n a pocket defined by the intersection of the massive state-planned Fifth Ring Road and Airport Expressway, which took visitors into the city of Beijing and to the “One World, One Dream” Olympic venues this August, sits the urban village of Caochangdi. Screened from view by swaths of some of the three billion trees now being planted in Beijing as part of a Central Party urban afforestation mandate, Caochangdi is a thriving early twenty-first-century urban space of mostly illegal structures being built by entrepreneurial farmers and contemporary art dealers and artists.

Change has been inscribed upon the village since its origins as a wild grassland. (Caochangdi translates from Mandarin as “grassland.”) The area underwent extreme changes during the Imperial and Cultural Revolution and Deng Reform periods and is home to a mix of farmers, taxi drivers, and other industry people, as well as the international contemporary art mob.

Caochangdi tells a story specific to itself and its 4,000 to 7,000 mostly illegal residents, but it also has embedded within it the problems and possibilities of urban space as it occurs in this most unique and pivotal point in human history. Increasing rural-urban migrations have produced, for the first time ever, a fifty-fifty split in urban and rural inhabitants. Watching Caochangdi over the course of the past two years has been like looking at a mad fast-forward video revealing not only the mechanisms of urban change as they are occurring in early twenty-first-century Asia but also the human and spatial consequences of this change. Caochangdi’s recent development is spontaneous and seemingly “under the radar” of the planning authorities. This spontaneous behavior is, in fact, experimental urban development and can be seen as extremely healthy for the larger city and perhaps the larger project of the New Socialist Cultural Revolution and Deng Reform periods and is the case with all the land of China—is not privatized but rather belongs to the government, that is, to the People’s Republic of China. This produces a kind of strange urban conundrum that sets Caochangdi apart from the 300 or so other urban villages in Beijing, is that since the beginning of the twenty-first century it has become a locus of art production and international art galleries.

In human memory, this land began as uncultivated grazing land and was used by the Imperial Court as a hunting ground. The first inhabitants were the dead. Once the site was determined to have excellent feng shui, the Imperial family began to use it as a grave site and planted elaborate gardens. A zi ran cun or “natural village” sprang up, built and occupied by two extended families, the Sun and the Zhang. These villagers serviced the tombs and assisted the Imperial family members during visits to their ancestors’ graves.

During the Cultural Revolution, under Chairman Mao’s orders, the Imperial Gardens were demolished, and the village became an agricultural people’s commune. The villagers’ work ranged from manicuring gardens to planting and harvesting crops. At this time, as a part of the Shanghai Xiaoxiang campaign, when young people were sent “up to the mountains and down to the countryside,” Caochangdi was considered much too far outside the city to be habitable for some people. When Deng Xiaoping opened the economy of China to the global market, some private companies moved into the village and set up their head-quarters and factories in large compounds or da yuan. Because of the need for more real estate to build such compounds, the farmlands diminished. The land—which farm or private compound, as is the case with all the land of China—is not privatized but rather belongs to the government, that is, to the People’s Republic of China. This produces a kind of space under the influence of a hybrid experiment that is part capitalist, communist, and socialist. If we jump ahead in time, we will see that the remaining large sheds and compounds are now being transformed into galleries and studios for the operation of the new entrepreneurial contemporary art scene that has emerged in recent years.

The New Chinese Middle Class
The farmland still remaining after the large compounds were built was subleased to the city’s new economy and atmosphere of the village itself operate much like a rural Chinese community. The only exception to this, and what produces a kind of strange urban conundrum that sets Caochangdi apart from the 300 or so other urban villages in Beijing, is that since the beginning of the twenty-first century it has become a locus of art production and international art galleries.

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Village in the City
Caochangdi is one of more than 300 urban villages or “villages in the city,” to translate more directly from Mandarin, in Beijing. An estimated 1.5 million people, or one in every 10 Beijingers, live directly from Mandarin, in Beijing. An estimated 1.5 million people, or one in every 10 Beijingers, live in these villages. Caochangdi is now in the midst of the encroaching city of Beijing. The village is in the Chaoyang District, the largest revenue-producing district in all of China, accounting for 25 percent of the entire gross domestic product of the country. It is minutes from the Central Business District and not far from the Olympic sites. And yet, the economy and atmosphere of the village itself operate much like a rural Chinese community. The only exception to this, and what produces a kind of strange urban conundrum that sets Caochangdi apart from the 300 or so other urban villages in Beijing, is that since the beginning of the twenty-first century it has become a locus of art production and international art galleries.

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Chain migration refers to the mechanism by which rural residents from the same village make the move to a large urban area, usually in search of work and better opportunities, aided by previous immigrants from their village.

Xiao Liu began a chain migration from his home village in Anhui Province. Most of his workers are from his village, and some are even family members (as the mapped lines at the left show). Although from a more dispersed area, Xiao Liu has also been hiring workers from Hebei Province, causing another chain migration to form.

Floating Populations and Chain Migrations
Xiao Liu is a builder who runs his own business and a workforce of about 35 men near Caochangdi. He is from Lin Quan Village in Anhui Province, as are many of his men. He and his workers are what is called in China the nong min gong or “farmer workers.” They are also sometimes called bei piao, which means “Beijing floaters” or just “floaters” (the floating population). They are migrants to the city, whose move from rural to urban was made during the first time in history that 50 percent of the world’s population lives in cities.

In the city, the floaters are everywhere, but they are invisible. The floaters and their sites of production are screened from view by huge green mesh polypropylene nets. Every once in a while, they leak into the street and into public view, especially at Chinese New Year when they pack a bag of belongings and the year’s earnings and head home to their village for one month with their families.

Architects building in China do not seem to pay much attention to these producers of architecture who work 12-hour shifts, night or day. Contemporary artists have paid attention to them and have found ways of making the floaters and their conditions visible.

Xiao Liu works for many artists in Beijing, especially in the 798 Arts District. He builds out their spaces and helps them construct large sculptures and installations. He began this work in the year 2002, and at first he had just seven or eight workers.

Xiao Liu is described by his clients as having “three heads and six arms,” which is a Chinese saying for a very capable person. He has also been nicknamed XL because he is considered an extra “large” man in spite of his short stature and slight build.

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Xiao Liu has been very successful. He is now a landowner and is soon to become a landlord. It is even rumored by some that he has become a “millionaire.”

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Off-Center in Caochangdi, Beijing

Mr. Hu - Floating Populace
Following is one of many interviews with people now living and working in Caochangdi. Their words revealed many of the very real conditions at play. Mr. Hu is a “floter,” or a member of the “floating population,” one of the many illegal migrant workers in the city engaged in the construction trade. The floating population adds an estimated “invisible” 25 percent to the population of Beijing, which is officially published as approximately 18 million.

Q: How long have you worked here in Caochangdi?
A: I have been here for one month, since the construction started.

Q: What do you do in the team?
A: I am a cook. I make three meals every day for the workers.

Q: About 20.

Q: What do you think about their work?
A: This is hard work, really hard. There is no easy work for us. We are labor workers.

Q: What is your daily work schedule?
A: I get up at 4:00 a.m. and make breakfast. The workers are on duty at 6:30 a.m. Lunch is at 12 noon; then we all have a rest until 1:30 p.m. Supper time is at 7:00 p.m.

Q: How many teams are here in the village now for the New Social Village project?
A: Three teams, at least. We are doing the sewer pipes. Other teams are doing water and gas pipes.

Q: How much is spent on each worker every day for food?
A: About five yuan (70 cents) per person every day.

Q: How long is the project going to take?
A: At least one more month.

Q: What are you going to do after the construction?
A: This is my first time in Beijing. I want to go to Tiananmen Square and have a look. It is not easy to come to Beijing.

immigrants as the farmers became more entrepreneurial. Freed from farming by passing
the work on to the more recent rural-urban migrants, the farmers now had time
on their hands and cash in their pockets. To enhance their entrepreneurship, they be-
came landlords by renting out parts of their own houses or by building larger (illegal) buildings where their one-story houses once stood. This phenomenon of new self-built, illegal multistoried structures has taken place over the past two to three years, giving rise to a middle class. While few options for investment exist in China, one of the most successful is for people to acquire, enhance, and profit from interior real estate by be-
coming landlords. The rent of interior real estate is used to distinguish traditional west-
ern forms of real estate that involve land ownership from the Chinese version where all
land is held by the government (with land leases possible for a maximum of 70 years), but where architectural space can be owned, sold, traded, leased, and so on. Many middle-class families are purchasing multiple apartments or flats in high-rises across China and profiting from the rental income. These are often rented by members of the floating population or beggars, rural farmers turned urban construction workers. The
floors fill the flats with hunk beds, and the beds are filled 24 hours a day as they rotate
between work shifts and sleep shifts.

Art Chain Migration
Early in the twenty-first century, artist Ai Weiwei moved to Caochangdi and built a compound of illegal structures to serve as a house and studio. He provoked a chain mi-
gration that produced an influx of other artists and galleries. As of fall 2008, of the total 65 registered companies in the village, 40 are cultural industries. Many of the galleries have been opened by Europeans. This action has brought with it sleek Mercedes and Audis, designer-clad art patrons, and exhibitions of truly stunning art that coexist with the rough-and-tumble village, producing a simultaneity without a collapse of differences among the people there.

In an attempt to capitalize upon the “natural” growth of the arts in Caochangdi, the Chinese Central Party has given village leaders the mandate to increase the art and cultural enterprises to 70 percent of the local economy by 2009. 1 As part of the Chinese Communist Party’s most recent Five Year Plan, President Hu Jintao has called for the national development of the Socialist New Village and Caochangdi has been slated as a model Socialist New Village, even though it is smack-dab in the middle of the city.

While anything is possible, it appears that the mostly illegal structures of the village are not slated for demolition. In fact, as part of the initiative of building the Socialist New Countryside, many improvements were made during the summer of 2007. All new gas lines and storm and sanitary sewers were installed, and new roads, parks, and landscaping were added. In the aerial view of the village, the asymmetrical freeway ramp system reveals that an on-ramp to the Fifth Ring Road was omitted, thereby sparing the demolition of most of the village.

It is impossible for us to know if the village is slated to be saved, and if so, why. The mechanisms of the echelons of power and responsibility are just too opaque and impen-
etrable (as they might be in any place under strong governance). The reason that the vil-
lage still exists might be that both the village and its inhabitants are thriving and prospering without any effort being expended by the government. We know that the most internationally recognized (and now locally recognized) artist, Ai Weiwei, has rooted himself in the village and has provoked the prestigious chain migration described ear-
lier. We also know that creative enterprises are regarded by the government as the most
dangerous but also the most productive activities in China today.

The Dangers (and Benefits) of Creativity
This combination of danger and productivity arising from creativity is so strong that recently, in the better-known adjacent Arts District in Beijing—the 798 Dashanzi area—
6,000 meters of space was taken back from an independent cultural and educational enterprise leaseholder. This occurred after high-level and lengthy meetings that includ-
ed the cultural affairs minister of Chaoyang District and Wu Yi, who is one of the four vice premiers of China and was ranked by Forbes as the second-most powerful woman in the world in 2004, 2005, and 2007. The lease was revoked, and the space was taken over by the Cultural Affairs Ministry of Beijing in order to hold public exhibitions to showcase “appropriate” kinds of Chinese creativity. It is also said by some—namely, by 798 artists and gallery owners who found their exhibitions and publicity suddenly censored—that the Chaoyang District’s occupation of the space was a way to keep an eye on this very high profile arts district.

Covers - Bedding Facades as Inside Comes Out
On any given sunny day in Caochangdi Village, the residents take advantage of the rare break from the overcast, gray Beijing sky. The bed covers and quilts come out of the houses for a sun bleach. The village transforms for a few hours while the blankets’ soft facades temporarily clad the brick houses. This low-tech laundry method is especially useful in a place like Caochangdi where running water and drainage infrastructure are not present in most of the dwellings.

Continued on page 12
Urban Rural Conundrums continued from page 11

Inside Out - Li Wai Bu Fen

There is a saying in China—"Li wai bu fen." This is a way of describing a lack of clarity about what is inside and what is outside. It can refer to your clothes being inside out, not knowing a friend from an enemy, or not being able to discern the difference between your home affairs and external affairs.

"Before 1992, in China, we did not have a notion of private space, or at least such a definition between public space and private space. Every space was public. You go to 798 [the Arts District in the former military danwei], and you can still see this kind of format of collective buildings. It's like a hotel—you didn't have a toilet; you didn't have a kitchen. Everybody had one bedroom, and we shared the kitchen; we shared the bathroom.

"This kind of new real estate thing really changed lives. People started to have their own private spaces. That's the main thing. In the 1990s, it was a fantastic dream for a Chinese family to have their own apartment, with one kitchen, a toilet, and two bedrooms. For Westerners, it is very hard to understand how this change can inform and transform daily life for Chinese people. People started to have public space and privacy, their own space to act in."

Pi Li, May 2007, Public Lecture/Talking Head at B.A.S.E.

The high profile of the 798 Arts District was evident during the August 2008 Olympics in Beijing. The district was flooded with visitors, including an anticipated 50 to 60 world leaders. Previous visitors have included former German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and French President Nicolas Sarkozy. The Arts District has been added to official guides of things to see that include the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven, and the Summer Palace. As a recent edition to this list, it is clear that 798 has become a huge asset for China's public "coming out" associated with the 2008 Olympics, showing it to be a formidable player in the contemporary art world and scene and, even more so, as an upcoming creative source to be reckoned with. It was a bold move for the establishment to appoint filmmaker Zhang Yimou, whose work was once censored and banned in China, and artist Cai Guo Qiang, who uses fireworks, gunpowder, and fire as his media, to design the opening ceremony that heralded in the 08/08/2008, 08:08:08 p.m. opening of China to the world consciousness. Showcasing 798, Caochangdi, and other art enclaves in Beijing heralded in the 08/08/2008, 08:08:08 p.m. opening of China to the world consciousness. Showcasing 798, Caochangdi, and other art enclaves in Beijing was a way to demonstrate China’s move away from being the widget maker of the world and, quite forcefully, toward design and creative output.

Urban Afforestation as Green Screen

Also as a part of the Socialist New Village campaign, but more directly related to the Central Party mandate for urban afforestation, between three to four billion trees have recently been planted in Beijing. Afforestation is the word that the Chinese Official Press has adopted when speaking of the movement to counteract the massive deforestation that began with Chairman Mao’s agricultural campaigns. Deforestation has caused the Gobi Desert to advance toward the city at the rate of one kilometer per year, producing dunes as high as 30 meters and spring sandstorms that have become known throughout Asia and beyond as the dreaded “fifth season.”

The village has benefited from some of the urban afforestation in Beijing. Yet in Caochangdi, a mapping of the green space shows that 90 percent of the new trees and landscaping occur at the periphery of the village. This suggests an agenda less geared toward providing villagers with parks or street greenery, and more toward the production of a “green screen” that masks the village’s mixed bag of architecture, including a shantytown look, from the Airport Expressway and the Fifth Ring Road. These two arteries are, respectively, visitors’ first entry into the city, and the “powers that be” desire to make an impression as visitors take in scenes through the taxi or limo window. In fact, what the powers that be do not fully grasp is that tourists and visitors who make it to the village, which has been touted by Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and French President Nicolas Sarkozy. The Arts District has been added to official guides of things to see that include the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven, and the Summer Palace.

Some of the work described in this essay was supported by a generous Experiential Learning Fund grant from the University of Michigan International Institute during the summer of 2008. The project won the biannual James Stirling Memorial Lectures on the City competition. Ray and Mangurian will present the Stirling Lecture in fall 2008 at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal and at the London School of Economics in fall 2009.

Learn more at www.basebeijing.cn.

What is B.A.S.E.?

Beijing Architecture Studio Enterprise (B.A.S.E.) was founded in 2006 by Robert Mangurian, Principal, Studio Works Architects, and Mary-Ann Ray, Taubman Centennial Professor of Architecture at U-M and Principal, Studio Works Architects, with Robert Adams, U-M Assistant Professor of Architecture. B.A.S.E. is a laboratory for experimental work and a public forum for discussing and tackling real projects in architecture, design, and urbanism. The location of B.A.S.E. in Caochangdi has allowed for close interactions with villagers and with some of China’s best contemporary artists, filmmakers, and designers who live and work in the area. B.A.S.E. has also developed B.A.S.E.ine, a product line that includes designs by collaborative teams of students and faculty ranging from clothing and furniture to building components.

Mary-Ann Ray was appointed the Taubman Centennial Professor of Practice at the University of Michigan in 2007 where she is currently teaching. Ms. Ray also practices in her architectural firm of Studio Works in Los Angeles.

Robert Mangurian is a Principal of Studio Works, a Los Angeles-based architecture, planning, and design group he cofounded in 1969. Mr. Mangurian has participated in a design critic for graduate theses and studio work in schools of architecture throughout the country.

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As one of the primary agendas, the Eleventh Five Year Plan of the Chinese Communist Party has the goal of fostering invention in China through the development of cultural and creative industries.