

DEATH OF A BUILDING

THE KNOCK-ON EFFECTS OF KNOCKING DOWN BUILDINGS

by George Ding

Three years ago, I taught at a building on the southeast corner of Guanghai Bridge. It was an ugly thing, with peeling maroon paint and dark, musty hallways. There was no air conditioning and in the summer it got so unbearable that sometimes we had to relocate to a nearby coffee shop.

I worked on the eighth floor. Between classes I'd look out the window by the water cooler and watch the construction of the new CCTV headquarters. People called it the Big Shorts but back then it looked more like a pair of assless chaps.

One day late last year, I passed by Guanghai Bridge and was surprised to see our building and its surroundings cordoned off with sheets of metal plating, the kind you see around construction sites. Though the building I had worked in was still standing, a crane was driving a wrecking ball into the wall of a building right next to it. A construction worker stood next to the crane with a hose, spraying water to settle the dust where the wrecking ball had hit.

Over the next few months, more and more of the area disappeared, transmuted into hills of debris and bent rebar, but my building remained, until it was the only thing standing amidst a field of concrete tumuli.

Then, a month ago, my building disap-

peared too. Like many things in the city, it was there one day, gone the next, and no one could say why. Later I read in the news that when the building fell, it collapsed on top of four cars, including a Porsche, destroying them entirely.

I'm not trying to eulogize the place – it was falling apart and I didn't particularly enjoy working there. And yet, whenever I pass by its ruins, I vainly try to pinpoint the place in the empty air where I had once taught class.

Seeing the building's destruction brought back memories I thought had been discarded and those memories made me think of the friends I had met during my time there, and the thought of those friends made me miss that maroon monstrosity. Like it or not, that building was a part of my Beijing story, and when it disappeared, a part of me, however small, had gone with it.

In the four years I've lived in Beijing, I've seen subway lines carved from cavernous holes in the middle of busy avenues. I've watched the Bird's Nest slowly grow into its shell and the Assless Chaps stitched together in midair. But until now I had never given much thought to what had existed before all that. When people complained about demolitions, I used to think, *That's just the way it is. The past has to make way for the future.* Now I wonder, what had to be destroyed so

that a television station could have a new headquarters?

Cities are cultural, historical and architectural palimpsests. Cab drivers sometimes rant about what Beijing was like before all the high-rises and shopping malls, but maybe that's what makes them real Beijingers – they can remember an iteration of the city that existed before this one. Though I can hardly remember what Sanlitun was like before the Village, something tells me that I'm going to remember what used to occupy the southeast corner of Guanghai Bridge.

All buildings have a history, but in a country that's charging so swiftly into the future, there's no time to look back, no time for sentimentality. That's the way it is, I guess. The past has to make way for the future. The old has to make way for the new.

Today, the area southeast of the bridge is being cleared of rubble. By the time you read this, there will be no trace of what used to be there. I imagine, over the next year, a construction crew will dig a deep pit and line it with concrete; shafts of rebar will rise out of the ground like spring grass; scaffolding will spire toward the sky with green construction mesh trailing it like scandent vines; and then, before you know it, Beijing will have a new skyscraper.