

IT IS A MULTIBILLION-DOLLAR makeover that has seen Beijing totally transformed – the largest remodelling the Chinese capital has had for some 500 years, in fact, since the Forbidden City was built.

While that imperial-era project took decades to finish, the current revamping of Beijing, specifically for this summer's Olympic Games, was completed in a shade under five years, turning the once-staid capital into a glittering showcase for modern architecture. As well as the big-ticket infrastructure projects, the city has also seen the debut of a slew of new hotels, restaurants, bars and clubs to kick-start its once-moribund nightlife scene.

It is unlikely that any capital city has ever undertaken such a mammoth regeneration so quickly, and certainly not in modern times. Among the now-completed projects are the airport terminal, the world's largest by some way, bigger than all Heathrow's terminals, including the new one, put together; the stunning steel Olympic National (Bird's Nest) Stadium where the major Olympic Games ceremonies and athletics events will be held; the blue-tinged Water Cube complex, destined to host the swimming and diving contests; and the titanium-coated National Theatre, dubbed The Egg after its oval shape.

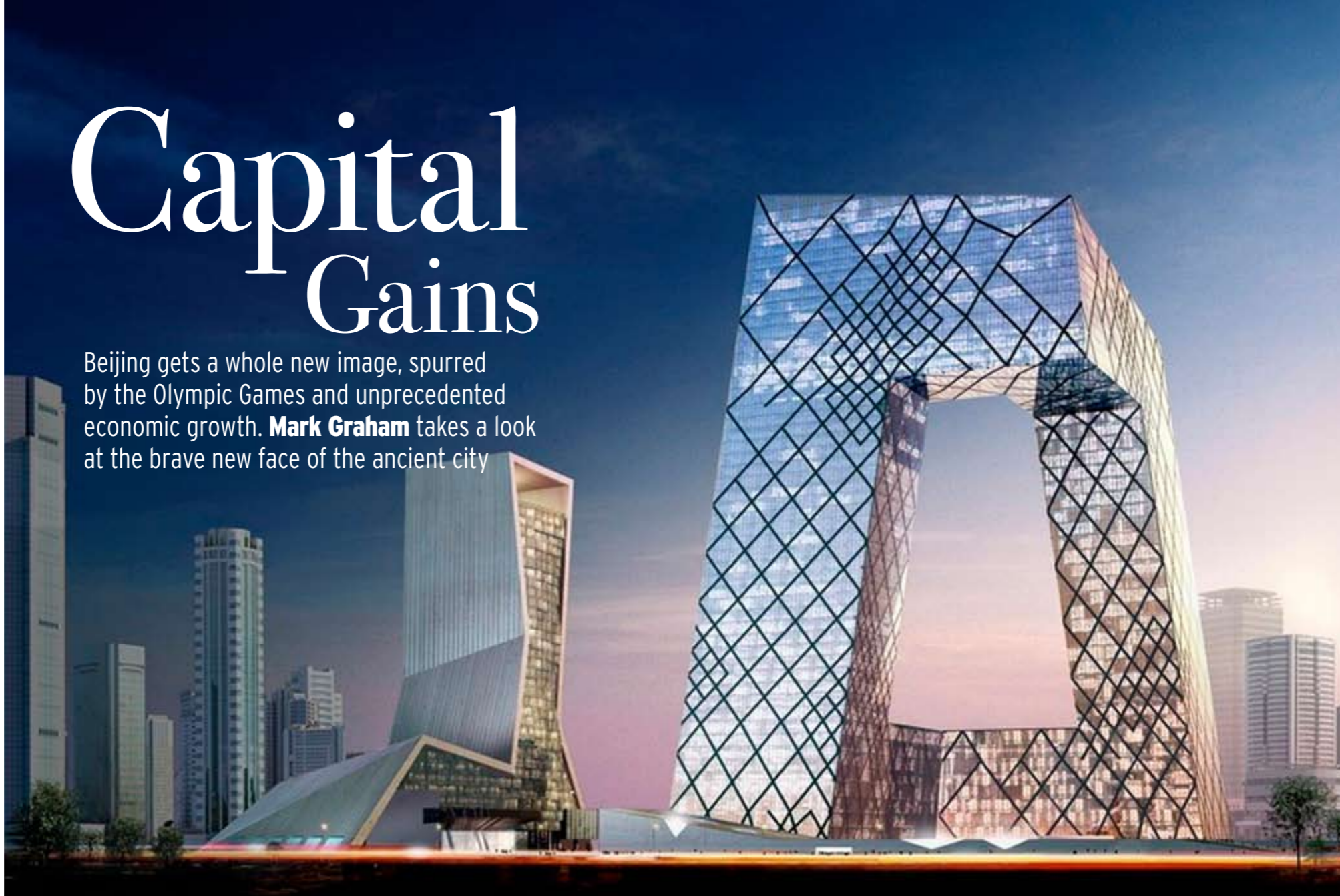
Add to those the wacky, almost-finished CCTV Tower, nicknamed the Trouser Legs for its leaning twin towers, and Beijing can now boast that it has some of the most provocative and creative contemporary architecture anywhere on the planet.

That was always the idea. For China, hosting the Olympic Games was an opportunity to show the world what a dynamic and modern-minded nation it had become. In truth, the old Beijing did not really match that description, overshadowed in recent years by Shanghai's building flurry, and saddled with some real Stalinist monstrosities such as the Great Hall of the People, big and imposing but hardly a structure to make the spirit soar. Other city buildings from that 1950s era are equally dull and uninspiring clunkers.

Demolishing such revolutionary-associated edifices was never an option, so the city sanctioned a programme

# Capital Gains

Beijing gets a whole new image, spurred by the Olympic Games and unprecedented economic growth. **Mark Graham** takes a look at the brave new face of the ancient city



**Above: Impression of Beijing's new CCTV Tower and Television Cultural Centre. Left: Building the Bird's Nest stadium**

that would see some of the world's most free-thinking architects invited to let their imaginations run wild. It has resulted in buildings such as the Olympic National Stadium, a spider-like web of steel that forms a giant bird's nest, a structure that the world is already familiar with long before the games start at the auspicious time of 8pm on 8/08/2008.

That is located on the fringes of the city, but the downtown area has had its fair share of change, too. The most talked-about building is the new CCTV tower, destined to house the state broadcaster, featuring stilt-like towers that lean at giddy angles. It was designed by radical, rule-breaking architect Rem Koolhaas, as was the next-door Television Cultural

Centre, shaped like a giant silver-platform boot from the glam-rock era, which will be home to the new Mandarin Oriental hotel. The building's

odd shape means that half the Mandarin's 241 rooms will have different dimensions, posing headaches for the interior designers. "It is definitely set to be an iconic building," says general manager Pierre Barthes. "There will be nothing like it in the world. Everyone will want to come and see it – and to stay in the hotel just to see what it feels like."

Close by will be the Park Hyatt, due to open in the downtown area's highest building. Other just-finished hotels include the Ritz-Carlton and Marriott, with a Swire Properties venture, The Opposite

House, destined to make its debut later in the summer. The boutique-style hotel is part of the shiny new Village complex in Sanlitun, a district currently known for its down-at-heel bars and restaurants. The idea is to gentrify the area so it lures the monied nouveau riche crowd as well as the current collection of students, backpackers and low-budget expats.

There will certainly be plenty of would-be customers with cash to flash during the late summer. The estimated half-million people expected to descend on the city during the Olympic Games will provide a bonanza for every bar, restaurant and hotel; some could recoup a significant chunk of their investment in the space of a few weeks.

Among the venues certain to be raking in fistfuls of dollars will be Legation Quarter, a marvellous conversion of the century-old former United States embassy compound, located just off Tiananmen Square. Wheeler-dealer American lawyer Handel Lee managed to snag permission to convert it into a lifestyle complex, featuring gourmet restaurants and an art gallery.

Lee, the man behind the hugely successful Three on the Bund project in Shanghai, is confident the swish project – restaurants include Teatro, Maison Boulud and Shiro Matsu – will attract the city's social elite and, probably more importantly in terms of repaying the US\$40 million investment quickly, corporate sponsors looking for prestigious venues to host their Olympic Games parties.

It is far from the only world-class restaurant in a city that was once renowned for being deadly dull. As recently as the late 1980s there were no international-standard restaurants anywhere; the only option was the hotel dining room, where diners would be presented with grubby menus by surly, ragged-uniformed waiters and told that the order cut-off time was 6pm sharp. There was a glimmer of fun to be had in browsing the erratically translated menus, which promised dishes such as rubbery black chicken, double-boiled ox penis soup and special beef gristle.

None of those are ever likely to feature on the menu of hotshot chef Brian McKenna, who presides over the Blu Lobster restaurant. It's located inside the Shangri-La hotel, but McKenna has

carte blanche to run the place how he sees fit; the ebullient Irishman personally supervises every aspect of the operation, using an all-local cooking and waiting crew.

Serious gourmands go giddy with delight at his innovative fare, such as salad with 42 ingredients served with hazelnut mayonnaise, chardonnay jelly and slowly cooked egg and rib of beef with a 24-vegetable garnish. And, of course, the lobster dishes that give the restaurant its name: the chef's lobster sauce is made by extracting meat and juices from the crustaceans using a specially commissioned pure silver Christofle press that cost \$36,000 to make.

"Blu Lobster is about the whole experience, not just coming here to eat," says McKenna. "With my food, I like to take dishes that people know and love and reinvent them. I am into perfection and consistency. I wanted to be involved in something brand new and I was given free rein here to do what I wanted. The staff I have here are as good as you will see anywhere in the world and most of what we use here is locally sourced. We even have a foie gras supplier in Beijing . . . he brings it in and I fry a piece and eat it to make sure it's up to standard."

The other frequently talked-about gourmet dining spot is Whampoa Club, located in a converted courtyard home, or *siheyuan*, one of the few low-rise structures remaining in the financial district. The food is traditional with a twist, dishes such as beancurd and vegetable roll with foie gras terrine, Beijing-style pork and bean jelly, and roasted lamb leg with cumin.

Two similar examples of converting an old building into contemporary usage can be found at the China Club and the Red Capital Club. The Hong Kong Jockey Club has gone one step further by constructing its own hotel-cum-club, built in traditional Chinese architectural style at a cost of some \$100 million. When it opens, it will immediately become the most exclusive place in the capital city – outside the leadership compound of Zhongnanhai – given that access is only via invitation by a club member.

Not that well-heeled Beijingers are short of places to flex their credit cards. One of the most popular late-night spots is Block 8, in the suburbs, a restaurant-



Once non-existent, Beijing's nightlife now sets the pace for the rest of the country. Below: New faces of Beijing

MARY DENNIS

club known for the sound of popping champagne corks. Partner Sebastien Noat says that during the first five months of operation, the bar shifted 6,000 bottles of Moët & Chandon at \$80 a go. "Beijing people like to go out," he observes. "There are always clubs that are full every night of the week."

At the other end of the nightlife scale is Le Baie Des Anges, a French wine bar located in the unlikely setting of a traditional *hutong* (alleyway) building, near Hou Hai lake. It is a tiny and convivial place run by two brothers from the southern French city of Nice, featuring well-priced wines and occasional live music.

Their compatriot Philippe Starck designed the city's most glamorous nightclub, Lan Club, which is continuing to wow one and all. Even by the Frenchman's standards of wackiness, this is a restaurant of jaw-dropping excess – the cavernous 60,000-sq-ft space is dotted with a seemingly haphazard collection of fixtures and fittings that include plush red velvet sofas, gold chairs presided over by soaring gold eagles, old-master-style paintings hanging at odd angles, glass cupboards stuffed with cans of tuna and tented areas that serve as private dining enclaves.

Owner Zhang Lan is opening a similar club in Shanghai, just off the Bund



promenade, which in itself marks a major shift of emphasis – the capital city bringing its nightlife concepts to its bustling rival, once considered the most happening of Chinese cities.

No more. Beijing is casting a large and ever-growing shadow over the east-coast port. Shanghai, which lays claim to be the fashion capital of the nation, was passed over in favour of Beijing by Lane Crawford when it was deciding where to site its new \$40 million uber-store.

It was a logical move. Beijing, for now at least, is going through a spell of thrilling change. It already has the best preserved ancient architecture of any Asian capital – the Great Wall, Forbidden City and Temple of Heaven are the prime spots – and can now boast a contemporary collection that is as inventive as any city in the world. ■



The Park Hyatt

Given the ever-worsening traffic situation in Beijing, opting for a hotel close to the centre can be a real time saver.

Some of the city's prime properties are within strolling distance of Tiananmen Square and the adjoining Forbidden City, meaning visitors are spared the unpleasant experience of sitting in a smelly cab in heavy traffic.

The closest of all is the **Raffles Beijing** ([www.beijing.affles.com](http://www.beijing.affles.com)), which is actually housed in part of the old Beijing Hotel, a cavernous, grimly utilitarian building. The Raffles group

took on the challenge of making its part of the building a five-star haven, introducing Singaporean levels of comfort and service.

A little further to the east is the 825-room **Grand Hyatt** ([beijing.grand.hyatt.com](http://beijing.grand.hyatt.com)), a well bedded-in property with a constantly buzzing lobby, always full of people wheeling and dealing. Its Made in China restaurant, specialising in duck dishes cooked in an open-plan kitchen, is one of the best in the city; likewise Redmoon, which trebles as a bar, sushi-counter and cigar lounge, is a hugely popular late-night spot.



The Peninsula

A five-minute walk away is **The Peninsula** ([www.pensinsula.com](http://www.pensinsula.com)), one of the pioneering five-stars in Beijing and the first in the country to offer guests the option of travelling by Rolls-Royce, a real novelty back in the early 1990s. The 525-room hotel has had a recent refit, ready to take on the raft of five-star newcomers.

Likewise with the **St Regis** ([www.stregis.com/beijing](http://www.stregis.com/beijing)), a 273-room hotel that exudes luxury and refinement in an English-country-mansion kind of way. Its Press Club Bar, which has whisky, cigars and occasional live jazz, is a popular evening hangout.

The eastern end of Jianguomen – a couple of kilometres from Tiananmen Square – is home to one of the city's long-established favourites, the **China World** ([www.shangri-la.com](http://www.shangri-la.com)), a Shangri-La managed hotel that is part of a giant office-shopping complex. The 716-room hotel has been in operation for nigh on two decades, meaning its systems run smoothly and efficiently.

But it is about to face serious competition. **The Park Hyatt** and **Mandarin Oriental** are both due to open in the immediate vicinity, with the **JW Marriott** and **Ritz-Carlton** a subway stop away. At the other end of town, in the newly created Financial Street, there is a cluster of recently opened hotels including another Ritz. The spate of openings is great news for autumn visitors. When the Olympic circus leaves town, there are certain to be lots of very sweet deals from September onwards.