

# Dislocation, Disconnection, Dilemma: Exploring Urban | Rural Disparity in Contemporary Mongolia

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**ABSTRACT:** Informal settlements present thorny challenges for environmental designers, politicians, civil servants and, most directly, residents. Mongolia's ger (felt-lined tent/yurt) districts, unique manifestations of slums, provided the focus for the present ethnographic and environmental design research. Problems of the ger districts, and difficulties of finding innovative and potent vehicles with which to improve quality of life therein, are many and complex. Mongolia's informal settlements are most notably found in Ulaan Baatar (UB), the capital city of over one million inhabitants. Upwards of sixty percent of UB's population live in the sub-standard conditions of ger districts. The current research analyzed context and conditions in Mongolia, including comparative ethnographic study of residents of city (urban dwellers) and country (pastoral nomads). Mongolia's long history includes rich traditions of nomadic life – an existence which sees herdsmen move regularly with their animals and which deeply respects the environment, celebrates spirituality and demonstrates sustainability. Upon migration to the city many values, behaviors and conditions shift dramatically. In sharp contrast to the environmentally-oriented and ecologically-respectful existence of the herdsmen, ger district living highlights serious concerns including hygiene, health, security, comfort and happiness. The researcher, through immersion within the various sub-cultures, developed thick descriptions and colorful narratives aimed at characterizing lifestyles, values, obstacles and opportunities.

For over a decade the author has ethnographically researched and extensively delineated the lives of both urban ger district dwellers and rural nomadic herdsmen. This work has been a fundamental aspect of, and necessary complement to, ongoing design and planning work aimed at improving quality of life in Mongolia including and urgently within the perplexing urban ethos. The present paper presents compelling narratives documenting life in city and country, considers the immense challenges of the status quo and explores ideas, innovations and opportunities for moving in new and promising directions.

**KEYWORDS:** Mongolia, ger-districts, culture, sustainability, ethnography

## OVERTURE



**Figures 1 + 2 + 3:** Ulaan Baatar Ger Districts in Center City + Several Images from Outskirts (Source: Author 2013)

*A slum is defined as a group of individuals living under the same roof lacking one or more of the following conditions: access to improved water; access to improved sanitation facilities; sufficient living area, not overcrowded; structural quality/durability of dwellings; and security of tenure. This is an operational definition that reflects conditions that characterize slums in the world. (United Nations Habitat 2003)*

Informal settlements, in many cases characterized as slums, are home to a significant portion of the world's population. With limited formal land planning and poor quality from an architecture and construction perspective, such informal settlements routinely develop as unhygienic, chaotic, under-managed and often unsafe environments. In many instances densities are high, infrastructure is weak or absent, and living conditions are sub-standard. Attracted to urban centers for many reasons, including most commonly the lure of employment, slum dwellers quickly become caught in an inescapable cycle where money is scarce, demands are high and difficult housing / lifestyles become accepted. While conditions are often problematic, there are many dimensions of community that surface and prove to introduce some order and routine into daily lives. For example, the presence of water stations prove rally points for members of a given community. The range of conditions and types of informal settlements is wide and intensive, varying based on such factors as geography, culture, climate, resources and economy.

The present research focuses on the ger (felt-lined tent/yurt) districts, or informal settlements, of Mongolia with a focus on said districts within the capital city of Ulaan Baatar. Mongolia is a mysterious isolated country intensely locked between Russia and China. With a population of approximately 2.5 million and a land area (17th largest country in the world) larger than Western Europe, Mongolia stands as one of the least dense nations on the globe. It also is undeniably one of the poorest, with over a third of the population living below the poverty line (one half of these people residing in urban areas). Mongolia is ranked 118<sup>th</sup> in the world with respect to the Human Development Indicator. While there are small settlements dotting the landscape, the country is largely comprised of communal land inhabited by nomadic families. Standing in stark contrast to the rural landscape is the capital city of Urga (now Ulaan Baatar). With a burgeoning population, Ulaan Baatar (UB) is a city rich in complexity, diverse in culture, yet rife with challenges. Leading the pack in terms of urban problems are the informal ger settlements which wrap the city proper. Recent accounts place the ger settlement population at almost 60% of the urban count. These sprawling settlements are informally planned, lack infrastructure, and present massive dilemmas from a quality of life/health perspective.

Over the past decade the author, a member of the Union of Mongolian Architects, has ethnographically researched and extensively documented the lives of both the urban ger district dwellers and the rural traditional nomadic herdsmen. This work has been a fundamental aspect of, and necessary complement to, ongoing design and planning work aimed at improving quality of life in Mongolia including and urgently within Ulaan Baatar's remarkable ger districts. This paper, presenting compelling narratives documenting life in both the countryside and in the informal settlements, considers the immense challenges of the status quo and explores ideas, innovations and opportunities for moving in new and promising directions.



**Figure 4 + 5:** Ulaan Baatar Ger District Aerial (Source: GoogleMaps 2013) + District Excerpt Sketch by Author

## BACKGROUND + CONDITIONS

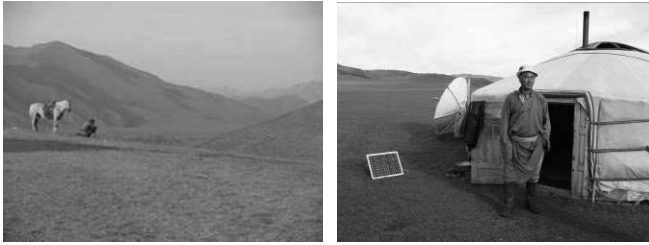
*In the center of the ger, directly underneath the roof ring, is the cooking fire. In the early twentieth century, a type of iron hearth called tulga was used. A large cauldron is placed on top of the tulga, and the smoke from the fire rises through the roof ring. The tulga is the symbol of the home, and many aspects of fire worship, with which it is closely associated, survive today. (Bikaes 2001)*

Our human journey, and human condition, is richly colored and deeply varied. A major objective of the present research work was to 'paint a picture' of life in Mongolia. While the focus of this research primarily considers the urban areas, most notably the ger districts of Ulaan Baatar, it was nonetheless deemed essential to concurrently explore and delineate the more traditional, rurally-based nomadic lifestyle. It is important to understand that many, though not certainly all, of the ger district residents come directly from herding backgrounds. Many residents of these slum areas have arrived to Ulaan Baatar from the countryside following years, if not generations, of nomadic existence. As these newcomers arrive to the city they are commonly ill-prepared and inadequately equipped to succeed. With novel circumstances, unclear regulations, and an atmosphere of chaos, disorder and at times corruption, adaptation to urban life is often difficult and turbulent.

Over many years of research the author spent extensive field time with both urban and rural dwellers. Equipped with a set of 'city' and 'country' base questions, the researcher observed, queried, explored and examined a broad spectrum of issues that together illustrate key Mongolian lifestyles. Deploying ethnographic methods and aiming to collect and generate 'thick' descriptions, the researcher often expanded and navigated beyond the base questions in order to gain clarity and to build better awareness around activities, values and traditions. As a part of the immersive experiences the researcher often participated in national pursuits (such as horse riding), partook in local cuisine (such as chanasan makh; boiled meat and innards), and lived within the communities (such as sleeping in gers on the Asian steppe). While this approach in no way placed the author into a position of authority on Mongolian life, it did serve to enrich understanding so as to better inform thinking around the development of a more appropriate, sensitive and meaningful design and planning framework for the Mongolian context. This direct immersive experience also served to build respect and appreciation for other ways of seeing the world, of interacting with fellow beings, and of valuing life and our place in the ecosystem.

It is important to understand how attitudes and approaches relate and vary between country and city dwellers. In many cases concerns are shared, yet in many ways behaviors were seen to vary dramatically. It can be argued that much changes, and indeed much is lost, in the transition from country to city living. Many aspects of life that are clearly valued in rural existence seem to be discounted or abandoned through taking root in the urban fabric. Reasons underlying these differences are many and complex. While the present paper does not aim to fully explain (e.g., sociologically or psychologically) the reasons for and nature of such differences and losses, the ethnographic portraits certainly convey rich and colorful information shedding light on the issues. The researcher crafted concise 'vignettes' that attempt to characterize ways of life, values and traditions, etc. These vignettes are not cast as universal, extensive or definitive, but rather aim to provide a limited and albeit somewhat personal glimpse into the researcher's experiences, thoughts and interpretations gained through the culturally immersive field component of the present work. Following each vignette (i.e., country and city) short excerpts from actual interviews are presented to provide further color, context and 'personal' aspects of the ethnographic endeavors.

## COUNTRY VIGNETTE: LIFE ON THE STEPPE



**Figures 6 + 7:** Nomadic Herdsman with His Horse + Herdsman with Ger + Energy Systems  
(Source: Author 2013)

For thousands of years Mongolian people have lived as nomads on the Asia steppe. Living in gers and moving around in response to available grazing lands, the herdsman's way of life proves highly connected to nature with a deep respect for the land. They live off their herds, wasting nothing. They burn dung as fuel. In some cases modern herdsman experiment with new technologies such as solar panels, micro-wind turbines, televisions and cellular phones. Often their transportation is provided by their animals, although with increasing frequency one finds herdsman with cars, trucks and motorcycles. They accumulate only what they can carry, knowing that the nomadic lifestyles requires common movement in search of feeding lands. Through the present research, and the ethnographic efforts therein, a picture was shaped of the present day Mongolian herdsman. Primary aspects of the lifestyle center on the ger, or tent, that pragmatically provides shelter and symbolically represents the cosmos. The ger sits gently on the landscape with its door always directed to the south. At the north of the ger resides a Buddhist shrine, a constant reminder of the crucial place of spirituality in the culture. The ger is organized internally with sleeping, cooking and living areas. Food is ritualistically prepared and stored. The ger as a living machine is readily adjusted in response to climate and circumstances. As winter approaches additional layers of felt are added to ensure protection from the severe chilling winds. As a people the herdsman are welcoming and open. That said, they have clear social order and well developed skills for survival on the harsh steppe. Over the period of the present field studies the researcher was impressed with the remarkable connections of the herdsman to the environment, of their understanding of their role in the ecosystem, of their respect for nature and life, of their joy of family and respect for others, of their commitment to a life of hard work and honest living, and of their happiness and pleasure. Seldom was a herdsman heard to say that s/he wanted to abandon nomadic life to move to the city. Rather, comments were commonly voiced expressing the hardships and difficulties of rural living yet underscoring its undeniable benefits and rich rewards.

### EXCERPTS FROM A COUNTRY INTERVIEW:

#### Countryside east of UB

- *Man age 59 years old.*
- *Originally from western Mongolia.*
- *How long in this area? Approximately eight years. Why did you move here? Western Mongolia is too far from big markets. Also wanted children to attend university in UB.*
- *Three people live in ger. Husband, wife and a son (with job in UB).*
- *The family visits UB quite often, perhaps two-three times per month. Why? Father owns a wooden house and yard in UB. Youngest son works for the railway and lives in the father's UB house.*
- *He has five children all together. Four of them live together in his UB house. Son with railway. Daughter with railway. Daughter a university teacher. Daughter who does sewing.*
- *Animals? Total herd is about 350. 270 sheep. 70 goats. Then horses.*

- *How is life in the countryside? He cares greatly about his animals. Likes freedom of being a herdsman.*
- *Sells meat. Making some profit. It's important to support his children.*
- *He moves his ger a minimum of four times per year. When does he move? Seasonally. He checks lunar calendar to decide right date and time. Follows lunar calendar for many decisions.*
- *He owns a quite new truck.*
- *Uses the truck for moving the ger. Also sometimes uses it to go to the city.*
- *Each day he wakes at 5am then goes to sleep around 11pm. Summer days are very long.*
- *At present he does not own a TV although he had one before.*
- *Has a small solar panel that powers a light in the ger.*
- *Has a mobile phone. Charges the phone using the cigarette lighter in his truck.*
- *Ger? He has two gers. Uses the smaller one for more mobile travel. He has had his large ger for about 37 years. The smaller one is over 60 years old – he received it from his grandparents.*
- *Small ger includes a Buddhist shrine.*
- *Democracy versus socialist period? Not a lot of change for herdsmen. But today prices for goods are increasing. University fees are very high. One million T (Mongolian Tugrik is the currency in Mongolia). This is very hard.*
- *More people are building fences today in Mongolia. And creating plantations. Such actions are taking away valuable herding land. This is a real problem.*
- *People are also digging around and ruining streams. It seems there is less good water today in Mongolia. Worsening water quality. This is hard on animals.*
- *Future? When he is older it will become more difficult to care for the animals. Perhaps then he would consider a move to the city.*
- *Will a move to the city be hard? Yes, for sure. He is not looking forward to this possibility. He knows there is bad air and a poor life in the city.*

#### CITY VIGNETTE: URBAN DWELLING



**Figures 8 + 9:** Ger Settlement in Ulaan Baatar + Young Girl within Fenced Yard In Ger District (Source: Author 2013)

Many of the residents in the ger districts come from rural nomadic backgrounds. As is the case with slums areas around the planet, many arrived to the city in search of work and a better life. Despite such dreams the conditions of the city, and life in the ger districts, proves demanding, difficult and often depressingly disappointing. Homes in the many ger districts of Ulaan Baatar are varied in size, organization and definition. Many yards have one or more gers as the primary residence. In some cases, usually where dwellers are more established and with some means, yards contain so-called wooden houses (in some cases they might be constructed with concrete, bricks and/or metal). Most yards display ambiguity and disorder as regards positioning of the fence and size of the property contained. In some cases local governmental administration and policy plays a role, often closer to the urban core. At the peri-urban edges policy and order assume a background role as the city attempts to informally accommodate an influx of migrants. Typically many individuals live within a ger district dwelling. In some cases multiple families live within a yard (khashaa), and commonly multiple generations of a given family dwell together. Yards are routinely protected with high wooden and/or metal fences, with doors, dogs and locks providing a heightened level of security. Pit

latrines are dug nearby yet downwind of gers as migrants arrive to the city. Once a given pit is filled a new pit is dug in the yard, often adjacent to the initial pit. In some areas of the city, most notably the inner areas, some yards are so replete with spent latrines there is no more available land and the full extent of the property is contaminated. Typically electrical wires are dropped into ger districts (or unofficially spliced in) with residents paying the government for services. Beyond electricity few services are available. Infrastructure is desperately lacking. Wooden slats are burned in open stoves inside dwellings in the summer. In winter dirty coal is burned, resulting in unimaginable air pollution. Seldom in the city is use of alternative energy witnessed – such as solar panels, wind turbines or biofuels. Water is a major issue in the ger districts, with clean water purchased at local kiosks (water is trucked to these kiosks by the government). Often ger district residents need to travel significant distances to fetch water. In some cases wheeled carts are used to move the water yet in other cases (and commonly) the researcher saw very heavy canisters being moved manually (and often by young children). In the transition from the country life to the city herds are sold off, resulting in the need for food, fuel, and other goods to be purchased or traded in Ulaan Baatar. Garbage is a major problem in the ger districts, with trash piled in leftover spaces, collected by the city in some cases (in best case scenarios once or twice a month), left to rot in many instances and in other circumstances set afire. Public space is scarce in the ger districts and where found is often ill kept and unmanaged. In numerous instances the researcher witnessed ger district residents urinating and/or defecating on the streets of these communities. Public toilets are non-existent. Throughout the interviews conducted in the ger districts of Ulaan Baatar a strong and overwhelming sense of hopelessness was expressed. Concerns about health, safety, isolation, fear and disconnection were commonly voiced. In very few cases in the city interviews did the researcher note happiness expressed about the present situation nor optimism raised about the future. More often than not there was serious concern about a very poor quality of life, a desperation regarding chaos and disorder, and a real apathy about individual ability to make any positive difference.

#### **EXCERPTS FROM A CITY INTERVIEW:**

##### UB northeastern area

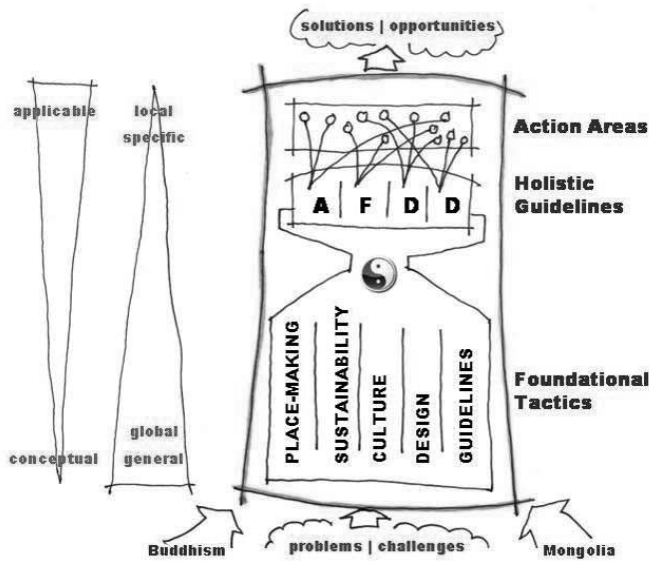
- *Woman age 53 years old.*
- *Lives with three of four children – boy (19), girl (18), girl (14) - and her father (age 90). Older boy lives in South Gobi.*
- *She retired one year ago. Was in telecommunications in rural town for over 30 years.*
- *Moved to UB one year ago. Why? To have children closer to schools.*
- *UB. She likes living here – a lot of work opportunities.*
- *Big yard is owned by relatives. She lives on property in exchange for helping to guard yard.*
- *Ger areas. Too many street children. High unemployment. High alcoholism.*
- *University fees are too high in Mongolia.*
- *Many people in UB don't seem to care about things.*
- *Her father was a herdsman.*
- *In Mongolia today the high ranking people are taking all the money. Very hard for poor people to survive.*
- *It is much harder now than in the socialist era.*
- *Too much unemployment now. Limits of age are a problem – government is forcing people to retire too early. Then very hard to live.*
- *Water supply is very far away.*
- *Fuel is expensive. Very far away.*
- *Democracy has meant wide range of treatment of people. Varied quality and often unfair.*
- *Need state supplied water delivered directly to houses.*
- *Mother and daughter (14) collect water – approximately one bus station away (800m). Fetch water every day.*
- *Buy fuel from the landowner.*
- *Electricity fees are expensive and increasing.*

- *Food. Mostly buy in downtown area. Buy meat from the countryside.*
- *Usually have to take the bus to get places, such as downtown.*
- *Public transportation is very poor.*
- *14 year old daughter – stays at home and helps mother. Likes to attend some activities with friends, but often quite far away.*
- *Making food to sell in city center every day.*
- *Safety. Not so safe outside the fence.*
- *Medical treatment. She has not visited yet. It is quite far away.*
- *Ger. Quite good to live in, but would prefer a two-three room house.*
- *Currently they live in a ger without a full floor (only partial) – problem.*
- *She wanted to live in UB for quite a long time.*
- *Her father (very elderly) doesn't care where he lives. Too old. Just happy to be alive.*
- *Sleeping in ger: father on east side. Mother and daughter on west side.*

## **HOLISTIC FRAMEWORK FOR DESIGN + PLANNING**

*In the excitement over the unfolding of his scientific and technical powers, modern man has built a system of production that ravishes nature and a type of society that mutilates man. If only there were more and more wealth, everything else, it is thought, would fall into place. Money is considered to be all-powerful; if it could not actually buy non-material values, such as justice, harmony, beauty, or even health, it could circumvent the need for them or compensate for their loss. The development of production and the acquisition of wealth have thus become the highest goals of the modern world in relation to which all other goals, no matter how much lip-service may still be paid to them, have come to take second place.*  
(E.F. Schumacher 1973)

The challenges of design + planning for and in informal settlements are many, difficult and perplexing. Often there are particular agencies and organizations involved that, by necessity and efficiency as driving rationale, tend to have specific agendas and their own approaches to problem solving. This situation, while understandable, is insufficient. Such approaches, due to pressures of managing complexity, are commonly narrow and usually uni-disciplinary. A good example might be the need for a medical clinic where the main goal becomes building a physical structure as opposed to more fully considering an array of environmental conditions that seriously, and negatively, impact public health. While it is undeniable that many problems must be tackled using quite circumscribed procedures and manageable methods (i.e., there is a definite need and place for focused expertise and specializations), it is also true that such constraints should be coupled with a solid understanding of the 'bigger picture'. The author's approach arguably deviates from more conventional approaches in its attention to this broader 'umbrella' scale, in its focus on interdisciplinary thinking, and in its proposed framework which by intention and invention assume an overarching and holistic posture.



**Figure 10:** Schematic Diagram Exploring Problem Seeking & Problem Solving (Source: Author 2013)

A significant, extensive and long-running research effort by the author has been directed at the conception and construction of a model, or FRAMEWORK, with which to approach design + planning writ large. In the case of the present research the immediate challenge is, of course, concerned with Ulaan Baatar's extensive and troubling ger districts and improvements to the milieu contained therein. Said framework includes an underlying knowledge base, cast as Foundational Tactics, and comprising the topical areas of PLACE-MAKING, SUSTAINABILITY, CULTURE, DESIGN and GUIDELINES. This knowledge, taken collectively, provides a firm base with which to better analyze, understand and hopefully more productively impact design + planning efforts in the ger districts (and by extension urban settlements more broadly).

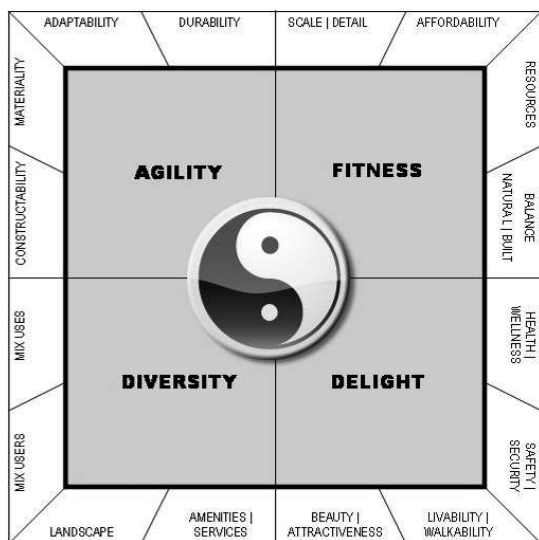
While the aforesaid knowledge categories are foundational and underpinning, the GUIDELINES are crafted to be overarching, inspiring and suggestive. The model or FRAMEWORK proposed within this paper assumes that decision makers and environmental design professionals will necessarily be equipped with this base knowledge (such as functional knowledge of sustainability) as part of their preparation for very demanding design + planning activities. This base knowledge should be seen as requisite for the severe urban-oriented work in question. The Holistic Guidelines, on the other hand, point these folks in important directions for critical inquiry relative to local conditions and specific needs. Said guidelines prove relevant to particular cases through their ability, at the sub-category level, to be tailored and customized. The Holistic Guideline subjects, namely AGILITY, FITNESS, DIVERSITY and DELIGHT, are seen by the researcher as common to most urban environments and yet highly relevant and applicable to particular case in point of the informal settlements of Mongolia. While the present paper considers the unique instance of ger districts, these four Holistic Guidelines prove germane to urban improvements beyond the developing world – for example in urban areas of global cities like Boston, Berlin or Beijing, Toronto, Turin or Tokyo. Where the fine-tuning and customization comes into play is at the next level of detail – that is, within the sub-categories or Action Areas sitting under the Guideline subjects of AGILITY, FITNESS, DIVERSITY and DELIGHT. It is at this Action Area level where local traditions, values, knowledge, policies and politics prove most apropos and meaningful.

Such work is impenitently subjective and imperfect – arising through the interpretation of variables in place and at play, considering the aforesaid knowledge areas (e.g., PLACE-MAKING), and both informed and inspired by the rich ethnographic stories told by Mongolians themselves (including ger district residents, herdsman, architects, planners, scientists,

politicians, civil servants, etc.). While the crafting of Holistic Guidelines and the associated Action Areas is influenced by evidence, the exercise is undoubtedly a *mélange* of both art and science. Like design + planning more generally, the enterprise of conceiving and constructing the present model or framework is a marriage of *telos* and *techne* – it is an inexact exercise that explicitly acknowledges the complications, contradictions and complexity inherent in human habitation. This goal, when all is said and done, of the proposed framework, is to positively impact thinking and by extension improve the ger districts in ways that respect culture, protect the environment, and enhance quality of life.

The Holistic Guidelines should be applied in a cooperative and collaborative manner, understanding all hold equal value and significance. The Action Areas underlying the guidelines of AGILITY, FITNESS, DIVERSITY and DELIGHT are seen as having great flexibility and capacity for customization. These Action Areas are case specific and as such are subject to change and modification as conditions suggest and context dictates. For example, some ger districts are close to the urban core and as such gain benefit through striking distance to established infrastructure (e.g., district heating). Outlying edge districts, on the other hand, are entirely disconnected and therefore must look to other solutions. Openness to a range of options, and open-mindedness, are essential to the success of the model and vital for the crafting of pertinent and potent Action Areas. For each Guideline the researcher has proposed and developed four Action Areas. These specific Action Areas are not definitive but rather should be seen as explicatory. A developed list of Action Items for a given problem or project, such as a particular ger district, could be larger and/or different from the proposed sets depending on funding, personnel and/or perspective.

As this Framework sees actual application in the field much greater attention must be paid to details, data and conditions. When developing and crafting more finite guidelines careful attention will be required as pertains the appropriate level of detail, the appropriate use of language, and the most appropriate means of communication to ensure most effective awareness, application and implementation. Further, and critically, each of the Action Areas needs to be cross-referenced with concerns about place-making, sustainability (including triple bottom line thinking), culture and design.



**Figure 11:** Sinclair Holistic Framework for Design + Planning (Source: Author 2013)

The four Holistic Guidelines, and their associated Action Areas, should be seen as an interrelated set – a rich system of give and take where classification is less important than consideration. In developing this approach the researcher viewed the four guidelines as intensely connected and entirely complementary. Further, it is the contention of the researcher that successful design + planning interventions, and successful environments (e.g., interiors,

buildings, landscapes, spaces and places) thereafter, most regularly arise when attention is given to both poetics and pragmatics. The trilogy of ‘firmness, function and beauty’ needs to be imagined as a three legged stool – to weaken or remove one leg serves to destabilize or destroy the system. While many argue that informal settlements should be tackled with a pragmatic approach only, it is the researcher’s belief that even the poorest of the poor deserve joy, respect and dignity in their lives. The fact that someone lives in a slum does not discount the need for beauty, balance and happiness in their lives. It is perhaps these very individuals and their communities that need even more attention therein by the decision makers, politicians, architects and planners vested with the creation and management of buildings, streets, parks and neighborhoods that comprise cities. The present Framework, comprising the nested or layered components of Foundational Tactics, Holistic Guidelines, and Action Areas, proves unconventional and in many ways indeterminate and discretionary. That said, the real value of this set of knowledge bases, guideline topics, and action areas, comes via looking at the world, and problems, in new ways. For an engineer to consider delight is a good step. For a politician to imagine agility is helpful. For an architect to embrace diversity is beneficial. And for all players to critically envision and ensure fitness of environments and people is vital to the realization of communities that are healthier, more livable and more successful. No small charge for sure, yet necessary and important nonetheless.

### SUMMING UP + MOVING AHEAD



**Figures 12 + 13 + 14:** Ger Sited Near UB Outskirts | Ger District Near City Center | Forces Sketch (Source: Author 2013)

*Already there are conflicts between communities and nations over land, water, oil, fish, ‘pollution rights’, acid rain, genetic resources, forests and many other resources. And such conflicts can be expected to intensify and to exacerbate already frayed relationships between women and men, between peoples of differing cultures, races, and faiths. Some of the conflict will be motivated by greed, some by extreme poverty, and some by despair. (Barney, Blewett & Barney, 1999)*

Mongolia is at a critical crossroads where it confronts desperate poverty and massive slums at the same time looking to optimize development (with international partners) of its vast natural resources and mineral reserves. Despite being one of the world’s poorest countries Mongolia has a remarkably rich history, an impressive land ethic with regard to nomadic life, and a genuine desire to move more fully onto the global stage. To reach towards and begin to realize its aspirations, Mongolia will need new ways of seeing, thinking and acting. Mongolians will need to innovatively and potently partner, among key stakeholders within the country and between the country and a plethora of professionals, aid agencies and non-governmental organizations beyond its borders. The current paper delineated research that considers both the urban and rural conditions of modern Mongolia, and highlighted some dramatic contrasts therein. The present holistic model developed by the author over the past few years is intended in a more comprehensive manner to tackle design + planning with cultural sensitivity and a serious push to greater sustainability. It takes an overarching view of a complex ethos and, through an integrative method, aims to develop solutions and generate opportunities that are more appropriate for the context and conditions arising in the informal settlements of Mongolia. No small task and yet one which affords hope and promise at the current juncture.

To advance civilizations we need to have the ability to see through others eyes, to grasp the need for and see value in differences, and to substitute arrogance with acceptance & intolerance with respect. Education proves a necessary and effective vehicle for change. Values must be discussed and positions debated. Service learning approaches are needed. Internationalization of curricula is warranted. More integrative, comprehensive and embracing strategies must be developed to move our world forward. Our greed must give way to compassion. Modernity must be inclusive. Perspectives must be multiple. Metrics must be manifold. Mongolia's future, as a developing nation with a strong colorful history, rich natural resources, and profound spiritual traditions, should be considered in light of such pressing parameters and critical issues. Future research by the author will examine in greater depth the challenges of the ger districts in light of similar problems faced by informal settlements globally, as well as underscoring lessons learned through deeper study & thicker descriptions of the nomadic herdsman who remain intensely connected to the land, ever respectful of the environment, and connected as interdependent beings in their remarkable cosmos.

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