

SELLING SOCIAL CHANGE

By Taz Hussein & Matt Plummer

ACROSS THE RETURNS CONTINUUM

By Matt Bannick, Paula Goldman, Michael Kubzansky, & Yasemin Saltuk

TOWARD THE EFFICIENT IMPACT FRONTIER

By Michael McCreless

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THE CURB-CUT EFFECT

Laws and programs designed to benefit vulnerable groups, such as the disabled, often end up benefiting all of society.

BY ANGELA GLOVER BLACKWELL

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WHAT'S NEXT

NEW APPROACHES TO SOCIAL CHANGE

⚡ A QUICK UPGRADE: Workers install “plug-ins” (left) that give people living in Beijing’s old courtyard houses access to modern amenities (below).

WATER & SANITATION

Plugging Into the Past

BY KRISTINE WONG

The majority of the ancient courtyard houses that form Beijing’s narrow *hutong* alleyways are now rubble, demolished over the past decades to make way for new development. But a quick, inexpensive method to modernize the houses’ interiors is slowly gaining traction—and it could become a key to preserving not only these historic structures but also the culture that has developed around them over the centuries.

Up to one million Beijing residents still live in the approximately 30 percent of *hutong* houses that have escaped demolition. But for the most part, these old houses don’t have any electricity, plumbing, or bathrooms, according to Matthew Hu, a Beijing-based Chinese cultural preservation expert and the cofounder of the Courtyard Institute, which seeks to help protect the *hutongs*.

“These places have been left out of the development process, and they’re extremely difficult to upgrade,” says architect James Shen. “The residents have limited resources, so if they were to move out, they wouldn’t be able to afford to live anywhere else.”

Shen, an American expatriate, is the cofounder of the Beijing-based People’s Architecture Office (PAO) along

with Chinese natives He Zhe and Zang Feng. The firm specializes in projects aimed at addressing Chinese social issues, and the team thinks they’ve found a good way to update the *hutongs* for modern needs.

Their solution: a lightweight, prefabricated panel with embedded electrical wiring, insulation, and plumbing that has been custom designed—in consultation with *hutong* residents—to fit snugly inside of the existing walls. Different “plug-in” panels are tailored for kitchens, bedrooms,



and bathrooms; installation takes only one day, so the residents don’t need to move out during the upgrade. Each panel can be connected with a simple Allen wrench (a tool commonly used to assemble Ikea furniture). Residents also can choose to connect their gray-water plumbing lines to a septic tank in the courtyard and install a composting toilet.

At “a few thousand US dollars per 200 square feet,” the installation is relatively affordable, Shen says—especially given the lack of alternatives. Over the last few years, PAO has installed 16 of these systems in courtyard houses, most of them in Beijing’s Dashilar neighborhood. The government funded the first few, and then the Leping Social Foundation (LSF), which invests in scalable social innovation projects, stepped in to sponsor more. Two families contributed money for their own houses to be upgraded.

“It’s a good signal for new change in China,” says LSF cofounder Jaff Shen. “The project has allowed local government, social investors, and designers

to collaborate. This meets our foundation’s goals for inclusive development and the transformation of society.”

PAO’s inclusion of local residents in the design process is significant, says Hu. In a place where government and private developers tend to make building decisions fairly unilaterally, participation in the plug-in project helps give the *hutong* residents “a sense of ownership,” meaning “they will be more proactive in terms of how to solve the overall heritage preservation issue in Beijing,” Hu says. “We need more of these kinds of experiments, because right now people have doubts about how much they can participate.”

Some preservation purists—government officials, visitors, and academics mostly concerned with the old structures’ aesthetics, according to Shen—have criticized the project for erasing the *hutongs*’ unique culture in some ways, since the wall panels resemble those of any modern structure. Hu, who grew up in a courtyard house himself, understands the desire to preserve the

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old, but having talked with current *hutong* residents, he believes some change is necessary. “In many ways, the life in *hutongs* is not comfortable,” he says. “So the project is a very good interim solution. ... It’s a compromise [in] the argument [over] whether we should preserve the old houses or provide people with the modern amenities.”

And Hu, James Shen, and Jaff Shen all point out that cultural preservation isn’t just about buildings—it’s about the people. “Unlike other cities, these historic neighborhoods are still occupied by people who have been there for generations—and that’s key to a lot of PAO’s ideas,” James Shen says. “For a place to really be a place, you need to ensure that there’s continuity in [its] development ... and that means you don’t have these sudden shifts in population.” Shen and his colleagues hope their work can help ensure some degree of continuity for generations to come. ■

HUMAN RIGHTS

A Journal for Refugees

BY JAMIE STARK

Husam Al-deen Al-Barazy was working as a lecturer in language education at the University of Damascus when the school started getting bombed. He fled Syria last year with his family, and then he and his sister sailed on a cramped boat with 300 others from Libya

to Italy. They ended up in the small German town of Döpenweiler, near the French border, where the German unemployment office offered Al-Barazy a job at a laundromat.

It looked as if he wouldn’t be returning to academia for a long time. But then he saw a story on German public television about the *Journal of Interrupted Studies*—a place where migrants like him who had been forced to flee could submit academic work.

Al-Barazy wrote up and submitted a proposal for the doctoral research he ultimately wished to pursue, on classroom practices for teaching pronunciation and word stress patterns to high-level English learners. In June, the *Journal of Interrupted Studies* published the article in its inaugural issue, along with five other articles also written by migrants in Europe who had been uprooted by disaster at home. The goal: not just to offer displaced people the rare chance to publish their work, but to change the popular image of migrants.

“Most people have pity [for] refugees,” Al-Barazy says. “But they’re not usually aware of their potential.”

Paul Ostwald, one of the journal’s editors, says that news organizations are partly to blame for negative perceptions of migrants. Most portray the refugee crisis “as a lot of very poor people coming across the borders with basically nothing but a backpack full of blankets,” he says. He and his classmate and coeditor Mark Barclay, both in their final year of undergraduate studies

at Oxford University, hope the journal can help create a more nuanced portrait of people coming to Europe with something to offer. They want to “amplify the voices of those people who had been frankly denied their voice,” Barclay says.

The idea has been well received in the academic community. News coverage has led to flooded inboxes for the editors and offers from professors to help review submissions. Now, 140 academic reviewers are ready to help, according to Ostwald. The hardest part, says Barclay, has been getting the word out to refugees who worked in academia in their home countries. News coverage and social media, however, helped bring in nearly 40 submissions for the first issue. The editors say they have enough material and volunteer capacity to put out a second issue around mid-November.

Barclay notes that the Oxford brand may be helping attract students and teachers like Al-Barazy who want to rebuild their reputations. To enhance its image, the journal has sought to maintain an academic look and format, even though it’s often impossible to verify contributors’ academic credentials when their home universities are unreachable. The coeditors based the publication’s look off of existing journals in Oxford’s library. “If only there’d been a journal on how to make journals,” Barclay says with a laugh. “That would have been fantastic.”

The journal also sticks to academic norms in its review process. Although biographies

appear in the published issue, the academic reviewers are blind to the stories behind the submissions they look at. “If you receive a paper from someone who’s had a horrific journey across the Mediterranean Sea and has family members back there,” Ostwald says, “you might end up overrating papers or not judging them by their academic quality.”

The six articles in the journal’s first issue mostly cover social science topics. One sits on the fence between analysis and narrative: In “Interrupted Sequences of Normality,” Ameena Abdulrahman, now a teacher in Germany, writes about being forced to move from place to place throughout the Middle East, yet trying to stay connected to the students she taught in each location. Barclay says that although the piece isn’t strictly academic, its examination of education’s role in refugees’ lives makes it appropriate for the journal. Many others submitted harrowing, first-person accounts but were referred to newspapers or other outlets.

As for Al-Barazy, he and his sister keep looking for opportunities in Germany, while their parents remain stuck in Turkey. He is taking computer science courses online through Kiron University, a free online college for refugees. Someday, he hopes to complete the research he proposed in the *Journal of Interrupted Studies* and earn his PhD. In the meantime, he may submit another piece to the journal. “I’m grateful to be given this opportunity to contribute to humanity,” he says. ■