Maximize the Minimum
Baitasi urban regeneration, Beijing, China

Initiated by a state-owned enterprise, the project offers a set of strategies for the regeneration of the Baitasi historic neighborhood in the west downtown district of Beijing. Questioning the outcome of normative urbanization processes in China, which often rely on the eviction of local populations and the replacement of existing buildings by new construction, the proposed scheme empowers local stakeholders and vulnerable on-site residents to upgrade infrastructure and public services, while encouraging them to improve their housing and workshop units themselves. A so-called “max-min” concept is pursued that promotes the implementation of minimal means for maximum impact. New low-rise, courtyard housing will be added within the built fabric via pilot programs to increase densification without high-rise construction.

The project explores the micro-scaled, decentralized interventions, which will be undertaken in such a way as to respect the historical fabric, without turning the neighborhood into an outdoor museum or a tourist attraction. Instead, the project aims at the regeneration of the existing social and physical fabric to create a living community by and for the people.

People and place
To avoid being a pure gentrification process, the project aims to support the local low-income people, documenting their situations and requirements through door-to-door interviews, formal registration, participation meetings and participatory design, to protect the historic physical setting at most. And the pilot housing units are also fitting well into the traditional local architectural modular both in plan and in section, and make a positive contribution to the cultural expression.

Prosperity and progress
Compared with previous high-cost remove-rebuild development, the approach of this project is economically feasible. The municipal government will secure the financing of all public products construction and maintenance. The pilot housing units will control the cost under USD 20,000 each, which will be covered by the government for the basic core parts and also be paid by private owners for their personalized option parts. The project demonstrates an innovative concept in integrating different stakeholders and disciplines to work together under a micro-perspective community renewal, and trying to maximize the minimum back to the urban level. This comprehensive approach could be transferable as blueprints for similarly challenged social and built environments in and out of China.

Planet
The project exhibits its energy-saving and low-emission concerns by densifying the land use, encouraging public transportation, adding on wall insulation, changing of old doors and windows, etc. The infills of toilet modular and sewage system will also reduce the risk of environmental pollution.

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Project data
Project group: Landscape, urban design, transportation infrastructure and public utilities
Client: Beijing Huarong Jinying Investment & Development Co. Ltd.
Project background: Public commission
Planned start: April 2017

Summary and appraisal of the project by the jury
The jury appreciated the client’s aim to support low-income populations in their effort to remain on site, and this within an economic context marked by rampant gentrification. Valued were the methods used to identify the needs of inhabitants through door-to-door interviews, formal registration, and participatory meetings – needs that were then translated in comprehensive upgrading proposals for the improvement of infrastructure, public services, and living spaces. Viewed with great esteem was the idea that all physical construction, generally based on micro-scale and decentralized interventions, will be undertaken in such a way as to respect the historical fabric, without turning the neighborhood into an outdoor museum or a tourist attraction. Instead, the project aims at the regeneration of the existing social and physical fabric to create a living community by and for the people.

Statements on the sustainability of the project by the author
The project aims to support the local low-income people, improving their life quality by upgrading accessibility, public transportation, adding on wall insulation, changing of old doors and windows, etc. The infills of toilet modular and sewage system will also reduce the risk of environmental pollution.

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