

# Global Times: World Heritage Site Beijing Central Axis: 'Masterpiece' with unique Eastern charm

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BEIJING, July 30, 2024 /PRNewswire/ -- Chinese people love symmetry, which involves elements mirrored along a central axis, creating a balanced and harmonious composition that is visually appealing as well. The Central Axis is very important to Chinese as balance and harmony are key elements in Chinese philosophy and everyday life.

"Beijing Central Axis: A Building Ensemble Exhibiting the Ideal Order of the Chinese Capital" was named as a World Heritage Site at the 46th session of the World Heritage Committee in New Delhi, India, on Saturday, becoming China's 59th entry on the list.

With over 700 years' of history and urban development, it is now the largest extant imperial capital city in China and a classic model of ancient Chinese urban planning.

The old city of Beijing enjoys a prominent position in the world history of urban planning and development. Global Times Culture Desk reporters took a trip along the Central Axis and its surrounding areas see the important architecture such as palaces, temples and altars, bridges and city gates as well as the people living there and explore how it embodies the Chinese philosophy of "neutrality and harmony."

'Soul' and 'backbone' of Beijing

Known as "the soul and backbone of Beijing" and "the world's longest north-south central axis," the Central Axis in Beijing is an architectural marvel spanning 7.8 kilometers from the Bell and Drum Towers in the north of the city to the Yongdingmen Gate in the south. Consisting of 15 heritage components, it is classified as a "building complex" in terms of cultural heritage.

Established during the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368) and further developed through the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1911), this axis embodies the symmetrical precision and grandiosity that characterized ancient Chinese urban planning.

As praised by famous Chinese architect Liang Sicheng, "The unique sublime and magnificent spatial order of Beijing was generated by this central axis."

Historically, the Central Axis has been the heart of Beijing, housing significant monuments and sites that represent the political, social, economic and urban development of China. Key landmarks such as the Bell and Drum Towers, the Forbidden City, and the Temple of Heaven are aligned along this axis. These structures not only symbolize imperial power or possess religious significance but also highlight the meticulous planning and architectural ingenuity of ancient Chinese society.

The World Heritage Committee recognized that the Central Axis in Beijing fulfills the World Heritage List selection criteria 3 and 4: bear a unique or exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization that is either still living or has vanished; be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural, or technological ensemble, or landscape that illustrates significant stages in human history.

Heritage experts told the Global Times that the uniqueness of the Central Axis in Beijing fills a gap in the World Heritage List regarding urban landscape ideals and the types of core architectural groups in the East, representing an irreplaceable uniqueness and possessing outstanding universal value.

Lü Zhou, director of the National Heritage Center at Tsinghua University, told the Global Times that while many medieval European cities on the World Heritage List evolved organically with influences from religion, commerce, and municipal systems, leading to intricate urban cores, Beijing was uniquely planned and built as an ideal global central city, with the Central Axis at the heart of this meticulously designed urban layout.

Jiang Bo, a professor from the Institute of Cultural Heritage at Shandong University, told the Global Times that the Central Axis in Beijing is a "masterpiece" with a unique Eastern charm in the history of world urban planning.

"The urban planning concept of this north-south central axis has a long history and profound influence, even extending to the Korean Peninsula, Japan, and Vietnam, becoming an Eastern classic in ancient world urban planning," he said.

## Rebirth of an ancient relic

The application for the Central Axis in Beijing as a World Heritage site spanned 12 years. It did not just involve the dedication of experts in the heritage field, but also the enthusiastic participation of the general public, which has been crucial. Volunteer Fan Laiyou is one of them.

As the streetlights flicker on accompanied by a flock of pigeons flying in the sky, Beijing native Fan, who is in his late 60s, starts his routine night patrol along the hutong, or traditional alleyways, snaking around the foot of the Bell and Drum Towers.

Fan and some of his neighbors embarked on volunteer patrols seven years ago, assisting in maintaining the security of the neighborhood and supervising the health of the cultural relics as well as the historical buildings around the Bell and Drum Towers.

"We contact the authorities as soon as we discover any damage to the ancient buildings," Fan told the Global Times.

Residents along the Central Axis like Fan do not carry out these efforts for the money, as in their eyes, they are working to protect their homes.

Public awareness of preserving and cherishing the Central Axis rose greatly after official projects to conserve historical relics and large scale infrastructure in the related areas, including lots of dwellings, were launched in droves.

Fan and his neighbors watched as the nearby buildings and courtyards were renovated one by one and the pavement was replaced by permeable brick. Even the streetlights standing outside their gates were updated to brighter ones. They have been able to completely relish daily life along the Central Axis.

The sustainable development of the axis itself has also been the center of attention. Over 100 cultural heritage restoration projects have been launched along the axis.

Overlooking the city's courtyard houses alongside the Drum Tower where Fan's home is located, the nearly 48-meter-high Bell Tower has been fully restored and open to the public since 2022. The restored Bell Tower incorporates numerous modern facilities, while an immersive digital exhibition provides visitors with a whole picture of the history of the tower.

The human aspect along the axis is not the only issue that has been taken into consideration. Government organizations are also trying to build the Central Axis as a model of a harmonious ecosystem.

The comeback of Beijing swifts, who have witnessed Beijing's historical changes since they started nesting in the original city gatehouses and palace eaves in 1417, is just one example of these efforts. Though human activities had harmed these birds, diverse measures such as establishing a database based on data collected by professionals and amateurs has led to more and more swifts returning to their native city.

#### A lifetime commitment

During the session in India, Li Qun, director of the National Cultural Heritage Administration, stated that the "world heritage" title in 2024 marks another new beginning for China's commitment to the lifetime - management of the Central Axis in Beijing.

"Smart conservation" and "digital displays" are ways to shed light on the sustainability of the Central Axis.

In 2021, a conservation center dedicated to the monitoring, archiving and management of the Central Axis was established. Supported by technology like AI and remote-sensing and mobile signaling techniques, a digital "warning" system was built to monitor for potential hazards caused by people, natural disasters and fires along the Central Axis.

More than 7,000 documents recording the history and engineering of the Central Axis was digitized into an archive.

Zhou Ziyu, the director of the conservation center's monitoring department, told the Global Times that smart technology has boosted the efficiency of managing the heritage site and that traditional paperwork will gradually be replaced by digital means.

"The system will function as it is alive, which means that new data will be added to it every day to make it an encyclopedia of the Beijing Central Axis," Zhou remarked.

In the post-Central Axis era, "value interpretation" and society's participation can keep the heritage site alive, Deng Chao, the director general of the Cultural Relics and Historic Sites of the NCHA, told the Global Times.

Led by Chinese tech giant Tencent, the online project "Central Axis Digital Patrolman" was launched several years ago to engage ordinary people in supervising the heritage site through an online platform. During the second quarter of 2024, around 19,411 registered volunteers uploaded 76,317 patrol photos online.

Over the years, the Central Axis has become a hot cultural belt that has given rise to new landmarks such as the National Stadium, also known as Bird's Nest, and the National Museum For Modern Chinese Scientist, which opened in May.

These urban landmarks show that the more than 700-year-old Central Axis is still able to keep up with the country's modern growth.

"Cultural heritage requires continued and sustained conservation efforts. The Central Axis in Beijing requires generations and generations of experts to commit to it and take care of it with a rigorous mindset and love," Deng told the Global Times.

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