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The Road to Beijing

By ARIC CHEN

LOOMING over the Chaoyang district of Beijing, the rising headquarters of China Central Television, or CCTV, will soon angle and cantilever like a colossal Constructivist doughnut, threatening to writhe free of the scaffolding that barely harnesses it. Designed by Rem Koolhaas and Ole Scheeren of the radical Dutch firm OMA, it will be a gravity-defying, 755-foot-tall monument to architectural derring-do — an audacious beacon and backdrop from which the images of a newly ascendant China will be beamed across the globe, one year from now, during the 2008 Summer Olympics.

But when Beijing finally gets its Olympic moment in the sun, some of the thrills will simply require a room key. Rising next to the CCTV building, and also designed by OMA, the dazzling Television Cultural Center, or TVCC, peaks and plummets like a mountain cloaked in corrugated zinc. And when its ribbon is cut next year, it will be home to one of the most spectacular hotels around: a 241-room Mandarin Oriental that looks like no other. With restaurants and a bar suspended above, its modular curtain of randomly staggered rooms will hypnotically shift in and out of a head-spinning, 21-story atrium, while a circular ballroom, ringed by water, will glimmer down below.

“It’s not an accident that this is in Beijing,” said Mr. Scheeren, the OMA partner in charge of both the CCTV and TVCC projects. “No other city has this level of ambition.”

As Beijing races to recast itself as the metropolis of the future, while ramping up for a projected 1.5 million visitors to the Games, the Mandarin Oriental signals a hotel boom of hyperbolic proportions. A deluge of luxury chains, along with an emerging boutique hotel scene, is lending a platinum-card sheen to the capital’s cosmopolitan reawakening. At the other end of the spectrum, historic courtyard mansions are getting a trendy makeover as guesthouses, leaving no stone undesigned. It is a surge that mirrors the frenetic pace, superlative aspirations and architectural zeal of a city looking to shed its reputation for being as gray as a Mao suit.

“A lot of first-time visitors to Beijing are surprised by how developed things already are,” said Damien Little, a Beijing-based director of Horwath HTL, an international hospitality consulting group. The city is expected to add more than 4,000 upper-tier hotel rooms this year, Mr. Little said, with 7,000 or so more in 2008.

In redrawing Beijing's skyline, these hotels are staking space among the iconic buildings that now line the city's monumental thoroughfares like surreal Morandi-esque still lifes. Pick your metaphors: the mammoth “bird's nest” of the Herzog & de Meuron-designed Olympic stadium, the iridescent “water cube” of the aquatics center next door, or the new National Grand Theater, an enormous glass-and-titanium bubble that seems just inches away from becoming the Blob That Ate the Forbidden City.

Then there's the soaring new Terminal 3, designed by Norman Foster, at the Beijing Capital International Airport. Naturally, it will be the world's largest air terminal when finished, at close to 10 million square feet.

But the gigantism now consuming Beijing is hardly confined to glass and steel. Tucked among the city's towering new behemoths are the budding, yet no less ambitious, epicenters of a new fashion-conscious affluence.

Consider LAN, a recently opened mega-restaurant where a sea of designer labels throbs within an interior that can only be described as decadent — even by the standards of its over-the-top designer, Philippe Starck.

Or Legation Quarter, a project that is transforming the former Qing Dynasty-era American Embassy compound into a cultural hotbed, complete with a Daniel Boulud restaurant, a repertory theater, a contemporary art center and an outpost of the London nightclub Boujis. If its high-octane mix evokes Beijing's more glamorous rival, Shanghai, there's a good reason. Its developer, Handel Lee, was responsible for the Three on the Bund complex in Shanghai, which helped raise that city's style quotient with, among other things, an Armani flagship store and Jean-Georges Vongerichten restaurant.

“I think Legation Quarter is going to blow things open,” said Mr. Lee, who expects Legation Quarter (www.legationquarter.com), at the southeast corner of Tiananmen Square, to start opening early next year. “Up to now, you could have had the Beijing experience” of hutongs and other historic attractions, he added, “but there wasn't much excitement.”

Completing the picture is the near-total overhaul of Beijing's hotel stock. Once limited to standard-issue, tourist-class rooms, it will soon rival, if not surpass, the world's top cities next year — and in record time. When the Hotel Kapok (16 Donghuamen

Street; 86-10-6525-9988; www.hotelkapok.com) opened last November, it was considered by many to be Beijing's first boutique hotel. Designed by the leading Chinese architect Pei Zhu, whose Olympic digital command center looks like a monolithic microchip, it offers spartanly stylish rooms at 1,280 yuan (about \$166, at 7.7 yuan to the dollar) a night, in a five-story minimalist box wrapped in a diaphanous fiberglass grid.

Since then, other boutique hoteliers have zeroed in. The Japanese star architect Kengo Kuma is designing a 99-room property, clad in a pixellated pattern of glass, in the Sanlitun area of the city. Andaz, a new boutique brand from Hyatt, is eyeing a site near Grand MOMA, a futuristic, eco-friendly development designed by the vanguard American architect Steven Holl. Grand MOMA will have its own hotel, a 60-room cylinder amid its eight Lego-like towers linked by a floating "street" of cafes, bars and even a swimming pool, all hovering 20 stories in the air.

"It will have its own reality," Mr. Holl said of the hotel and the unusual complex he is designing. Like other architects working in Beijing, he marvels at the creative latitude that designers have been given. "In preparation for the Olympics, it's amazing what the city is doing with architecture," he said.

For some hotelgoers, however, no feat of modern design and engineering can compete with the charm of Beijing's traditional courtyard houses. Mostly dating to the Qing Dynasty (1644 to 1911), many of the siheyuans, as they are called, have been the lamentable casualties of the city's hyperactive bulldozers. Luckily, a precious handful have been preserved as guesthouses, and one of the newest, and perhaps the finest, is the Côté Cour (70 Yanyue Hutong; 86-10-6512-8020; www.hotelcotecoursl.com; standard rooms at \$168). Painstakingly restored and stylishly renovated, it is a rambling, 14-room sanctum of Venetian plaster, glass mosaic tiles and Chinese antiques set among courtyards replete with a lily pond and century-old date tree.

"You can easily be somewhere modern in Beijing," said Shauna Liu, the hotel's fashionable owner, who plans to open two other such properties in the near future. "But to be in a courtyard house is just really, really cool."

Still, they represent a small minority. The big push is coming from international luxury chains, which are casting a wide shadow on Beijing's hotelscape. Many are familiar Western brands like the 825-room Grand Hyatt Beijing (1 East Chang An Avenue; 86-10-8518-1234; www.beijing.grand.hyatt.com), the St. Regis Beijing (21 Jianguomenwai Avenue; 86-10-6460-6688; www.stregis.com/beijing), and the new Ritz-Carlton Beijing, Financial Street (1 Jin Cheng Fang Street East; 86-10-6601-6666; www.ritzcarlton.com), InterContinental Beijing (11 Financial Street; 86-10-5852-5888; www.ichotelsgroup.com), and Regent Beijing, which features a nearly 50-foot-high crescent-shaped lounge (9 Jinbao Street; 86-10-8522-1888;

www.regenthotels.com).

Asian-based hoteliers have also been active. Their properties include the recently renovated Peninsula Beijing (8 Goldfish Lane; 86-10-8516-2888; www.peninsula.com) and [Raffles Beijing](http://www.beijing.affles.com) (33 East Chang An Avenue; 86-10-6526-3388; www.beijing.affles.com), which last year took over a historic hotel, built in a French-Oriental style, where [George Bernard Shaw](#) and Henri Cartier-Bresson once checked in. By Western standards, Beijing's luxury accommodations are a bargain; generally they are less than \$300 a night.

So hungry does the city seem for high-end lodgings that both Ritz-Carlton and InterContinental are unveiling second properties in Beijing later this year. And the list goes on. Before the Olympic torch lights up, expect a new Four Seasons, a 588-room J. W. Marriott and a Park Hyatt with a pyramid-shaped lobby and restaurant perched some 60 stories above the city's Central Business District — not to mention the Mandarin Oriental in the TVCC.

During the Olympics, however, the most coveted rooms may be from the self-designated Beijing 7 Star Hotel, being built across the street from the main Olympic stadium. To justify the extra two stars in its name, it promises three dedicated staff members for each of its 270 rooms and, most notably, a bird's-eye view of the stadium from your king-size bed.

“There's hardly anywhere else where so much is being built,” said Mr. Scheeren, the architect. “Much of it is pretty respectable — not only in the context of Beijing, but on a world scale.”

ARIC CHEN frequently writes about art, architecture, design and travel.

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