

# GIS for Balance

Beijing's characteristic, narrow alleyways called *hā'tong* are vanishing at an unimaginable rate. With the 2008 Olympics on the horizon, these old walled residential neighbourhoods must make way for high-rise apartment buildings, offices and hotels. Over the past six years an estimated 1,500 to two thousand *hā'tongs*, some dating back to the Middle Ages, have been demolished. The homes of sometimes hundreds of Beijing families at a time are disappearing overnight, the inhabitants being shifted into shiny new flats. For the people themselves this is almost always a change for the better. Living in the *hā'tong* means a lot of people in very small space and no privacy; the accommodation is cold and draughty in the winter, hot in the summer and muddy in the spring.

But the downside of the re-housing looms. Protesters have already found a platform in the media and on the internet to voice pleas for the preservation of centuries-old heritage. They point to Beijing already having lost more than a thousand temples and the medieval city wall in the last fifty years and call it unforgivable to demolish the *hā'tong* for the sake of economy.

On the other hand, a city that doesn't renew itself is a dead city. Amsterdam in The Netherlands, and Bruges in Belgium, have become almost open-air museums. Their perfect preservation may be attributed to more than a hundred years of economic standstill. Circumstances for the citizen in such times are often pretty bad. The disappearing *hā'tong* show the enormous strength and power of renewal of the Chinese economy and are a sign of improved living conditions and welfare.

But still, a bit more balance would be good. More caution and well thought-through decision making over the past ten years would have preserved Beijing as a more beautiful and characteristic city than augured right now. And that goes for many other cities, past and present, and most definitely not only in China. Integrated MIS-GIS could be a great tool in guaranteeing such caution for the future. A Management Information System (MIS) is a computer-based programme that helps managers organise, predict outcomes, evaluate decisions and so run their departments smoothly. MIS integrated with a GIS makes the geographical component visible in the decision-making process: see "Integrating GIS and MIS" by Sajeevan G, Sameer Ailawar and Sunil Chhillar in this issue of GIM International.

Use of integrated MIS-GIS could hugely have helped to preserve the *hā'tong* of Beijing. The speedy development of such systems could greatly enhance attempts at many beautiful sites all over the world to find a balance between preservation and equally necessary economic growth to help the, often impoverished, citizen living there.

Durk Haarsma, publisher, [durk.haarsma@reedbusiness.nl](mailto:durk.haarsma@reedbusiness.nl)

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