

Neighbours and Gardens: Social and Environmental Change in the Bayanzurkh Ger District of Ulaanbaatar

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This paper discusses the social and environmental change experienced by people migrating from the countryside into the city of Ulaanbaatar. As the formally planned housing areas of the city of Ulaanbaatar cannot accommodate the rapidly urbanising population, vast areas of unplanned settlement have formed surrounding the city. Ger means home or dwelling unit, – baish means building. These informal settlements in the peri-urban areas are known as ger districts; referring to the traditional Mongolian tent dwelling, the ger.

The ger district phenomenon has been considered as something transitory both for the people who inhabit them and for the development of Ulaanbaatar. However, unlike proposals of the last Soviet master plans from the 1980s, the current city planners do not plan to excise the extinction of ger districts (Gilberg/ Svantesson 1996:22). Instead, different kinds of improvement plans are being made. Besides obvious health and pollution problems, these areas have also created a unique semi-nomadic culture of their own (Schenk 2006:187, Sneath 2006:156). This heuristic knowledge of the inhabitants might well be studied, as they may provide useful ideas for new developments in urban design.

This paper is mainly based on our field experience during the summers of 2007 and 2008 in the ger district of Bayanzurkh in eastern Ulaanbaatar. The interviewed families were selected through their membership in a community project, and their networks within the neighbourhood. Other interviews have taken place in planning offices, the Ulaanbaatar City Museum and other residential areas of Ulaanbaatar, besides Bayanzurkh.

Family and Neighbours

During the socialistic period (1924-1992), the settlement of Ulaanbaatar was regulated by the government and ruled by

From a collection of "Oddities in Mongolia":



The one and only underground pass in Central Ulaanbaatar, also known as the UB Metro.



An earth-cellar in a traditional ger to keep airag cool, Undur Ulaan, Tuv Province.



Inside the 'UB Metro*.

the demand for labour in state industries. After the Mongolian democracy in the early 1990s the transition to a market economy released a new form of urbanisation (Sneath 2006:154). In the last few years migration to Ulaanbaatar occurred out of three reasons:

- to find working possibilities (due to lack of work alternatives in rural areas most of migrants came to the city to find work)
- to send their children to school (job training or education - particularly beyond compulsory school)
- to improve living quality (infrastructure in rural areas is limited - in particular education and health care and supply of goods is inadequate)

The housing in ger areas is comprised of the traditional Mongolian ger combined with self-built cottages. Unlike the way this are placed the countryside in the ger districts, a fence surrounds each private dwelling forming a khaashaa or compound (Müller 1999:25). The protection of private ownership with fences in urban (and peri- urban) Mongolia is characteristic and necessary for safety and security reasons.

In rural Mongolia residential groups like the ail (family, hamlet) are providing- beside main function as a working cooperation- a strong sense of social security and a sense of community. The general relatedness helps socializing and provides members with identity (Bruun 1996:72, Humphrey/ Sneath 1999: 139). In urban cities like Ulaanbaatar, the need for cooperation is restricted and socializing becomes difficult.

As a result of systematic settlement, the contact with kin living close- or even in the same compound- remains very high. Interaction with neighbours seems to be unnecessary.

Settlers who lived in the area for a shorter period had less contact with neighbours than people who already lived in the area for decades. One aspect affecting the permanency of neighbour relations is physical mobility in ger areas. Especially people who do not own a place or a dwelling but just rent space in a compound usually don't intend to stay long. Because of high mobility, it is often difficult for newcomers to develop social interactions with long established residents.

Neighbourhood Projects and Gardening

One way to improve living in ger areas is through community projects. For example the implementation of saving groups is

From a collection of "Oddities in Mongolia":



Holiday gers with 'bay windows' and porches in Manchushir Valley.



A tomato plant being grown inside a ger with the help of a traditional skylight window.



An open air bar / cornfield in central Ulaanbaatar.

a successful initiative to improve living standards and in addition create a neighbourhood. The members of the observed group were selected and had to be full citizens of the area. In all cases the members were also the landowners and had to prove a secure income. The saving group is one way to enforce collaboration between people from the same area and to create a community.

One way to increase a sense of neighbourhood is also sustained through gardening and the collection of waste. The disposal of waste is not distinctive in every area. Usually the waste is burned or thrown on the street. So the members of the community project decided to improve their environment and started to collect waste in their neighbourhood. Gardening has become established as another example of exchange in some areas. In the compound, inhabitants start to grow vegetables for their own daily consumption or for sale. Through the community members' knowledge, of plant cultivation is shared among the neighbours.

Green Areas in Ulaanbaatar History

Agriculture and gardening have not been part of Mongol culture due to the nomadic way of life, and disturbing the earth's surface has been considered a sacrilege. According to Shamanistic religion, life is ruled by the sky and nature. The protection of nature is seen as a responsibility due to Mongolian customs (Germeraad/ Enebish 1996:27). There are stories of how to pick plants undercover of a tent, so the Sky will not see, and jokes on Mongolians not using the metro, because to be underground is no place for a human. Reflecting on these and other similar stories we enquired the architectural historian Mr. Daajav if there was any relating reason for there not being a metro in Ulaanbaatar. He said: "Or because there are three underground rivers here. It's no good to go digging here." The reasons behind the belief about the 'unbreakability' of the surface of the earth are probably manifold, combining religious, political and very practical reasoning. Out in the steppe, not breaking the earth in large amounts has probably saved it from erosion through the centuries. The nomadic lifestyle on the steppe never necessitated excavation, as the animals grazing food in the form of grass always grew seasonally on the surface, where all moisture and waste was returned.

In this article, we are not addressing the questions of countryside and agriculture but the green areas of Ulaanbaatar. Before the Revolution Ulaanbaatar had its Chinese quarters where the Chinese had their vegetable patches. Also the monasteries had



Dolgor's and her husband's garden and house. All the family in collaboration built the house. Now it has an elementary central heating system, but for a long time they also heated with coal as is customary in ger districts. If he could re-build his house Dolgor's husband would add a second floor as well as an inside toilet and shower.

gardens, some of them quite elaborate, with different varieties of trees to blossom in different seasons etc. Public parks and tree-lined avenues came first with the Communist times. Mr. Daajav who moved to Ulaanbaatar as a young man in 1938 remembers spending most of his Saturdays doing voluntary tree planting in the city. The earliest recorded (at least in the UB City museum) tree-planting effort was performed already in 1925. Besides the avenues many parks and children's playgrounds were established among the new residential areas as they were built from the 1940s onward. Many of those growing up in the 1950s and 1960s have talked of the greenness and spaciousness of the Communist Ulaanbaatar with emphasis on the greenness. For example, Tuya Tse, growing up on Baga Toiruu in central Ulaanbaatar, remembers with longing how the watering cars came every morning to water the lawns, and they as children used to run after them. Referring to the current serious air-pollution problem, she says: "We used to call Ulaanbaatar the White Swan of Asia . . . Now it's just a black hole."

The current city planning includes many plans for new parks and for better maintenance of the existing ones, but water has become very scarce and expensive, and privately owned land is difficult to keep for recreational purposes. Many of the courtyards that used to be parks in the centre of the city have been built out with new high-rise buildings. From the 1990s the government has been actively encouraging people in the ger areas to grow their own vegetables. This has even been referred to as the Green Revolution in Ulaanbaatar (Schenk 2006:175). Possibly as the inner-city parks will be built up, the ger areas will emerge as the new green areas of the city.

Gardening in Bayanzurkh

In Bayanzurkh there are two elaborate gardens. The first one we came across is owned by Dolgor who moved to Bayanzurkh in late 1970s. Dolgor only started gardening seriously when she retired in the early 1990s. She received her first seeds from her children living in China, Korea and Russia. Then she also became involved in the Neighbourhood Project and the women living in Bayanzurkh have an extended plant sapling swapping system. Besides vegetables Dolgor grows pot-plants for selling. She also has a private project of saving hurt and mistreated trees and bushes from the city.

The second garden we were shown is owned by Adya, who moved to the area in the 1960s, and has been cultivating her



Adya and Daajav's house has been re-built three times since the 1970s. The first building materials they collected piecemeal all around the city. The ground-floor plan is from a building magazine, the 2nd floor is custom-made to accommodate the family's children and grandchildren. A specialty is the plant room with big windows facing in two directions and giving a view over the city.

garden ever since. She explains that she started with some cauliflower-seeds she had been given. Taking intense pleasure in watching them grow, she moved on to potatoes and other vegetables – and eventually to trees and flowers as well. Her gardening skills were so remarkable that the rumour reached the “state gardening section”, and people came to see “this woman that could make a rocky mountain flower”. She was encouraged by both the state organisation, and later by World Vision, in teaching her neighbours gardening skills. For the past ten years, she has also grown greenhouse vegetables, such as cucumbers and lettuce, also for selling to a few hotels.

In discussion about the traditional attitude towards not breaking the surface of the ground Adya and Dolgor say that it is very true that that has been the attitude for long, but that people need to improve their lifestyles, and also to be more ecologically conscious. They still consult the Buddhist calendar to see what days are good for digging into the ground, but are convinced that the gods are not angry with them for making their environment more beautiful and healthy.

Both Adya and Dolgor and their husbands speak very adamantly about fresh air and the good effect of greenery for this. Adya and her husband tell proudly how they heat the house entirely with electricity, producing no smoke at all. They tell that when they first moved to the area it was very spacious around their “fence” compound, all flowers and fresh air. Now the neighbourhood is densely populated and coal burning causes a lot of air pollution in wintertime. Dolgor’s husband shows especially one tree that is planted between their house and another one, and tells how their neighbours open their little bedroom window at night to steal the good air that their tree is producing. He calls it stealing, as they have not paid a cent for the watering, joking though. Fresh air and a good smell seem to be the most important aspects of trees and vegetation besides their edibility. Dolgor also tells of a public area with trees as a possible project for the neighbourhood group. In this plan the shadow the trees produce is the central idea.

The Ger and the House

Besides a change in relation to the surface of the earth, moving from a rural to an urban environment produces a different spatial relation of dwelling and landscape. The ger has a single door, to a single room and a skyward-facing window. The inner space of the ger is considered to form a whole together with the

surrounding landscape. In the rural context the landscape that belongs together with a ger is considered to be about five kilometres in radius. In the urban context this is replaced with fence. Thus a wall of a house is not to be compared with the felt wall of a ger, but with the fence. The yard of a ger is a private space and is the place of many domestic activities. It does not have a public and representative function in the meaning of a Western type front yard.

The skylight-window of the ger does not provide eye contact with the surrounding landscape. At some level the (open) door can be considered to provide such a relation, referred to some even as “the Mongolian TV”. However, according to Mr. Daajav, the inside of a ger is considered to be a mental space where you are not supposed to be looking for the outside, but turning inward. Even in ceremonial gers that have a raised top to provide space for glass windows, the windows are merely to provide light, not to provide a view. A view is something one gains going out of the ger. In the ger districts, this is of course different as the fence excludes a view even outside the ger. In self-built houses in the ger districts, however, large windows and balconies are very popular. The interviewed residents considered windows to be very convenient for growing plants, but also for keeping dust and dirt outside.

The greatest advantage, besides windows, of the house compared to the ger is the provision of separate rooms for serving different groups/functions at the same time. Further (self-built) houses are seen as better than apartment blocks for their direct connection to the environment; the garden and fresh air. Also privacy is thought to be greater in ger districts in comparison to having a lot of neighbours living in the same block. Something that Dolgor and her husband still miss in their ger district house is indoor toilet and shower, which would make it “not necessary to go out at all in the winter”.

Conclusion

In the countryside, it is the extended family and working that forms a person's social frame living in residential groups known as the ail. When settling in the peri-urban context of the ger district many people hold on to this framework and try to maintain their kinship ties. Other people near by, e.g. neighbours, are not easily contacted for help or general socializing. Some neighbourly behaviour can still be detected- forming between families which have inhabited the same ger district for a longer time and owning the land they occupy. Gardening has emerged as a special form of neighbourly activity that has led to further projects.

As gardening, or agriculture in any form, has not been part of the traditional Mongolian way of life, it is interesting to discover to what extent the change in social and spatial environment also leads to a change in conception of nature. According to the interviewed ger area residents gardening improves life quality by providing food (for free) and by making the living environments more agreeable, in particular freshness of air is considered important. In addition gardening activities increase interaction with neighbours.

Living in self-built houses, not to mention apartment blocks, creates a very different relation to the surrounding environment than living in the traditional ger dwelling. Major differences are the placement of windows and thus the relationship of inside and outside, and the differentiation of spaces according to different functions and privacy indoors. Interviewed ger district dwellers claim the ger districts provide a direct connection to nature, which they did not experience when living in apartment blocks in the city. Others see also the ger districts' way of settling on valleys and mountains alike without changing the surface of the ground as a semi-nomadic attitude towards nature.



A view from Bayanzurkh Ger District of Ulaanbaatar with a mix of gers and self-built houses.



New residential buildings with two-storey high windows giving a view towards the Bogd Khan Mountains.

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