This brief essay explores the relatively recent proliferation of what are commonly referred to as civic beautification scaffold-wraps or graphic landscapes in the sign industry. This trend in outdoor media seems to have first popularized in Europe and has entered the everyday texture of cities across the globe—and more to the point of my interest here—in urban China. Most practically, these billboard-like fences or structural wraps act to separate, beautify and make safe spaces of construction, projecting uninterrupted views of urban space and allowing for business as usual. Sensationally associated with environmental art, like Christo’s wrapping of the Reichstag building in Berlin, these beautification panels are indicative of changes in outdoor media industries and suggest important points of translation, both spatial and historical, in the process of de/re-construction and massive urban change in cities like Beijing. In what follows, I gesture toward the global relevance of urban beautification wraps before moving on to sketch out some uses of the screens in Olympic-era Beijing.

Screen Culture and Urban Change

As a starting point, it is important to note that civic beautification panels are directly linked to earlier forms of urban visual culture. However, these urban screens do more than point to the way older screen technologies persist in the contemporary urban landscape, they also suggest the way screen-print culture is radically reshaped by the digital technologies often thought to have taken their place. Framed in this way, the coexistence of myriad forms of sign and screen culture outside, on the city-street, point to fresh questions and problems for approaching the media urban field. As one media consultant notes:

Outdoor advertising used to be billboards, kiosks and bus shelter panels, but now with large format, high resolution wide-bed printers, the realm of outdoor is wide open to printing anything large and putting it almost anywhere.

Among the new forms of urban signage made possible by innovations in digital photography and the relative low cost of wide-bed printing is the use of large-format vinyl graphics to shield and re-imagine large spaces of construction. Commonly appearing as construction-site fencing or building and scaffolding covers, this form of urban beautification is particularly associated with restoration or demolition and reconstruction projects in high-traffic and culturally or politically significant heritage areas (see image 1). What frequently distinguishes this type of outdoor media from related forms of screen culture is that in most cases—as with the Beijing examples explored below—the surfaces serve a civic and decidedly non-commercial function. That is to say, the panels are often associated with sites of cultural renovation or public infrastructure where commercial advertising banners are inappropriate.
and unwelcome. This, for instance, is certainly the case with much of the urban branding of Beijing in the period leading up to the 2008 Olympics.

It is interesting to examine, then, the interplay between global media industries and urban renewal on the one hand, and the local or national practices employing urban beautification landscapes on the other. In Italy, to take one national case, the large format print industry has responded to the need for beautification and protection around much visited historical sites. As Mauro Oliva, a director of the digital print company ExtraLarge Italia, states:

Oliva’s comments suggest the importance of on-site visual representations in translating changes in the urban body. In this context, demolition and construction are more than public eyesores and instead, signify serious threats to urban vision and memory systems, not to mention tourism revenues. The blue corrugated fence and the black mesh scaffolds that commonly surround construction sites, while protecting and marking off these zones, fail to fulfill this two-fold task of attraction and distraction, whereby the panels both stand in for and cover over the often traumatic reworkings of cultural space.

Interestingly, many cities have begun to require the use of beautification screens at certain sites. For instance, Oliva notes that such civic landscaping is regulated by a split-percentage system in Rome and Florence, where 50% of the space is allocated for advertisements and at least 50% of the space “must be a reproduction of the building” itself; he continues, “I have noticed that when we work for private and prestigious entities, they do not care about advertising; they only want to reproduce the actual facade of the building. They consider it very elegant and inspirational to be ‘seen’ correctly.”

In terms of our interest in translation, this first example suggests a representational mode whereby the screen literally stands in for the site it obscures. In this instance, rather than merely acting to disappear a blip in the urban landscape, the screen itself becomes an object of attraction, even while
covering over unsightly renovation. And instead of opening up a window onto another space, these mesh cover-ups simulate, almost indexically, the facades they envelop.

A second use of beautification screens can be found in the façade-wrap mounted on the Massachusetts State Capitol in early 2001. Located in the Beacon Hill neighborhood of Boston, the Capitol building is an important stop on the Freedom Trail and the African American Heritage Trail and thus remained a destination even during its messy refurbishment. However, unlike the reproduction mode suggested above, the Mass Capitol building was wrapped in an enlarged digital photograph of a statue of the Massachusetts 54th regiment, one of the first official black units recruited for the Civil War. In contrast to the simulation above, the focus of the Boston screen is more closely aligned with particular cultural imaginaries and memories. As Louis Brill notes, “now when tourists arrive, although the building is off limits, they see the graphic, which they can photograph and still have a sense of the building’s presence.” Interestingly, in this space recreating the front of the State Capitol was unnecessary; in its place, the photograph of the 54th becomes a temporary monument, providing visitors a significant historical cue as they walk through American history.

My interest with these simple examples is to begin to suggest the global relevance of this form of signage to sites of preservation and urban change, as well as the dual function of attention-distraction involved with such screening, and screening-out. These illustrations gesture to the everyday politics of representing cultural space during moments of transformation, whereby PVC images or mesh wraps act to translate and project cultural memories and aspirations onto the vinyl screen.

**Projecting Beijing**

The above sketches, among many other possible examples, highlight the interaction of (globalizing) outdoor media industries and site-specific contexts and set the stage for the following tentative exploration of civic beautification panels in Beijing. This discussion relies on my experience as a researcher in Beijing during 2007-2008, and in particular, a media arts collaboration documenting screen culture in the city. One aspect of that project focuses on screen practices in particular neighborhoods in Beijing, tracing the transition from the sidewalk television set to the billboard and large-screen video display. Given the intensity and scale of both demolition-reconstruction and tourism in cities like Beijing, beautification panels and related forms of signage—both civic and commercial—saturate many parts of the city. In particular, the panels tend to appear in heavy-traffic and high-profile areas around (1) infrastructural projects like the new subway lines or Olympic stadia, (2) in heritage areas and surrounding the preservation (often meaning the demolition and then reconstruction) of historic neighborhoods, such as the Qianmen neighborhood south of Tiananmen Square, and (3) around commercial developments, such as shopping centers and restaurant/bar districts. The examples I pursue below fall mostly into the first two categories and are limited to related civic or municipal practices. Though, of course, advertising and commercial projections are also widespread (see image 2).

To understand the ubiquity of civic billboards in Beijing, it is first necessary to consider the uniqueness of the postsocialist urban landscape in China. Here, I borrow and rephrase Benedict Anderson’s well-rehearsed discussion of print-capitalism and suggest the term screen-postsocialism. The term postsocialism refers to the complex and hybrid transformations in post-reform cultural and economic life, which in China, of course, includes the continued rule of the communist government. As Jason McGrath charts in his recent book *Postsocialist Modernity*, the shift in Chinese cultural logic beginning in the 1990s is a result of the move from a largely socialized to a marketized mode of cultural production. He writes:

not only have the forces of marketization resulted in a new cultural logic in China, but this development is part of a global condition of postsocialist modernity and must be understood in the context of the history of the global capitalist system, which not only transforms China but also is thereby transformed.
Screen-postsocialism thus refers to the relationship between the presence of screen culture and the nation-making project in the contemporary Chinese context and changing global sphere.

To give some sense of that cultural scene, let’s look briefly at trends in urban signage under the centrally controlled, yet highly centrifugal, mixed economy. By the 1990s, entrepreneurial capitalism and consumer culture had exploded in urban centers in China, recalling earlier urban modernities in the country. This marketization was replicated in the radical expansion of outdoor media and advertising in places like Beijing. To take a popular example, Feng Xiaogang’s 2001 film *Big Shot’s Funeral* satirizes this transformation—pointing to the real encroachment of advertising onto traditional and communist values and spaces. Hennessy XO ads on the Avenue of Eternal Peace and the 1996 Land Rover campaign in the Forbidden City are two good examples of Beijing’s commercializing landscape in the 1990s.\(^8\)

The proliferation of billboard advertisements, particularly those ads highlighting the growing gap between rich and poor, however, began to come under attack by the early 2000s. In 2004, an earlier ban on commercial billboards in Tiananmen Square was expanded to include a host of other cultural and political sites.\(^9\) And by 2007, Beijing Mayor Wang Qishan launched a broad attack against onscreen public excess. The assault was related to both billboard luxury and Olympic branding rights—demanding that the government both control urban visuality and ensure sponsorship rights. For instance, as *Newsweek* reported in October 2007:

> in the course of the past decade, high-end boutiques sprang up along the avenues, German sedans started prowling the streets, and billboards have appeared flaunting “ultra-exclusive” “luxury” goods fit for “tycoons.” INDULGE IN A SMALL VILLA, read one; BECOME A FOREIGN DIPLOMAT’S LANDLORD, exclaimed another.\(^10\)

In an interview, Mayor Wang complained that the opulent signs “encourage luxury and self-indulgence...
which are beyond the reach of low-income groups, and [are] therefore not conducive to harmony in the capital.”11 As a result, hundreds of billboards throughout the city—including some “90-odd” billboards along the airport expressway—were dismantled, and as the Wall Street Journal reported in 2007, no new billboards have been licensed since 2003; the goal, according to one city official at the time was to “reorder the urban landscape.”12

The distinctive spatiality of the postsocialist city, in addition to having a particular historical relationship with propaganda signage, which, of course, also continues to permeate streetlife, has thus had to balance competing political and economic interests in outside media. In this context of image control and radical urban change, the civic beautification panels become key sites to project cultural anxieties and aspirations. As suggested above, it is the sheer density of beautification panels in Beijing’s everyday urban landscape that immediately brings them to one’s attention. But more than their ubiquity, the central management of the screens is also critical to their particular presence.

First, graphic landscapes tend to be regulated by municipal districts within the city, generally requiring such signage to warn, protect and beautify public spaces. One Beijing project manager remarked that it was largely up to the construction team to choose the images projected at a given site—though advertisements, not including public service announcements, are forbidden.13 This image control, however, clearly follows a set of implicit guidelines as specific types of images mark particular locations, while other sites have no images at all. What’s more, at key moments the whole of the city’s civic billboard space can be made to come together to strike a single chord. The 2006 Sino–African Summit—projecting images of the Chinese imagination of Africa and development slogans—and the 2008 Olympic Games are good examples of such visual dispersion.

Qianmen Redevelopment

In closing, I want to briefly consider the role of graphic landscaping in the redevelopment of Qianmen (see image 3). This example, of course, is far from comprehensive, but suggests a few of the key threads in my larger project examining outdoor media in Beijing. Qianmen, meaning “front gate,” is a popular neighborhood just south of Tiananmen Square with a long history and connection to Beijing’s traditional inner city. In 2005, the Qianmen Demolition and Reconstruction Project began, relocating many of the area’s 80,000 residents to the suburbs and dramatically transforming the
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old commercial district’s courtyard houses and shops into a Disney-ish set for Beijing’s many tourists. Image three depicts the walling-in of the large hutong. Off screen, former residents look-on as their family neighborhood is covered-over and decorative fencing and a large PVC screen are installed. The vinyl representations are in tune with traditional landscape painting and present views of old Beijing. Importantly, these projections also document particular urban and modern aspirations, underlining the alternate claims on the city. The 2008 documentary A Disappearance Foretold, for instance, focuses on resilient tenants who refuse to leave their traditional homes and accept the poor reimbursement terms.

By Spring 2008, the beautification panels surrounding the area of reconstruction illustrate the new face of Qianmen (see image 4). Unlike the initial attempt to render the demolition and reconstruction project invisible, the latter screens simulate the potential of this future district, highlighting the connection between the city and its representation. The screens blend photographic realism—in some cases the beautification images literally map the emerging structures behind the wall—and the promise of Beijing’s historically rooted modernity. And as with example above, the screens function as temporary attractions—attracting many visitors to pose for pictures along the walls. The beautification panels in Qianmen, further, echo such uses across the city and, in particular, signal our attention to the peculiar problem of managing visuality at moments of spatial and historical change.

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Notes

3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Collaboration with photographer Graham Bury. See our website for more images: http://www.projectionsproject.com/.
11 Ibid.
Image 4: View from the north of Qianmen as it nears completion. Photograph by Graham Bury.