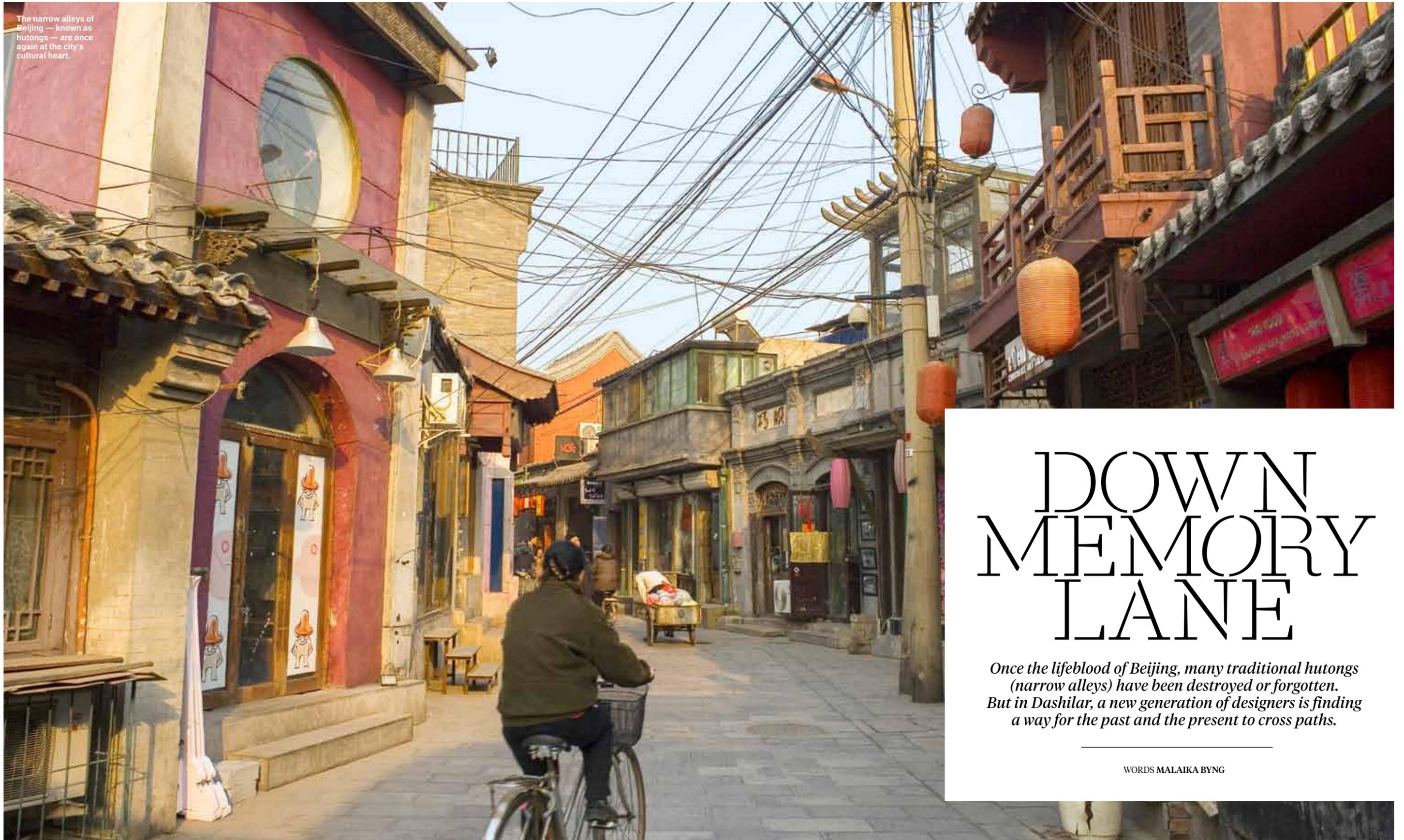


The narrow alleys of Beijing — known as hutongs — are once again at the city's cultural heart.



# DOWN MEMORY LANE

*Once the lifeblood of Beijing, many traditional hutongs (narrow alleys) have been destroyed or forgotten. But in Dashilar, a new generation of designers is finding a way for the past and the present to cross paths.*

WORDS MALAIKA BYNG

A tricycle laden with vegetables rattles down the lantern-lined street, sending stacks of antique books flying in all directions. A tiny truck pulls up, carrying precariously arranged handmade rugs, while a child perches in the rickety doorway of a Qing-dynasty courtyard house across the road.

This hubbub is part of the theatre of life in the narrow alleys — or hutongs — southwest of Tiananmen Square. With its clusters of traditional courtyard houses, once home to Beijing's earliest tea houses, opera houses, brothels and silk shops — and later stock exchanges and printing houses — the area remains one of the city's liveliest and most densely packed neighbourhoods. No other district so vividly captures Beijing's history, but, like so many of the city's hutongs, Dashilar's urban fabric is crumbling and its future is under threat.

During the rush towards modernity propelled by the 2008 Olympic Games, vast swathes of the hutongs were hit by a wrecking ball. The tiny streets and poor living conditions didn't fit with the government's vision of a 21st-century city, so many new developments, including 'starchitect' Zaha Hadid's Galaxy Soho mall, were erected. Meanwhile, Dashilar's close neighbour, Qianmen, was razed and replaced by a Disney-like parody of itself in the name of preservation: part theme-park and part shopping mall, complete with mega-brands such as H&M and Zara housed behind faux-traditional façades.

Thankfully, Dashilar looks set to follow a different course. And it's not just the area's complex property ownership holding back the bulldozers (fewer than 10 per cent of the buildings are believed to be state-owned). The cultural catastrophe of Qianmen has prompted a rethink by local government and the design community is seizing the chance to help it forge a new path.

**GRAND DESIGNS**

In 2011, Chinese practice Approach Architecture Studio teamed up with the state-owned Beijing Dashilar Investment Limited to conceive a new plan for regenerating the hutongs that could act as a model for other districts. Under the Dashilar Project, the architects proposed a holistic approach that would allow the area to grow organically with the help of a series of strategic interventions — referred to as a kind of 'urban acupuncture'. "It's not about gentrification," says Neill Mclean Gaddes, a consultant on the project, "but



(clockwise from left) The newly rebuilt Qianmen neighbourhood; Lin Lin, creator of Re-Up; the golden pop-up canopy erected as part of Beijing Design Week.



about giving local residents examples of how to restore and re-use the buildings."

During Beijing Design Week last year, these 'needles' came in many different guises. Local studio People's Architecture Office (PAO) conjured a canopy of gold discs that exploded from the rooftop of a courtyard house, while Standard Architecture built a treehouse-structure of rooms made from stacked plywood cubes within the courtyard of another.

The 'pop-up canopy', offering shelter to courtyards that have been stripped of trees due to the subdividing of properties, proved so popular it was stolen on the last day of the event. "Neighbours were amazed we could improve the space without affecting the original structure," says PAO principal James Shen. "They're so used to destroying and rebuilding because it's much easier."

The studio is now working on plug-in units for the houses, which will provide

infrastructure such as heating and proper electrical wiring. Meanwhile, Standard Architecture — whose Micro-Hutong is a building experiment in ultra-small scale social housing within tight hutong spaces — continues to hone its prototype.

While there was a buzz around these projects during Beijing Design Week, the doyenne of Dashilar's creative scene, Lin Lin, was putting the finishing touches to a permanent addition to the neighbourhood. Dressed, as always, in sky-high heels and sporting her trademark bob, she ushered visitors through the doors of an Art Deco former electrical parts factory for a sneak peek of what is now Re-Up (59 Tieshu Xie Jie), a cafe and retail space with a difference.

"I am working on offering an alternative approach to a sustainable lifestyle experience," she declared. In response to the over-consumption in China, Lin Lin has not only resurrected the building but designed all the furnishings from salvaged materials, while all the cafe's produce is locally sourced. There is a shared workspace above the cafe (Spoonful of Sugar; [www.spoonfulofsugar.cn](http://www.spoonfulofsugar.cn)), and topping it all is a recreational garden on the roof, complete with beehives.

"I want to build Re-Up Dashilar as a case study to engage people about sustainability in everyday practice," says China-born Lin Lin, whose design agency, Jellymon, is

based in the area. "We'll use it as a platform for workshops, as well as for promoting crafts and also fostering collaboration between local businesses."

Lin Lin sold her flat in London to buy a lease on the building and, with the support of engineering firm Buro Happold and sustainability consultants We Impact, began restoring it. "Like many of the surrounding houses, its structure was in danger," she explains. "We had to make it earthquake-proof, repair and insulate it," she says of the cost and process prohibitive to most local residents.

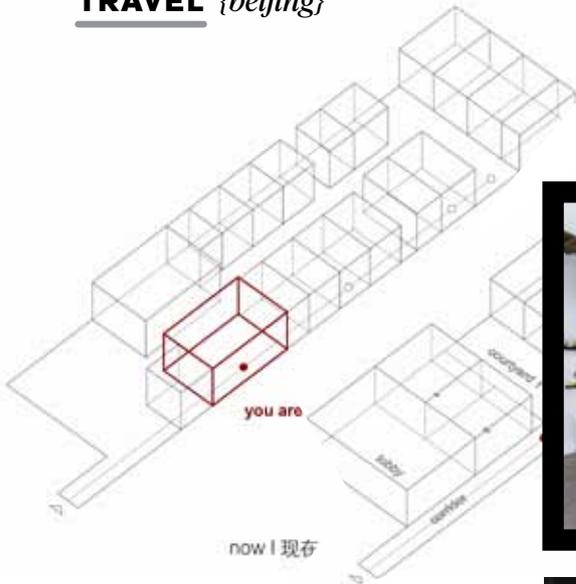
**MAKING HISTORY**

Hidden behind a crumbling red door is another ambitious rescue act — the transformation of a battered Qing-dynasty courtyard house into a hotel, opening later this year. The expansive space (38 Paizi Hutong) has had many incarnations, including, it's believed, as the home of an important Ming-dynasty figure, a school, a plastics factory, a hostel and (soon) a luxurious new outpost for The Orchid Hotel, which has a sister courtyard-house hotel in Dongcheng District (65 Baochao Hutong; +86 10 8404 4818; [www.theorchidbeijing.com](http://www.theorchidbeijing.com)). Stroll through Dashilar's streets and you can see the mix it fosters. Take the area's main artery, Yangmeizhu Xie Jie. Here, ►



(clockwise from top) The exterior (top) and interior (above) of the Micro-Hutong building experiment; Lin Lin's Re-Up cafe; a map of Dashilar.





(clockwise from far left) The before and after plans for the new Orchid Hotel; Ubi Gallery; Machtelt Schelling; a pop-up restaurant from Beijing Design Week 2013.

Ubi Gallery (62 Yangmeizhu Xie Jie; [www.ubigallery.com](http://www.ubigallery.com)) tempts passers-by with handmade jewellery and ceramics, while a few doors up is Old Zhang's Wood Carving Prints (50 Yangmeizhu Xie Jie), where you can see craftsmen producing traditional multi-colour wood plate prints. Further up is Soloist (39 Yangmeizhu Xie Jie), whose coffee roasts waft down the street.

Tiantaoguang Market (Tongzi Hutong 16), which sells fresh produce, remains the soul of the area, and is a lively place to wander around with a freshly squeezed pomegranate juice in hand. Meanwhile, nearby Liulichang Street is the place to go for antiques, and Dashilar Street is full of such varied treasures as China's oldest cinema (Daguanlou Cinema; 36 Dashilan West St) and the almost 200-year-old Ma Ju Yuan hat shop (8 Dashilan St).

But Dashilar is also a place in which to enjoy getting lost. Venture down the back streets and you'll find master calligraphers at work. Turn a corner and you'll see a craftsmen stitching beautiful carpets.

This variety is key to maintaining the area's spirit and ensuring it doesn't go the way of Nanluoguxiang, once a thriving hutong with a rich mix of boutiques north of the Forbidden City, now full of endless snack shops teeming with tourists.

Ubi Gallery's Dutch-born founder Machtelt Schelling was one of the first to sign up to the Dashilar Project's 'nodal' development plan. "The best thing about it is growth is controlled and knowledgeable people are checking if new business can add value," says Schelling, who works with Chinese designers reinterpreting



## DASHILAR'S REMEDY OF 'URBAN ACUPUNCTURE' COULD WELL BE THE SECRET TO ITS FUTURE HEALTH.

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traditional materials and techniques, and offers tours of the hutongs. "If you rent space to anyone interested, you end up with all the same gift or food shops in a row, as seen in other Beijing districts."

Despite these problems, there are still many other hutong neighbourhoods worth visiting. There's Wudaoying, near the Lama Temple, filled with cafes and boutiques, and Beiluoguxiang, north of Nanluoguxiang, where you'll find everything from quirky restaurants to a store selling Parisian antiques. But Dashilar's remedy of 'urban acupuncture' could well be the secret to its future health. "It's not enough to preserve a historic area,"

insists James Shen. "Preserving often means removing any life or sanitising a place for tourists. We need to ensure these areas remain relevant to modern society in order for them to survive."

The spirit of collaboration in Dashilar is radical for a city in which development is conventionally mandated from the top. Here, the design community is proving the 'old' Beijing can be part of the 'new'. 

**GETTING THERE** Virgin Australia offers services to Beijing via its codeshare partner Singapore Airlines. To book, visit [www.virginaustralia.com](http://www.virginaustralia.com) or simply call 13 67 89 (in Australia).

Photography: Cobis, Masterfile, Remix Studio, Standard Architecture