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Urban Pins: Modern Intervention as a Method for Urban Conservation and Urban Regeneration in the Changmen Historical District of Suzhou, China

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Abstract

This paper discusses modern intervention as an innovative planning methodology to address the problem of urban conservation in rapidly expanding cities in China. In contrast to traditional master planning, the 'urban pins' conservation method currently in development by Professor Croset and his team at Xi'an Jiaotong Liverpool University in Suzhou enhances updates and upgrades existing city spaces through a combination of urban conservation and modern intervention.

'Urban pins' is a strategy for urban regeneration that involves the participation of architects, academics and students to regenerate the historical city through multiple strategic interventions at the architectural or the micro scale. This is an ad-hoc strategy where any existing building, independently from its historical and architectural value, could be the base for specific interventions, without the necessity to define a global planning for all the area. Incremental development, bottom-up initiatives adaptive reuse, artistic installations, upgrading of public space become the new keywords. Conservation and innovation are considered together, and architecture is defended as a practice of "making urban transformation", and not only of design.

Keywords: Urban Conservation; Heritage; Chinese Urbanism; Urban Design Methodology

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1. Introduction

Historical districts of Chinese cities have been under extreme pressure to transform since the economic reforms by central government in 1997. The rapid expansion of cities has catapulted new districts of Chinese cities into the 21st century, leaving the old city behind and creating a gulf between the new and old in cities. This situation has resulted in the destruction and reconstruction of many historical areas in city centres throughout China. While extensive research has been made into rapid urbanization, limited research has been made on urban conservation, particularly on the methods of urban conservation in China, which lack a sound theoretical foundation. (Whitehand and Gu, 2007 p.643)

Suzhou historical centre is one of the best-preserved city centres in China and contains a number of successful conservation projects such as the award winning the Pingjiang Street project (Xie and Heath, 2016). However this form of urban regeneration can be seen to result in nostalgic touristification, transforming the old city into a tourist destination rather than upgrading and modernising the city centre. In contrast, the 'urban pins' method uses a strategy for urban regeneration that involves the participation of architects, academics and students to regenerate the historical city through multiple strategic interventions at the architectural or the micro scale. This is an ad-hoc strategy where any existing building, independently from its historical and architectural value, could be the base for specific interventions, without the necessity to define a global planning for all the area. Incremental development, bottom-up initiatives adaptive reuse, artistic installations, upgrading of public space become the new keywords. Conservation and innovation are considered together, and architecture is defended as a practice of "making transformation".

The 'urban pins' method has been tested in two workshops: The first Suzhou International Architecture Workshop 'Urban Conservation and Tourism along Shantang River' (February 2016) produced ideas and visions for the urban regeneration of Shantang River.

The Second Suzhou International Architecture Workshop "Urban Conservation and Modern Interventions in Changmen Historical District" (February 2017), discussed in detail in this paper, worked with the existing planning guidelines and proposed multiple interventions in the historical district.

The 'urban pins' approach is innovative for China. Normally, there is a clear separation between the interventions for the conservation of single listed buildings, and the interventions of demolition and reconstruction of large portions of the historical city. This second category of interventions follows a classical process of planning and urban design, with precise guidelines that define the height of the buildings; the roof structure and, the materials. These guidelines have to be respected by the architects. In Suzhou the present planning policies are quite strictly conservative, and the guidelines for the conservation of existing buildings are inspiring the demolition and reconstruction of many buildings, following an idea of "stylistic reconstruction". The workshop approach formed a critique, working with a stronger connection between urban design and architectural design, and between conservation and innovation, interrogating the role of architects as creative interpreters.

As architects, can we imagine an alternative process of regeneration of the traditional blocks, preserving a majority of buildings, but at the same time demolishing some of them to be replaced by strategic contemporary buildings without these characters of stylistic continuity? Is it possible to experiment in the historical core of a Chinese city a not-stylistic, morphological and material continuity?

2. Urban Conservation in China

Conservation practice on an urban scale in China started in 1980s with the first designation of 24 Historical-Cultural Cities (HCC's) by Ministry of Construction. The number of HCC's has grown to 131 in the past three decades. Suzhou was included in the first batch of HCC cities in 1982, with its interesting urban structure quite unchanged from 12th century, characterised by the cities dense network of canals, bridges and literati gardens.

According to legislation, there are three main levels of urban conservation practiced in Suzhou, that also reflect the wider common practice of conservation in historic cities in China. The three levels are: 1. the HCC area and its buffer zone, 2. the historical-cultural urban districts, such as Pingjiang historical district and Changmen historical district, and 3. the conservation area at the level of the single urban block. Beyond these three major types, the classical gardens of Suzhou are UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and the Grand Canal part of Suzhou, also has special conservation plans for the control of the traditional urban landscape. A new type of linear conservation of the town-scape is also apparent, for example the historical street, Shantang Street which is designated for a National level of conservation.

In the master plan for the Suzhou Conservation Plan, we can identify these different levels of urban conservation based on different levels of legislation. For the particular historical-cultural urban districts, a comprehensive conservation plan is the basic document and contains guidelines for the new buildings and regeneration plans in the area. The complexity of the historical remains in Suzhou has created some difficulties for the design of the conservation plan which emphasises the historical characteristics rather than actual remains. (Zang, Yu, Zhuang, 2014). To avoid the disruption of the "historical characteristics" of Suzhou, the architects were normally asked to be "harmonious with the historical landscape", and to "continue the traditional architectural language" (Wang, Zhou, Xu, 2013), which was very restrictive in terms of building height, color schemes and façade controls and can also create confusion between the old and the new.

3. Modern Interventions as a Conservation Method

Old Suzhou is one of the best-conserved historical cities in China, and any foreign visitor remains fascinated by its special character of the watertown with many traditional courtyard houses and gardens. As discussed in the previous paragraph, the present planning policies in Suzhou are quite strictly conservative, not only for the interventions on historical single buildings, but also for the regeneration of large portions of the historical city, which can be demolished and reconstructed following precise guidelines. For example, in the famous touristic historical district of Pingjiang, the guidelines define the heights of the buildings, the roofs, the materials, and these guidelines have to be respected by the architects. The result of these strict regulations is that it is often quite difficult to understand the real age of a building, and to interpret how it has been conserved, partially or totally transformed, or even fully "invented" as a fake.

What is effectively conserved in the old Suzhou? How can we as architects propose a more innovative approach to the urban conservation, less restrictive and nostalgic? Our first approach to the sites of Changmen Historical District has been phenomenological and empirical, exploring and documenting lanes, canals, courtyard houses and gardens, in a search for differences and exceptions in the continuity of the apparently homogeneous urban fabric,. Amongst the historic urban fabric we discovered many small modern buildings, realized mostly in the period 1980-1990, with a height of 4 to 6 floors and often in a bad state of conservation. Following the conservation planning guidelines of the Suzhou Conservation Plan, these buildings have been identified for demolition to be reconstructed with a height of only 2-3 floors, for

recreating the original continuity of the old city. Our approach is less dogmatic, we consider that these small fragments of discontinuity are creating special urban qualities, precisely because they are “not traditional buildings”. They often contain important uses and facilities for the contemporary city. On the opposite side, these small modern buildings are interpreted by the Suzhou planners as something purely negative, to be removed and replaced by a “traditional” architecture. For us, even if we easily recognize that the modern architecture is poor and trivial, these buildings have a positive value if we begin to consider them not only as single, isolated fragments, but also as the elements of an urban system.

We propose to consider these modern buildings as “urban pins” to be interconnected in a strategy of “urban acupuncture”. We can imagine small architectural interventions, using a contemporary language, for new public facilities, answering to the necessities of maintaining old Suzhou as a living heritage city, not a museum or a theatrical stage for touristic consumption. With some characters of innovation as the differences in the height, in the form and even in the materials, the new architecture could be recognized as a vertical landmark, a reference in the urban landscape, in the same way pagodas in the old city created a vertical accent, in strong contrast with the horizontal continuity of the courtyard houses.

Following this approach which appears innovative for China, the idea of “modernity” is no more related with the process of creation of “new towns” which characterized the intense and fast process of Chinese urbanization. We defend an idea of “soft modernity” which can enrich the historical city, with punctual insertions of modern buildings of high architectural quality: fragments of discontinuity, because we think that innovation and modernity are necessary for obtaining an urban conservation which is connected with the real necessities of the society, and not purely stylistic.

4. The International Workshop

The Second Suzhou International Architecture Workshop "Urban Conservation and Modern Interventions in Changmen Historical District" (February 2017), tested the ‘urban pins’ methodology described above. The proposals were subsequently deepened during the following semester by some of the students in their design studio ARC204 where various strategies were adopted to respond to the complexity and diversity of the historical city.

The workshop divided the Changmen district into fourteen parts. Each part contained equivalent components such as the protected urban fabric, at least one heritage building, and the presence of one or more modern buildings (up to 20 years old). The design strategy was based on an idea to replace the modern buildings that were not enhancing the old city with strategic urban centres. The general intervention strategy therefore traced a mosaic of parts with equivalent content but with a different positional value at the overall scale. The Yipu Garden, one of the famous UNESCO World Heritage Gardens of Suzhou, influenced some interventions, while other sites opened up to interesting reflections on important streets, such as streets facing to natural sites or water canals.

The result was an interesting comparison of heterogeneous positions between XJTLU and the colleagues and students coming from five European Universities (TU Graz, University of Liverpool, Politecnico di Torino, ENSA Paris Val-de-Seine, Sapienza University Rome). The fourteen projects can be interpreted following two main categories of intervention that worked at different scales, providing a new scenario in which contemporary architecture could dialog with the past.

The first category can be defined as "strong intensity", with projects that involve a complete demolition of the



existing modern buildings. Among these, some are projects that propose new urban centralities. These are projects that, for example, work with the creation of large public spaces, accompanied by iconic buildings. or propose to reconstruct the wall system through interesting interpretations of the "inhabited wall". The introduction of a new scale, both at an architectural level and at the level of open space, is based on the opportunities arising from the intensive demolition of obsolete buildings, allowing the introduction of a new relational system between the various parts, enabling future residents to experiment with a new urban space.

The second category focuses on "small ad-hoc" interventions, presenting some thematic variations on the well-known theme of the urban acupuncture. Demolitions are not radical as in the previous cases, but involve an intense consideration of all the details and a deep understanding of the existing urban situation. New scales are not introduced to the existing fabric, but essentially its essence is transformed. These interventions, apparently "weak", raise radical transformations of the meaning of the existing urban spaces. One example 'Water Spots' is the project for the regeneration of the public water spaces around the multiple existing wells. Small fountains, kitchens, washrooms, small channels, provide a new network of common public spaces throughout the historic city. Another proposition focused on the theme of the pocket gardens, to follow with the small courtyards or interiors, systematized with the historic Yipu garden. These projects believe in closer contact with everyday life and are an interesting alternative to the strong intensity interventions.

4. Conclusion

Rapid urbanization has resulted in problems for historic districts in Chinese cities making it difficult for them to regenerate through morphological methods. Traditional master planning has often resulted in a nostalgic touristification and a transformation in meaning of the historical city. The 'urban pins' method provides an alternative to traditional master planning or large scale regeneration as it upgrades the city through the provision of new strategic urban centralities and micro interventions that together update, protect and enhance the existing urban fabric. The method therefore conserves the diversity and vibrancy of the historic city at the same time modernizing it as a. The interventions act as catalysts, innovative pockets that allow for slower regeneration and offer the possibility for cities to become resilient to rapid traumatic change that threatens cities cultural identity. The workshop in the Changmen historical district was a pilot project and offered a process for testing another conception of innovation that can be adopted by Chinese cities wishing to conserve their historical centres as living heritage sites.

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