

# Move to Beijing...

# NOW

## The City of Contradictions

**H**ave you ever travelled somewhere so foreign to your way of living that the thought of leaving the sanctuary of your small 3x3m apartment makes you cringe? Have you ever commuted on a train so congested that people have actually been trampled to death? Have you ever lived in a city where outdoor running may cause terminal lung cancer? If you haven't lived in Beijing, then I assume your answer is no.

The plan was to move to Beijing for 12 months, and this reality slowly became 2 years. It wasn't all smooth sailing. Within my first 4 months in Beijing, I had 3 different jobs, all of which I quit after realising their daunting similarities to working in large development companies in Australia. The thought of a flight back to Melbourne to start Masters of Architecture earlier than planned, suddenly didn't seem so sour. In the first few weeks, I began to notice the differences between Melbourne and Beijing. For instance, small things, the value of personal space, road laws and traffic, infrastructure... all of which affected me.

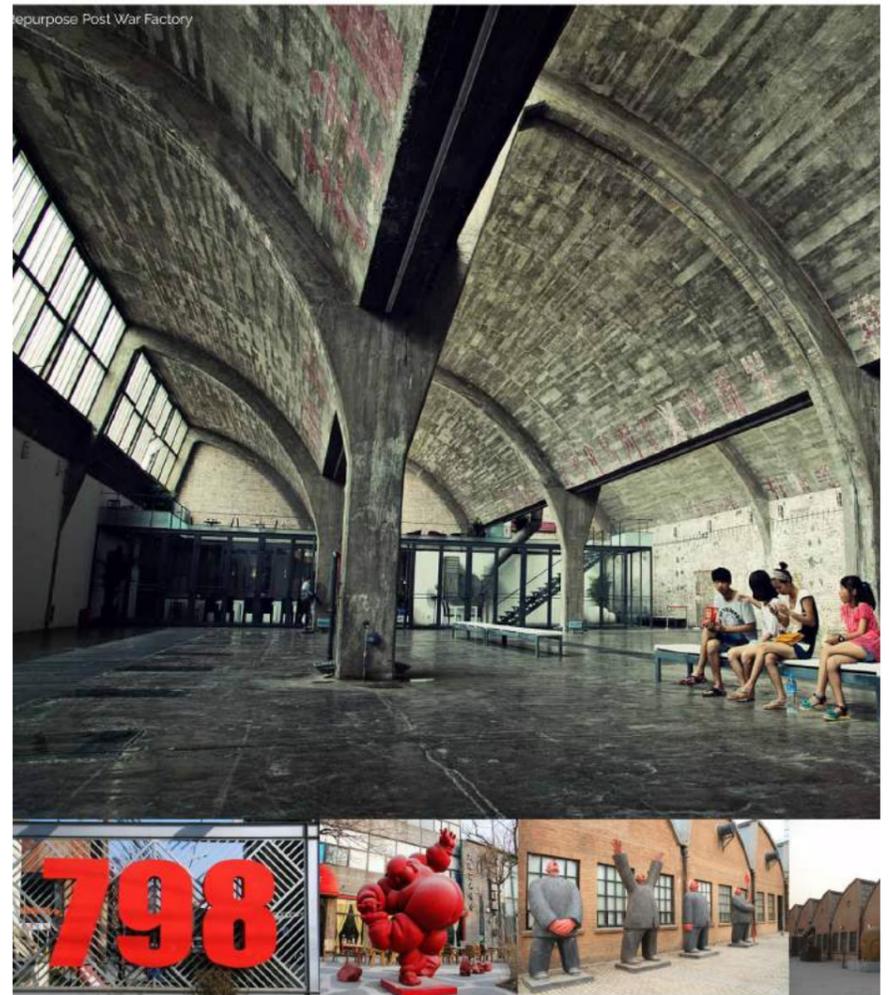
***“There were times that I struggled not to scream at the pedestrians who would walk in front of hurling cars as if they were made of tofu.”***

There were times that I struggled not to scream at the pedestrians who would walk in front of hurling cars as if they were made of tofu. Even trying to navigate a cab driver who speaks no English, to the nearest telco, just so I could purchase a sim that would allow me to use my phone as navigation, was a strenuous and frustrating task.

But ultimately, with no small degree of perseverance, I found the right job, and all these difficulties of living in Beijing dissipated amongst the inconspicuous sophistication and excitement of being in the Capital of China, a city so rich in every aspect of life and culture that all you want to do is learn and absorb its ethos and very existence.

It took 3 unsatisfying jobs in mainstream architecture firms and much needed persistence to get the job I always wanted in Beijing. I started with calling the studio, Fake Design, run by an international artist and architect, asking if He is hiring, and how I can apply, but every response was the same: “no, He isn't hiring, and if He was, it's only through connections, but you're welcome to come and meet Him if you like...”. So I decided to visit the studio to meet the Man who has, in many ways, changed the face of China. I took with me the portfolio I made during the RMIT Portfolio subject, which was actually described as more of a fine arts folio than a architecture folio, or at least a mixture of the two, and began my 2 hour journey to His studio.

Upon arriving, I was lead through the turquoise green front gates, and taken to His personal assistant who was sitting at her desk, in a large white office room with polished concrete floors and a bamboo ceiling. I quickly noticed that all the desks, computers, and chairs were the same, except for one - that must be where He sits, I thought to myself.



His receptionist tried to get rid of me by saying He is too busy today, try another time. Of course I responded that “it took me a while to get here, and I'm happy to wait”. I was surprised at how protective His employees were of Him. I was only waiting 15 minutes until I first saw Him through the glass door, walking with 2 other people in His private courtyard, which was filled with dozens of cats frolicking in a field of lush green grass and small bamboos, a rare tranquility to witness in the periphery of Beijing.

As He opened the glass door and enters, I felt as though He didn't even realise my presence despite seeing me. He addressed his staff and personal assistant in Mandarin, and I could detect His assertiveness by their reactions. He then turned to me and asked, “how can I help you?”. I was clear and confident: I introduced myself and told Him why I had come. We sat down and He said, “show me what you've got”. After 15 minutes of looking through my folio, and asking general questions about my life and why I came to China,

He told me he wanted me to work for Him. Later His personal assistant asked to see my folio too, remarking on how He doesn't usually hire people like this, and that my folio must have really impressed Him.

This was how I found myself in my ideal job, working for Ai Weiwei, a designer and artist exhibiting internationally. The man is a gentle genius with a fierce passion and unrelenting desire to use the misconduct of Chinese politics and the history of Chinese vernacular as a medium for artistic expression. Like many creatives, his temperament fluctuated from day to day, and he gave me a high degree of flexibility and freedom to design an array of artistic furniture, coffins, sculptures, imagery, installations and artworks for him, and for this reason, I am grateful. Notwithstanding this, it's a very stressful but rewarding environment to work in, when you're designing works that are being produced and exhibited all around the world, no false steps can be made - the higher up the mountain, the more treacherous the path.

# ***“Despite Beijing being restrictive in comparison to capitalist cities, I ironically felt more free than I do in Melbourne.”***

Once immersed in the sea of Beijing’s art scene, one begins to explore beyond the shallows of the mainstream, into the depths of what can only be described as a self sustained organic machine powered by artists, curators, gallerists and creatives, merging ideas and producing works and exhibitions at an unprecedented rate. The opportunities and willingness to collaborate and give emerging talent an opening to shine makes me want to spend the next 10 years living there. It’s an inclusive symbiotic frenzy of like-minded people taking the Beijing and international art scenes to unmarked territory.

Unlike Melbourne’s scattered assortment of galleries throughout the suburbs and the city, Beijing’s art scene is conglomerated into a main area that’s north east of The Forbidden City, around the 5th Ring road, making it conveniently seamless to venture from one gallery to the next. There’s the 798 Art District, a huge area comprising post war Russian warehouses, displaying exquisite brutalist architecture and forms, which have been repurposed into studios, galleries and artist residences. Then there’s Chiochangdi Art Village, where I lived, literally down the road from 798

(a road with 10 lanes), that encapsulates, through its graffiti decorated walls dissing the political regimes, the artistic rebellion that spawned in response to the constraints of Communist life imposed by the government.

Apart from Mondays, when all galleries are closed, there wasn’t a single day that didn’t offer something new to learn and explore, whether it be an exhibition, an installation, a performative art piece or live music. Galleries such as Chambers Fine Art, and UCCA offered a look at the world’s most successful artist, however, there are many more smaller boutique galleries that promote young artists. Living in a communist city isn’t as bad as it sounds. Most of the time you don’t notice the CCTV security cameras perched on a flagpole every 30 metres, or the 6 surveillance cameras disguised as street lamps, peering into Weiwei’s studio and home. As locals seem to ignore the ‘big brother’ vibe, you learn to follow suit.

In fact, despite Beijing restrictive in comparison to capitalist cities, I ironically felt more free than I do in Melbourne. Perhaps this is the result of being a foreigner in a seemingly unprejudiced society without the constraints of needing to conform to social norms.

Beijing is a city that would take a lifetime of living in to even begin to understand its complexities and cultural heritage. To be able to immerse yourself in the ancient city, even just as a sojourner, is an opportunity no-one should deny themselves. And if it comes to a point in your life, such as graduating from your architecture degree, where you feel as I felt (drained and empty), and seek as I sought (something new and challenging), then I recommend you visit Beijing, for you will have an experience that will never be forgotten.

