

Bidden City

SEAN KELLER ON THE BEIJING OLYMPICS



The National Aquatics Center and the National Stadium under construction, Beijing, September 17, 2007. Photo: Vector Folitec.

The “Bird’s Nest” and the “Watercube”—a bowl of steel bands and a box of blue bubbles—are examples of the particularly effective soft-power tactic of naturalization: the ascription of natural qualities to man-made entities.

THE OLYMPIC GAMES as we know them were born out of a late-nineteenth-century marriage of classical mythology and political science fiction. They decree that every four years all the nations of the world will set aside their political struggles and come together to compete in proxy battles of sport; everyone will watch. Yet such a premise naively denies both the relentlessness of politics and the equally irrepressible need for political power to be represented, to be made into images. Having stubbornly refused to follow their script, the modern Olympics stand in collective memory as a series of political—not athletic—events: Berlin ’36 (Nazis), Mexico ’68 (murdered protesters and censored Black Power salutes), Munich ’72 (Middle Eastern terrorism), Montreal ’76 (boycott against apartheid), Moscow ’80 (boycott against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan), Los Angeles ’84 (boycott against the previous boycott), and now, controversial already, Beijing ’08.

As the latest addition to this lineage, Beijing ’08 presents a new variety of Olympic propaganda, one that reflects the ambiguities of the post-cold war world. Like its present mixture of socialism and capitalism, the Chinese government’s motivations for hosting the games are apparently contradictory. Beijing competed for the Olympics in order to stage a coming-out party as a global superpower, but it simultaneously needs to demonstrate that this power is benign (in both geopolitical and environmental terms). The games have thus become a very public test for the complex compromises that define contemporary China as it faces serious internal and external pressures.

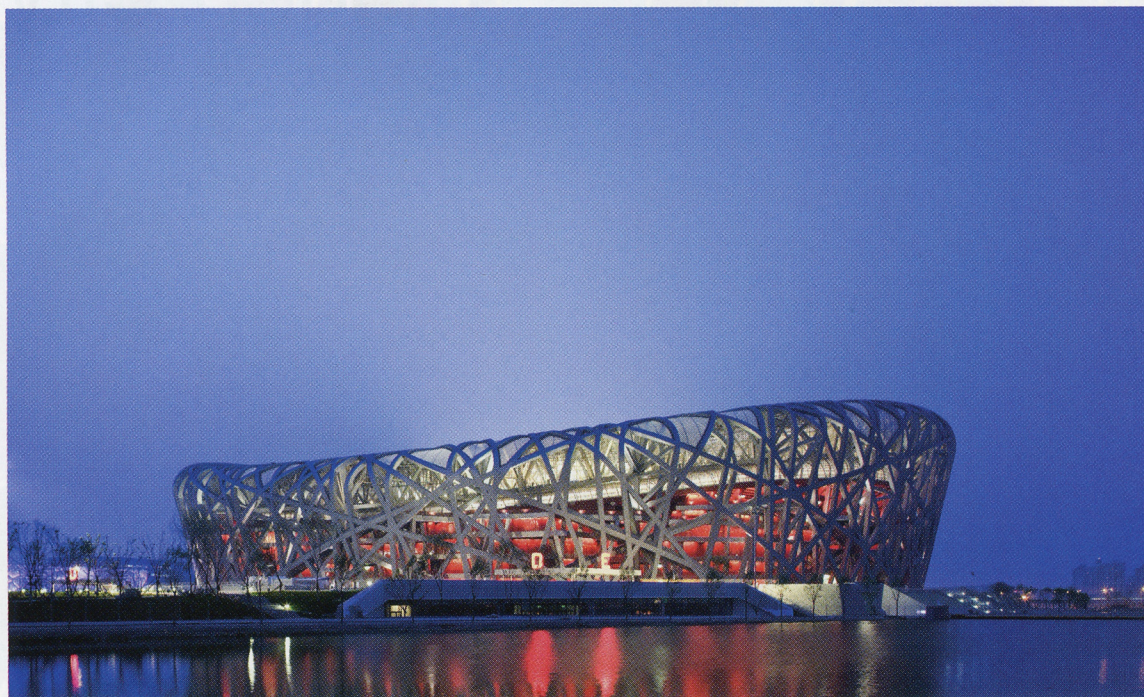
The context for this global examination will be a massively reshaped Beijing. Since the decline of World Expositions, the Olympics have provided a unique opportunity for political representation on an international scale; and for host cities such as Beijing, they are

primarily an architectural and urban-planning event—the physical environment serving as the medium for the host’s message. At the level of domestic politics, the games provide an excuse for otherwise unrealizable civic acts, as the neutral forms of the fields, tracks, and pools become embedded in a field of ideologically charged urban design.

Given Beijing’s desire to send a global welcome message via its orchestration of sport, spectacle, and architecture, and given its own history of occupation by Japan, one of the Axis powers in World War II, it seems scarcely believable that the name behind its new urban plan is Albert Speer—son of Albert Speer (himself the son of an Albert Speer). Immediately, one must say that the current Speer has had a long and respectable career as an architect and urban planner, and that he appears guilty of nothing more than choosing the same profession as his infamous father. Yet more than the name has provoked comparisons to Berlin circa 1936. Like the grandiose scheme envisioned by his

father for Hitler’s Berlin, Speer’s plan for Beijing is organized around a monumental north-south axis anchored by a large new train station. The correlation is certainly tempting. But again, one must resist and acknowledge that, historically, the monumental axis is so widespread as an urban device, and has been hitched to such a range of political wagons, that it would be a mistake to assign any inherent political “meaning” to the grand axis *in abstracto*.

Speer himself rejects the comparison to Berlin and emphasizes the deep Chinese roots of his plan. Drawing on centuries of tradition, it reasserts and extends the axis of the Forbidden City, which, after the end of imperial rule in 1911, was progressively weakened in favor of the east-west axis of Chang’an Avenue—itself a highly symbolic new “axis of the people” elaborated by both Republican and Communist governments. But even within this specific context, an assessment of the master plan remains elusive. What value to give to the decision by the current leaders of



Herzog & de Meuron, Chinese Architectural Design & Research Group, Arup, Ai Weiwei, National Stadium, 2002–2008, Beijing. Clockwise from top: Exterior. Photo: Iwan Baan. Interior. Photo: Iwan Baan. Detail of exterior. Photo: Iwan Baan.

the Communist Party to reject their own urban planning legacy and return to the imperial axis? Is it, as Speer has claimed, a progressive renewal of the traditions of the Chinese people? Or is it a repackaging of the party's power in the guise of the historical authority it once claimed to reject?

Perhaps more telling than the return to the imperial axis is the manner of its extension, and here the historical comparisons are useful. If axiality has traditionally been used as an unambiguous sign of centralized power, in contemporary Beijing the symbolic effect has been deliberately tempered. The Beijing planners are using the axis as a fundamental principle,

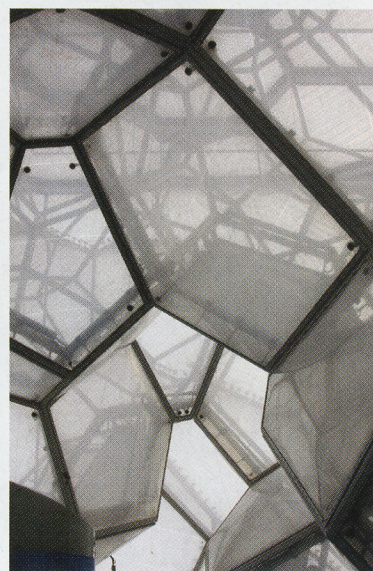
and at a vast scale, but—through displacements, asymmetries, and curvilinear landscape elements—they have modulated its northern extension as it passes through the Olympic Green and dissolves into a large park (the Green is the work of US-based Sasaki Associates). The urban effect is “soft power” on a grand scale. The dilemma this raises—and it is a fundamental problem in thinking about China today—is whether it is better to deal with an autocratic political system that clearly represents itself as autocratic, or with an autocratic political system that partially dissimulates itself with gestures toward openness.

Practically, the rebuilding of the city has been

achieved through the application of unambiguously “hard” power. The Chinese government has admitted to displacing fifteen thousand residents; human rights groups estimate the actual number may be as high as 1.5 million. Much of the city's traditional urban fabric, based on the narrow alleys called *hutongs*, has been demolished to make way for the modern hotels, apartment buildings, offices, and parks that the government wants as a backdrop for the games; and in the frenzied sweep of construction equipment many historical sites have been unearthed and built over faster than they can be recorded.

At the scale of individual buildings, the Chinese Olympic committee has chosen to sponsor the most advanced forms of international architecture. Flanking the central axis near the park are the architectural icons of the Beijing games: the National Stadium, designed by Swiss stars Herzog & de Meuron, and the National Aquatics Center, by a partnership of Australia-based PTW Architects and the Chinese group CSCEC (China State Construction Engineering Corporation). Both buildings have involved substantial collaboration with Arup, the engineering powerhouse behind so many famous new buildings. Better known by their popularizing nicknames the “Bird's Nest” and the “Watercube,” the two projects—a bowl of steel bands and a box of blue bubbles—are examples of the particularly effective soft-power tactic of naturalization: the ascription of natural qualities to man-made entities. By describing architecture in terms of nature, naturalization can make design choices seem both inevitable and neutral. In Olympic history, the precedent for this approach is again German. Given the terrible legacy of Berlin '36, Munich '72 faced the difficult problem of creating a nonthreatening national monumentality. It solved this representational conundrum with a “landscape” of enormous tentlike roofs developed by Frei Otto and based on the forms taken by soap films in tension—forms that seemed to represent nothing more than the laws of nature.

Soap bubbles are back for Beijing '08 at the National Aquatics Center—and with a similar rationale. This complex building is essentially a large hollow box carved out of a foam of giant “bubbles,” each roughly ten feet in diameter. More precisely, the bubbles are twelve- and fourteen-sided polyhedrons



PTW Architects, China State Construction Engineering Corporation, Arup, National Aquatics Center, 2003–2008, Beijing.
Clockwise from top: Exterior. Photo: Iwan Baan. Detail of interior. Photo: John Pauline. Interior. Photo: PTW Architects.

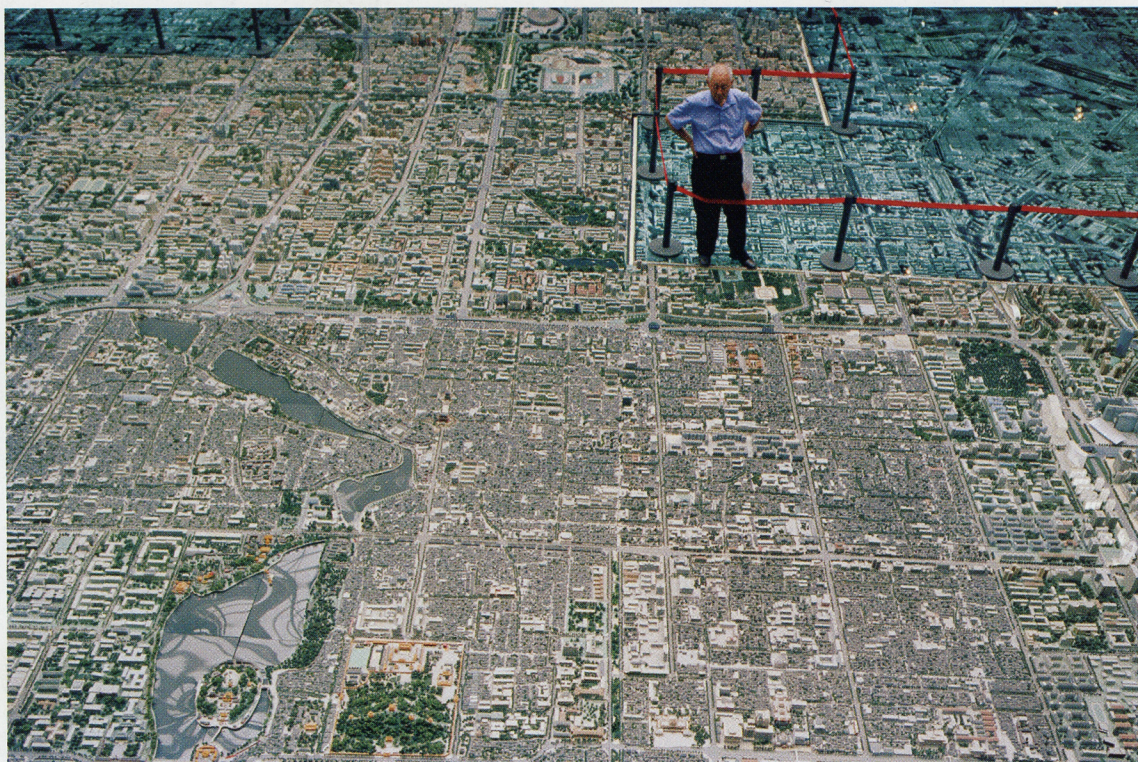
packed together in a regular three-dimensional array. Their arrangement is based on a recently discovered solution to the problem of efficiently dividing space into cells of equal volume (like bubbles in an ideal foam). In the Aquatics Center, this geometry is embodied in twenty-two thousand steel members that mark the edges of the polyhedrons. On the exterior and interior faces of the building the edges are spanned by thin sheets of plastic, creating a deep, sealed envelope of space around the perimeter. This perimeter is slightly

pressurized, causing the sheets to bulge like hundreds of taut balloons and turning the building into an energy-efficient greenhouse. According to the designers, the building is both environmentally responsible and conceptually tied to natural forms such as crystals, cells, and, of course, water bubbles.

Engineers and architects have long taken cues from nature, but one aspect marks the Aquatics Center as a particularly contemporary design, suited to the contradictory demands of Beijing '08. Although the ideal

“bubble” array itself is entirely regular and repetitious, the volume that the Watercube cuts through this array has been arbitrarily rotated on all three axes. The result is that the array appears to be irregular as it reaches the exterior and interior faces of the Aquatics Center. This choice can only have been driven by representational desires, since it greatly complicates the construction process. Even from the point of view of representation, it would have been an unthinkable decision until just the past decade or two. Rather than celebrating the well-ordered solution to the efficiency problem on which the building is based, the architects have willfully skewed and sliced it in order to suggest a pseudonaturalistic disorder. The widely publicized blue face of the Watercube is, then, a disarming mask for the thoroughly optimized and repetitious array that lies behind.

Herzog & de Meuron’s “Bird’s Nest” National Stadium is technically less advanced than the Aquatics Center—but architecturally more ambitious. Collaborating with Chinese art star Ai Weiwei and the Chinese Architectural Design & Research Group, the Pritzker Prize-winning firm conceived a monolithic concrete bowl that seats ninety-one thousand, resting within and partially beneath a saddle-shaped lid formed by an irregular weave of steel bands. To explain the project, Herzog & de Meuron have offered two principal metaphors. First, the firm relates the overall form of the stadium to that of a Shang dynasty vessel, suggesting that, although entirely contemporary, the stadium also draws on the ancient traditions of Chinese art. This metaphor expresses the desire for an “archaic” form that would overcome the hodgepodge of ticket gates, snack shops, and Jumbotrons that make up a typical contemporary stadium. The second metaphor comes from the structural concept of the project: Like twigs in a bird’s nest, each element would support and be supported by the others, producing a nonhierarchical structure. The steel bands would also be fully exposed, thereby acting as both the building’s facade and its ornament. The result is just the sort of twist on high-modernist principles that has become characteristic of Herzog & de Meuron’s work. Here the distinction between structure and ornament is collapsed à la Mies, but instead of the master’s calm Neoclassical order, we are given a taut sense of barely contained chaos. The underlying desire was to work against the great size of the stadium, to



From top: Visitor viewing the scale model of the city of Beijing, Beijing Planning Exhibition Hall, Beijing, 2005. Photo: Gideon Mendel/Corbis. Demonstrators at a rally protesting the Olympic torch relay, City Hall, San Francisco, April 8, 2008. Photo: Jeff Chiu/Associated Press.

de-monumentalize it through the erratic web of bands. In the *New York Times Magazine* in 2006, Pierre de Meuron spoke of trying to ensure that “this huge structure is not oppressive.” Again, the tendency is to soften the power of what is ostensibly a monumental project. (Herzog & de Meuron achieved this softening effect quite literally in the firm’s much-celebrated Allianz Arena in Munich, where the unitary drum of the building is given a quilted skin of air-filled pillows—technology that Arup has transferred to the Watercube.)

Given the enviable sophistication of the firm’s practice, it is not surprising that, despite the use of these nearly contradictory metaphors, the architects have largely got what they wanted. The Bird’s Nest is both

unitary and scaleless, primitive and novel: a massive urban device that denies its own weight. In the wake of this undeniable achievement, the pressing question that remains is whether these motivations are appropriate for Beijing ’08. The point becomes especially acute when one considers the conditions in which the metaphorical nest was constructed. Jacques Herzog remarked enthusiastically in 2006 that “such a structure you couldn’t do anywhere else.” Why not? Because, as the architects estimated, “construction costs in Beijing are one-tenth the amount in the West.” For despite its lightweight metaphor, the one archaic aspect of the Bird’s Nest was its dependence on a sheer mass of poorly compensated manual labor. As many as seven thousand workers, mainly migrants from the countryside, worked for about \$4 per day to raise and weld the forty-two thousand tons of steel on time. While it would be unfair to blame Herzog & de Meuron for the hardship of the Chinese builders, they have taken advantage of the conditions that produce this suffering—as have all of us who benefit from the inexpensive labor and lax regulations of the world’s fastest-growing major economy. The stadium, then, does not represent the value-free world of nature (as its nickname suggests), nor even the timeless values of traditional Chinese art. Instead, it represents the use of authoritarian politics and raw capitalism to produce a desirable product. Which is to say that it is a monument to the relationship that we in the West have to China today.

If Herzog & de Meuron imagine the stadium as an ancient Chinese vessel, the firm also surely knows that Ai Weiwei has made a name for himself by smashing such antiquities. Having played an instrumental part in the design of the stadium that will host the opening ceremonies, the artist has since disavowed the games entirely: “I hate the kind of feeling stirred up by promotion or propaganda. . . . It’s the kind of sentiment when you don’t stick to the facts, but try to make up something, to mislead people away from a true discussion,” he remarked last year in *The Guardian*. Yet Ai says he does not regret his involvement in the project, suggesting that its value lies in some future contribution to Beijing, not in its present use by the state. While seemingly erratic, his shifting position is in fact an honest reflection of the aporia presented by the choice of engagement or boycott that defines the politics of Beijing ’08.

Finally, the Olympic buildings may provide one other cautionary lesson. Encouraged by these and other recent projects—especially Rem Koolhaas and Ole Scheeren’s nearby CCTV Television Station and Headquarters—Western architects and critics have been celebrating the opening of China to their most advanced designs. One may even be tempted to see this as a sign of a more general political tolerance. However, a less encouraging interpretation is also possible: Perhaps architecture is given latitude only because of its capacity to remain representationally vague (in contrast with journalism, for example, which remains tightly controlled). The Bird’s Nest and the Watercube, as well as Beijing’s overall reconstruction, suggest a China that is more open and less authoritarian than it is. This slippage between architectural representation and political reality can be seen either as a mask or as a projection—as a cover for the abuse of power, or as an image of China’s emerging better self. Thus, for those concerned with reform in China, the real challenge posed by Beijing ’08 is not to artificially separate the Olympics and its architecture from politics, but to force the Olympics to become a political projection; and then to get the reality to match the representation. □

SEAN KELLER IS AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY AND THEORY AT THE COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE, ILLINOIS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, CHICAGO.