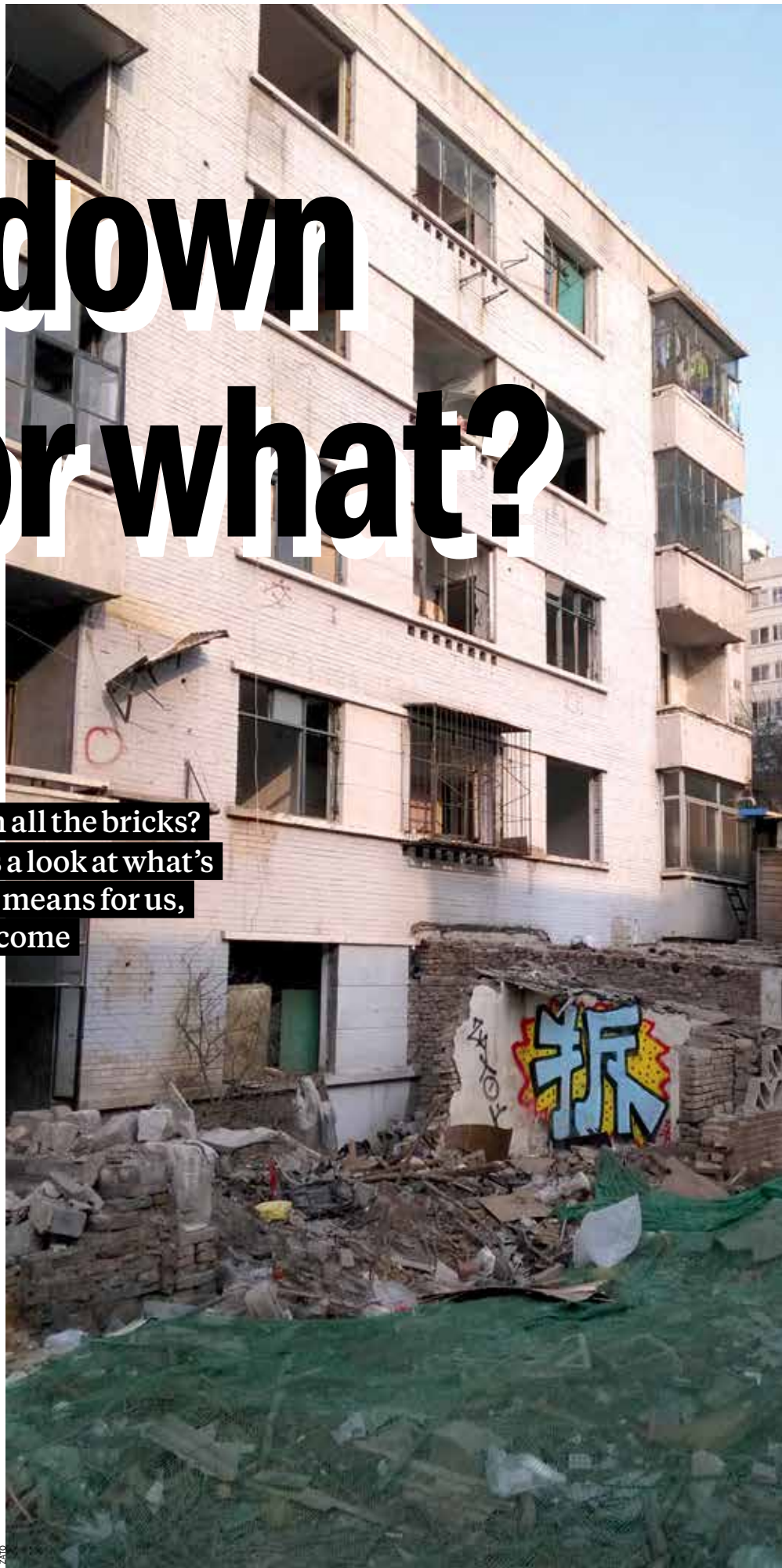


Tear down for what?

What's the deal with all the bricks?

Time Out takes a look at what's happened, what it means for us, and what's still to come



What's happened?



BY NOW, there's a good chance your favourite hutong business has changed forever or disappeared completely. There's also a chance your favourite small business-operating migrant has been stripped of their door – or their entire building – and for many the means to continue life in Beijing. Call it what you like, the current citywide renovations are some of the most dramatic and sustained Beijing has seen since the Olympics, and they're likely to continue for at least the next two years.

It might feel as though these wholesale changes in Beijing's hutong network and the broader city are a snap phenomenon, but 'The Brickening' has been in the works for some time, officially passing through Dongcheng District Government's 57th Executive Meeting – phrased slightly differently – in August 2014.

This is part of a larger push to recalibrate Beijing's image and function as capital, which includes shaving its inner-city population over the next three years – and capping its overall population at 23 million by 2020, a decision which sailed through the 2016 'Two Sessions' annual plenary meetings.

Government at both local and national levels have since released multiple statements detailing the impetus, the plan, the scale and the timeframe of what's being referred to as a 'beautification' of the city. Official language has been characteristically vague, but the need-to-know phrases include 'to better maintain the image of the capital', 'to promote the core function of the capital', 'to further enhance the quality of the urban environment', 'to improve the issue of Beijing's "dirty backstreets"', 'to maintain historical characteristics' and for Beijing 'to be effectively relieved of its noncore functions'.

If the language is somewhat open to interpretation, the scale is anything but. According to a document published on the Beijing Government website, the city will 'bid farewell to illegal construction in 2,435 hutongs' by the end of 2019, with 567 hutongs to be remodelled in 2017, 615 in 2018 and 495 in 2019, on a budget of roughly 10 billion RMB.

While unofficial maps predicting the gentrification juggernaut's path have been circulating on social media, it's difficult to predict with any certainty when and where will be next affected. Working on the current south-to-north trend in the Yonghegong area, however, there's reason to believe Guozijian Jie and Wudaoying Hutong are next in line.

100 cultural streets, 100 cultural businesses

By the end of the year, Beijing plans to announce its list of 100 designated cultural streets and 100 designated cultural businesses, for those worried about the impact all of this will have on 'hutong culture'. No word on the criteria, nor what culture will be promoted, but you can bet your floppy churro Nanluoguxiang will be at the business end of the conversation.

Timeline

AUGUST 2014

Hutong improvement programme passes through Dongcheng Government executive meeting.

SEPTEMBER 2016

Gui Jie remodelled – many businesses shutdown, most lose second storey.

OCTOBER 2016

Baochao Hutong bricked. People start to notice something's going on.

MARCH 2017

Chunxiu Lu's strip of shops, restaurants and bars demolished.

APRIL 2017

Over half of Sanlitun's 'dirty' bar street is torn down.

MAY 2017

Fangjia Hutong is bricked up in a day; many businesses shut down as a result.

How does it affect us?



Mind your business

'Oh good, you're here. Might need your help setting up if that's okay,' says Rain Xiao, owner of Fangjia Hutong dive Cellar Door, which, since its only useable door was replaced with a brick wall as part of citywide renovations a few weeks ago, is now known as Cellar Window. She needs our help because to open to the evening's custom, Cellar Window's outdoor furniture, signage and lighting must be passed onto the street through a tiny six foot-high window – now the only entry point to one of Dongcheng's most cherished lowbrow haunts.

This is a new reality for many businesses in and around the hutongs of Dongcheng and the greater city since Beijing's long-term restoration project ramped up significantly in late 2016.

Xiao clammers up her red ladder and peers through a window and into her business, which, as one might imagine, has taken a significant hit since losing its ground-level point of entry. The whole scene is a farce. 'Funny, right?' gags Xiao, floor-length skirt catching on the botched brick wall as she swings a leg through the window fixture. It's not though.

'My life has been damaged by this. I created this bar and now nobody can get in the door. It feels like a funeral time. Like an old man being dragged along, dying forever. Hopeless. It's like if you have a sick mother or sick child and you have to go to the hospital every day, and you know they're

dying, but you have to be there because you can't abandon them. That's how I feel. (The bar) is like my dying kid. I believe I'm doing something that means something to people. Some people really love it.'

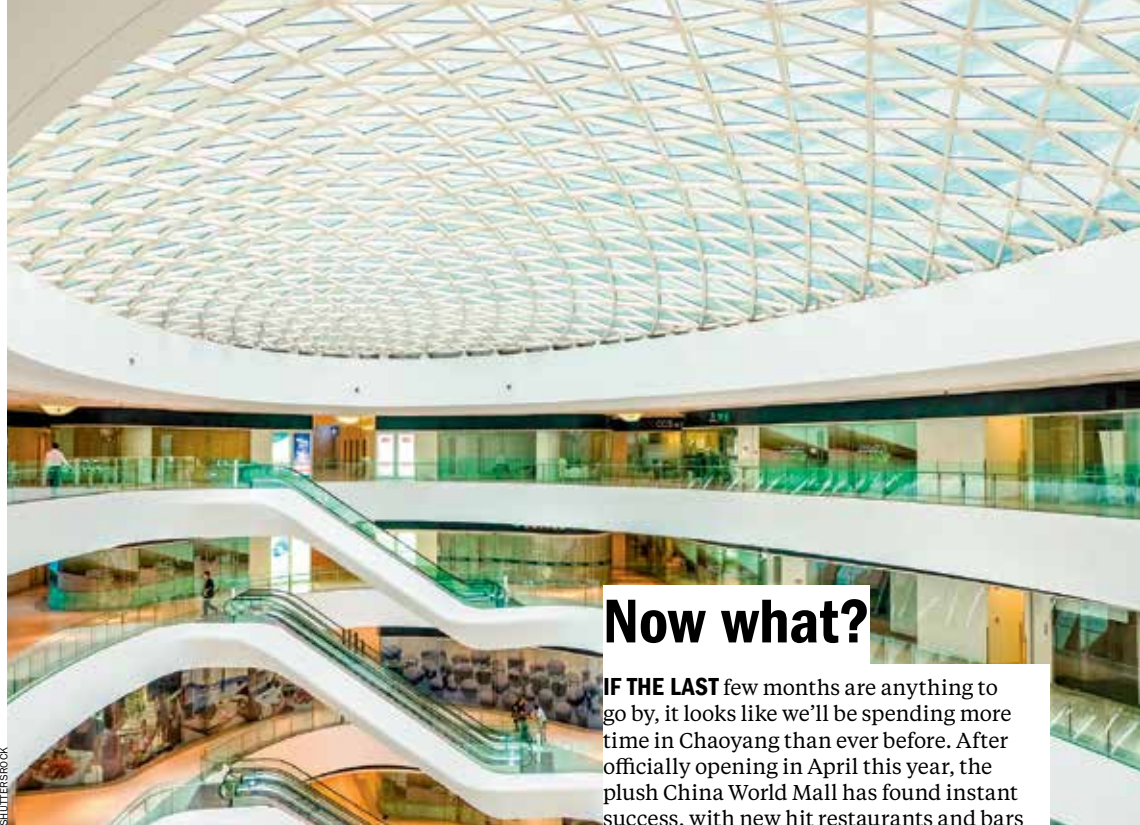
An old man calls us an idiot as we fumble with a foldout chair. Xiao assures us he's mostly joking; it's been five years since Cellar Door opened, and he's one of few local allies that doesn't know her as 'the foreign whore with a Chinese face'.

'The neighbours, they got really pissed off at our landlord for renting this space to me because all the foreigners go bananas every night.'

She's right about the banana-going clientele, who to the relief of a hard-sleeping neighbourhood are disappearing from the hutong quickly. For better or worse, the bricks mark a period of transition for both hutong culture and its unique aesthetic. For Grandpa Ji, lifelong resident of the area, it's timely change. 'Being a capital citizen, we have to show our benevolence and open-mindedness to the outside world. This is the spirit of Beijing. Think about it: if the world sees our dirty little alleyways, what would they think of us? We can't lose our pride!'

A couple of hundred metres down the road on Fangjia Hutong, Taiwanese-Kiwi owned restaurant Antlers has also lost its door. After watching the bricks make their way east down the street over a period of a few days, owner Tim had come to terms with the fate of his *guabao* nook in advance. 'What happened was what we expected I guess, we weren't really caught off-guard by anything. It doesn't really make it any easier though, especially since we're so new on the scene and things were picking up for us.' Thankfully, the couple were able to come to a creative arrangement with their next-door neighbour – a restaurant with whom they share a wall and whose hutong-facing facade was not bricked – to allow customers to pass through their front door.

Some haven't been so lucky. Mrs Yang, whose CBD restaurant was bricked without warning in April and now has no street visibility, is at a loss. 'There's no point just moving somewhere else in Beijing – it's the whole country. We're going to have to



Now what?

IF THE LAST few months are anything to go by, it looks like we'll be spending more time in Chaoyang than ever before. After officially opening in April this year, the plush China World Mall has found instant success, with new hit restaurants and bars from the likes of Migas, Flo and Susu, not to mention a gym and an ice skating rink, pulling enormous patronage from the CBD and surrounding areas.

It's not just the financial district that's expanding. Just north of Liangmaqiao and situated bizarrely in the shadow of a hospital is the recently opened Shang Plaza, a new lifestyle hub home to food and beverage hits new and old, including second outlets of both Bottega and Q Mex. Up the street in Zuojiashuang, taphouse Transmountain is foreshadowing a makeover for the traditionally 'Beijing' neighbourhood.

For hutong die-hards, it's not all bad news. Hao Dong of Crossboarders Architects is cautiously optimistic of a more structured resurgence in alleyway economics. 'The hutongs will still be lively, but probably the Government will influence the businesses that are operating in the hutongs, whereas before it was very organic. I think a lot of business owners are expecting this wave will pass sooner or later, and they will re-open. Of course, many have shut down because losing a door, a window, it's too much to continue.'

'Before there was totally no control. Everything was growing – just like China. But the city is now overpopulated. The population is exceeding the capacity of the city in many ways: in terms of water supply, in terms of the sewage system, the housing situation, the subway system. That can be dangerous.'

Hutong history

The current state of some of our favourite haunts

GONE (FOR NOW)

- Fu Tapas and Wine
- Beixinsantiao's lamb leg restaurants
- Rager Pies
- Tuk Tuk Sandwiches
- Mado

RELOCATED OR RELOCATING

- Ron Mexico (Jiaodaokou Dong Da Jie)
- Bottega (Nali Patio and Xinyuanli)
- Was Park (around the back)
- Moxi Moxi
- The Anchor
- Ling Er Jiu (across the road on Chunxiu Lu)
- Roll Box
- The Tiki Bungalow
- BBC
- Aperitivo (Sanlitun Soho)

COMPROMISED

- Mr Shi Sanlitun (entrance)
- Was Park (entrance)
- Antlers (entrance)
- Frost (space reduced)
- Cellar Door (entrance)
- Hot Cat (entrance)
- Jiao
- Fang
- Modernista (entrance)

go back to our hometown,' said Yang when *Time Out* spoke to her back in April.

While the hutongs in the Andingmen area have been a focus of late, the dizzying network of alleyways surrounding Dashilan seems to have dodged the bricks, for now. 'I hope so – it's a little unclear,' muses historian Lars Ulrik Thom, whose public history space, Beijing Postcards, lies just south of the bustling tourist strip. 'I think it's both good and bad, though in this discussion it's important to highlight that there are reasons. It's actually not sustainable, having so many people here, there's simply not enough resources.'

'But I've never seen a movement like this before,' continues Thom, who in over two decades recording and exhibiting stories from Beijing's ancient hutong neighbourhoods, is no stranger to change.

'I remember in '96 I was running in the streets, and there were all of these bicycles – hundreds – and they were really slow, but it was still one sustained movement. Slow, but it had a direction. And slowly but surely this society built itself, together. But now that movement has to be stopped and we have to redirect. It's understandable, but I think there's room for reaching out to the people who are affected.'

A loyal patronage is beginning to fill the outdoor seating we've assembled outside Cellar Window, many, no doubt, discussing what is a complex situation. Xiao is weary.

'It's just made people feel like they really don't want to be nice anymore. It's pushed people to the edge. What happens when people get f**ked? They just get nastier. I'm just so glad I can leave. But I'm not sure how many Chinese people are as lucky as me.' Of course, plenty of people will be leaving, many for lack of another option.

BRICK UPDATES

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