



Art villages in metropolitan Beijing: A study of the location dynamics



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ABSTRACT

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Despite the rapid transformation of art villages in Beijing, an understanding of their location dynamics has been lacking. This paper will supply that insight by exploring three interrelated questions: What are the location characteristics of Beijing's art villages? How has economic transformation shaped their location? Is there anything unique about the evolution of Beijing's art villages? Analyses of information gathered through field reconnaissance and secondary sources reveal that these art villages have expanded rapidly in the urban fringe of metropolitan Beijing. Major factors influencing its location and relocation include the cost of rental properties, the quality of the creative environment, attributes of the transitional land and art markets, and public policies for Beijing's metropolitan development. Rapid economic transition and urban growth in China have shaped a trajectory of art village evolution distinctive from that in Western metropolises. The fate of art villages in Beijing is determined by the transitional characteristics of urban development, art markets and state policies.

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Introduction

Art Village or Artists' Village, which is popularly known as *Yishu Cun* or *Huajia Cun* in Chinese, is a new spatial outcome in China's economic and urban transformation. Since China's economic reform started in 1978, ideological and political control over art and culture have been gradually loosened, allowing exposure of Western avant-garde art to art enthusiasts (Chen, Liao, & Gu, 2004; Wang, 1999). The rise of self-employment and easier migration has further allowed Bohemian artists to practice in their preferred cities. As such, China's art villages started to take shape in the 1990s. Some well-known art villages, such as Songzhuang in Beijing, Moganshan in Shanghai, Xiaoguwei in Guangzhou, Landing (The Blue House) in Chengdu, Factory 501 and Tankeku (Tank Loft) in Chongqing, Mufushan in Nanjing, have become artistic and cultural symbols in these cities (Yang & Wei, 2008).

Anecdotal reports on this new urban outcome reveal that art villages accommodate art studios, artists' residences and galleries, where artists create, exhibit and sell their works (Rables & Fan, 2008). Visual artists, especially those working on contemporary art rather than traditional painting, dominate the resident population.¹

Further, in the early 1990s, art villages evolved in a rather hostile environment because self-employed communities with a Bohemian lifestyle were not readily accepted by society (Cao, 2007; Keane, 2011). It is only over the last 10 years or so that art villages have flourished with supportive state policies that try to foster cultural and creative industries. Against the above backdrop of art village development, this paper addresses the following research questions: what are the location characteristics of art villages in China? How has economic transformation shaped their location? Is there anything unique about the evolution of art villages in the context of China's urban transformation?

There are many dedicated areas or districts for artists discussed in the western literature. Greenwich Village in New York City, for example, is home to visual artists as a majority, but also plays home to dancers, writers, and others (Beard & Berlowitz 1993). A similar term used in describing these areas is *art* or *artists' colony*. The earliest art colonies were observed in rural Europe in the late 19th century, when artists left cities in order to prevent the decline of true artisanship in the processes of urbanization and industrialization (Jacobs, 1985). Modern art colonies are found in cities. The Brewery Arts Complex in Los Angeles and Hoxton in London are other examples. The locations of art activities and art colonies are extremely unstable, as shown by their frequent relocation and shift of sites (Pratt, 2009; Zukin, 1982). The evolution of SoHo in New York City, Venice and Ocean Park in Los Angeles, SOMA in San Francisco, the East End in Great London, Balmain and Newtown in Sydney illustrates such location dynamics (Gibson et al., 2002;

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¹ It is observed that performing artists such as rock and roll performers also cluster in cities in China (Chen et al., 2004).

Green, 2001; Kostelanetz, 2003; Molotch & Treskon, 2009; Plagens and Gordon, 1996; Simpson, 1981; Wolfe, 1999; Zukin, 1982). There has been a continuous search for appropriate working space for art activities in metropolises by the creative, footloose, yet often monetarily poor artists (Caves, 2000). Is this also happening in China?

This paper uses Beijing as a case study to explore the above questions. When Bohemian artists began to cluster in the city, Beijing witnessed the emergence of China's first avant-garde art village in the early 1990s (Chen et al., 2004; Wang, 1999). The relocation of studios and artists' clusters seen in other cities were experienced in Beijing, as reports of collective remonstrations by artists who lost their studios attest (Tang, 2005; Wu, 2007; Yang, 2010). In this way, a case study of Beijing will shed light on the evolution of art villages in China.

There are six sections in this paper. Following this introductory section, Section 2 provides a brief review of the literature on the location of art activities. Section 3 presents the argument and method. Section 4 explores the evolution of art villages in Beijing. This is followed in Section 5 by a discussion of four art villages in detail. Section 6 summarizes and concludes.

Location of art activities

Research findings exploring the location of art activities suggest that they typically cluster in world cities or nationally dominant cultural nodes. For instance, artists in the USA are found predominantly in the 'big three' cities – New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco (Markusen, 2006; Scott, 2000). The rationale behind is a cultural 'agglomeration economy' in which co-location of artistic production, marketing and artists' living benefits the individual artists involved. Within these clusters, artists enjoy a sort of status honor and a shared market. Co-location also offers artists the potential of collective learning and knowledge spillovers (Currid, 2007; Liu, 1992; Lloyd, 2004). Markusen (2006) claims that in large cities, there is usually high demand for art activities from residents. Caves (2000: 30) recognizes the opportunities that these cities provide for artists to learn from each other and to have low-cost access to specialized services.

However, art activities and art colonies/villages are extremely unstable in their association with a particular site or neighborhood, generating dynamic location characteristics in metropolitan areas. SoHo in New York City is a well-known case to illustrate these location dynamics (Kostelanetz, 2003; Molotch & Treskon, 2009; Simpson, 1981; Zukin, 1982). In the late 1950s, artists found and moved into the segments of industrial decay in Lower Manhattan where plenty of low rent spaces close to Manhattan's former artist streets were available (Zukin, 1982). The agglomeration of artists soon attracted contemporary galleries which had space requirements similar to those of the artists' and also supplied them with the advantage of access to the latest creative innovations (Caves, 2000: 30–2). However, the trendiness of SoHo and the abundance of customers and tourists in turn attracted restaurants and other retailers, which eventually caused rents to rise sharply and priced out the artists. As Caves narrates, this process has repeated itself several times in New York City, such as in the East Village (Bowler & McBurney, 1991) and Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overage (DUMBO) of Brooklyn (Richardson, 1995). Similar stories also exist about other metropolitan areas in the U.S., such as Venice and Ocean Park in Los Angeles and South of Market Area (SOMA) in San Francisco (Lloyd, 2004; Plagens & Gordon, 1996; Wolfe, 1999). San Francisco's Multimedia Gulch in SOMA was an avant-garde art community hosted by converted manufacturing lofts and warehouses. Due to the rise of multimedia technology and industry after the mid 1980s, many media, design and advertising

firms increasingly moved into the neighborhood, taking over artists' loft space (Wolfe, 1999).

Similar cases are observed worldwide, especially in developed countries. For instance, the empty light industrial buildings in the East End of Great London – including the early Butlers Wharf and the recent Hoxton – were 'colonized' by artists from the late 1960s as part of the urban slum-clearance and regeneration programs, but the artists were later forced to leave these buildings (Green, 2001; Pratt, 2009). Balmain and Newtown in Sydney's inner-west were popular with artists who were among the first group of gentrifiers to the area in the 1970s. The rising property values meant that many artists had increasing difficulties to meet their financial needs. The difficulty of survival in the area was exacerbated by many incoming gentrifiers who complained about the 'unwanted' aspects (e.g., noise from musical instruments) of cultural activities. Thus, artists moved out, and the area transformed into a residential district for the middle class who worked in Sydney's CBD (Gibson, Murphy, & Freestone, 2002).

These examples show that areas of artist concentration begin and end as an outcome of artists' search for cheap and spacious properties. Artists are after cheap properties because they usually face great uncertainty in selling their works thus have no steady stream of income to pay for their rental. But they need large studio spaces when they work, as the need for spacious environment is an embedded feature in artistic creation. As art villages evolve, art production and artists could firstly be affected and driven out by art consumption activities such as galleries and then by creative business services, such as advertisement, design and media firms. In some cases, such as Sydney, the art district was directly gentrified into a residential district. The formation of art activity clusters increases rental and property prices through the inflow of art consumption and service establishments. Building space becomes a highly valued resource, the allocation of which is regulated by the ability to pay; thus, artists lose out. Nevertheless, the footloose nature of the art creation industry, enabled by its low capital and material inputs, make it possible for art villages to relocate more frequently than other industries.

On the other hand, the spatial transformation of art activities always happens in the specific context of metropolitan development, such as the transition from industrial to post-industrial city, urban regeneration and governmental projects. Urban changes generate unutilized areas with potential value, including deserted warehouses in inner city (Gibson et al., 2002; Green, 2001; Kostelanetz, 2003; Wolfe, 1999). Artists always demonstrate their sense and ability to identify and use the opportunities that emerge from metropolitan development. Nevertheless, artists also subsequently face neglect from metropolitan development and art activities/villages are forced to relocate as a consequence of their own contribution to the prosperity of the area. The purpose of this research is to establish whether this documented path of change has relevance in the experience of art villages in a transforming Chinese metropolis, Beijing.

Framework and method

It is postulated that art village location in Beijing can be explained by a core process (i.e., a trade-off between rent and the creative environment) which is shaped by three conditions: the land market, the art market, and state intervention (Fig. 1).

The trade-off process is centered on the cost of rental properties and the creative environment. Artists need rental properties that are spacious and cheap. Their work environment needs to be creative, which is usually marked by good proximity to existing art related activities, a low noise level, and freedom of expression. This environment must be low cost because artists usually have no steady income. As the work environment and rent change in the

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