speak of the present, but the experience of the streets parallels and continues that of previous eras. In cities like London and Tokyo, the result is a compendium of histories written within an outline slowly etched over time, providing the structure in which the past and present coexist. In these instances, modernization continues the writing of what preceded it, accommodating the contradictions and discrepancies of time.

At the other end of the spectrum, modernization can unfold at the expense of previous histories. Up to now, China's traces of the past have survived only because, for at least the previous two centuries, China has lacked the resources—financial, technological, political, military—to erase the past. Now that

those who hold power in China—from government officials to developers—have the means and authority to transform the country's environment on a nationwide scale, they are completing the erasure of histories that are no longer useful to the present, and rewriting what is left to fit a prescribed idea of what the past should be. In cities throughout China, the resulting landscapes are stripped, empty zones, cleared not only of buildings but also of the street patterns that once supported the structure of historic neighborhoods and gave cities their identities. The selected old buildings that do survive are rebuilt as profitable reinterpretations of tradition, while their former context of streets and buildings is removed, widened, or enlarged. The result is an entirely new history, rewritten for a new society, and accented with very specific, renovated versions of the past. It is the contemporary manifestation of Mao's slogan, "Let the Past Serve the Present." China's recurring cycles of erasure and rewriting have produced a history that is not an accumulation of diverse histories, but is a single history, always in the present.

The shaping of this single history has been directed, almost consistently since China first coalesced as a state more than two thousand years ago, by a single, unchallenged authority focused on promoting and enforcing a single viewpoint. Establishing a single viewpoint has required unwavering control and maintenance, sustained not just through the cumulative writing of history, but primarily through the continuous efforts to edit and shape reality. The result is that a principal tool for shaping reality in China is erasure. The centrality that erasure occupies in China is encapsulated by Tiananmen Square, a spatial expression of state power carved as a blank slate out of the former Imperial City. The square derives significance from its emptiness, a stage upon which the events of history are enacted: the fall of a dynasty and the establishment of a new republic, the public pro-

nouncements and denouncements of ideology, the measured rhythm of political ceremonies and spectacles, the creation and demise of movements. How the square was created, its symbolic significance, and its history suggest that the greatest and most valued power of the state is the authority to erase.

Much like a work of art is a material interpretation of an artist's opinions and perceptions, cities are a society's physical interpretations of reality. As society's largest, most encompassing, and most assiduously built cultural artifacts, cities are the accumulated efforts of different times and societies, able to encompass and represent multiple histories and realities. Past histories make their presence felt and known through what is left in built form. When a history is destroyed, its absence still defines and underlies its replacement—the knowledge of the interrupted history of Tenochtitlan, the former Aztec capital destroyed and replaced by Mexico City, will always linger in the modern capital, and the identity of present-day Hiroshima is synonymous with its catastrophic eradication. How erasure occurs, how a city emerges from the sudden interruption of the accumulative writing of its history, and how it replaces what has been lost, reveals a society's attitude to the past and its aspirations for the future. In China, erasure is deliberately imposed on its cities by the country itself, and has created a lineage of successive histories, following one after the other, momentarily coexisting together, each defining itself anew in relation to its predecessor. Each erasure paves the ground for a new, rewritten reality to emerge, and which today, again, prepares the foundations from which China's contemporary environment and society are emerging. From this erasure begins a new history, in the tradition of the previous histories that have existed in China—each arising from a new beginning, each enabled by the long history of erasure, each built upon the erasure of history.