

## Work begins to clean up Beijing's 'dirty streets'

"Dirty street" in Sanlitun was once famous for cheap food and drinks. Tian Liming, who has lived in the area for more than 50 years, knows all too well how the bar-and-restaurant-strewn thoroughfare lived up to its nickname.



Workers tear down unauthorized exterior walls on Tonglihou street, aka "Dirty street", in Beijing's Sanlitun Photos By Feng Yongbin and Zou Hong / China Daily

The Sanlitun South No 42 apartment building stands at one end of the 200-meter-long Tonglihou street – Dirty street's official name – which connects the two parts of the Taikoo Li shopping complex. "Small businesses grew out of these apartments like aggressive tumors," the 60-year-old said.

The rise of the street in Chaoyang district began when the number of visitors surged after the southern section of the popular complex was opened in 2008 as the city hosted its first Olympic Games. Many entrepreneurs saw great business opportunities, Tian recalled.

Since it was much cheaper to rent apartments than retail premises in nearby high-end commercial spaces, serving holes appeared in a number of street-facing exterior walls of the building's ground floor apartments. A large number of apartments, including many above ground level, were converted into bars, eateries and stores.

Soon, the illegal construction reached a point where it was impossible to see

the real exterior walls, prompting concerns among local residents that some buildings' structural integrity had been damaged and posed a safety risk, according to Tian.

### **'Smelly and sticky'**

Soon, the street in front of his residential building was constantly covered by trash, as well as vomit and urine from drunken late-night revelers. "The street became smelly and sticky. People then started to call it 'Dirty street', and it became famous among young people and expats," Tian said.

He witnessed the removal of the "tumors" on April 24, when the Beijing government launched a citywide campaign to block unauthorized business openings in the walls of buildings in residential areas.

On the first day, 33 businesses situated in Tian's apartment building were stripped of their unauthorized constructions and the original walls were restored. He said he was delighted, but was wary of showing his feelings in front of people who were sad to see the street lose its former "glory".

"For years, those businesses that some treasured deeply had been a nightmare for local residents – if they could sleep at night, that is. A friend in my building called the police five times in one night to complain about the loud noise coming from the bars," he said, as he stood in front of a belt of grass that was previously covered by several small eateries. Now, only the electricity cables covered in evaporated grease remind people of the outlets' existence.

Like many residents, Tian's friend decided to move. Only about a dozen original residents of the building stayed. After the renovation, people began to move back. Moreover, the incidence of crime on the street fell by one-third, according to Liu Zhe, deputy director of the Sanlitun police station.

Tian believes the authorities should have tackled the situation a long time ago, but taking action was not as easy as he imagines.

The process of converting ground-floor apartments or courtyards in hutong – traditional alleyways – into private businesses began as China pursued the reform and opening-up policy in the 1980s and '90s, said Zhao Yong, deputy director of the Sanlitun urban management team.

"This unauthorized behavior gradually became a common practice all over the city. Beijing has clearly grown out of that phase and things need to be strictly regulated from now on," he said. "The removal of illegal constructions in the infamous 'Dirty street' demonstrates the Beijing government's determination, and the business owners know that."

He added that some businesses in apartment buildings remain open because their business licenses and rental contracts are still valid, but unsurprisingly business has plummeted as they are no longer visible from the street and customers have to approach them through residential entrances.

"Who knows how much longer they can survive?" he said.

## **Zero tolerance**

By the end of July, more than 23,390 sites with unauthorized openings had been dealt with around the city, and the municipal government has stated that new unauthorized constructions will not be tolerated.

In addition to removing safety hazards, the citywide campaign is also expected to make central Beijing less crowded and provide room for improvements, such as the construction of parks and facilities to make people's lives more comfortable.

The goal is to develop Beijing into world-class capital city and improve the general standard of living, according to a draft of the Beijing Overall Urban Development Plan, which was published in March. The process, which began last year, will continue until 2030.

In February, President Xi Jinping said the urban planners must think deeply about how the city should look and devise ways to strengthen its function as the capital.

According to the draft, Beijing will further restore the traditional appearance of neighborhoods during the campaign. In August, the revised plan was approved by the central government, the Beijing Municipal Commission of Development and Reform said.

Xisibeitoutiao, a 600m-long hutong in Xicheng district, has existed since the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), when Beijing became the capital. As one of the best-preserved hutong neighborhoods in the city, it was also among the first to launch the campaign.

"Some stores selling electronic accessories near the entrances to Xisibeitoutiao had doors that opened into the hutong. Trucks would block the alleyway for hours every time new stock was unloaded," said Zhang Xiaozhen, who has lived in the area for 15 years.

## **Improvements**

Since 14 wall openings in the hutong were blocked at the end of last year, the 63-year-old has noticed obvious changes.

"The alleyway is much cleaner and quieter than before. The blocked walls looked quite ugly at the beginning, but now workers have started to repaint and decorate them to restore the traditional courtyard appearance," she said.

"I don't mind people running businesses from the hutong as long as they treat it as their home and take care of it. They shouldn't pour dirty water everywhere and change the structure of the houses just to make more money."

The process hasn't won universal approval, though, and some residents have complained that they have to travel further afield for grocery shopping and for breakfast because some small businesses, such as greengrocers and restaurants, have relocated.

"The inconvenience is only temporary. The planning of new supermarkets and convenience stores started even before the campaign was launched. Our goal is to ensure that hutong residents can find a supermarket or convenience store within 15 minutes' walking distance," said Wei Jihong, deputy director of Xijiekou subdistrict, which administers the hutong located on Xisibei street.

To accommodate people's needs, more than 3,000 greengrocers, convenience stores and restaurants that offer breakfast had been built or upgraded by the end of July, according to the city's development and reform commission.

The new convenience stores will also reserve spaces for former street traders who provide bike and shoe repairs, Wei said. "People need their skills, so we want to encourage them to continue their businesses in regulated areas."

Thomas Angotti, a professor of urban affairs and planning at Hunter College in New York, believes that the campaign in Beijing has many parallels with the development of the "Big Apple".

"The campaign in Beijing seems to be a response to interests by national and international capital to locate in central areas where land values and business potential are higher. Building regulations and zoning, when strictly applied, can be the mechanism (for that)," he said.

## **Zoning**

New York is now divided into three basic zones – residential, commercial and manufacturing – and construction application forms and permitted uses are strictly applied in all of them. Residents can use the city's urban planning website to discover their neighborhood's zonal code and work out if they are allowed to operate businesses there.

Angotti suggested that before it takes action the Beijing government should make greater efforts to work with small businesses to improve their compliance with local laws. In many places, governments provide incentives, grants and assistance, he said.

Back in Beijing, "Dirty street" is no longer dirty, according to Tian: "The city is changing so quickly. I can't imagine what it will look like in 10 years' time. All I know is that it is my home, whatever changes are made."