

## **Application of the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) Approach in China**

### **-- Developing a Road Map --**

Report of the Expert Meeting organized by the World Heritage Institute of Training and Research for Asia and the Pacific (WHITRAP) in Shanghai, 12-13 October 2012 (drafted by Ron van Oers).

#### **Introduction**

In general, China's current building boom is characterized foremost by radical short-term planning, a hegemonic power of developers with an exclusively commercial outlook, a total embrace of Western-style architecture, a consistently mediocre standard of construction and completely disrupted spatial configurations, which are resulting in impaired social networks, traffic congestion, air pollution and vast masses of internally displaced workers, who constitute the urban workforce but are deprived of many legal rights and protection. Increasingly metropolises in China are turning into a collection of objects, primarily iconic tall buildings that have no connection with each other or their immediate physical setting, which contains fewer and fewer surviving historical structures. Creeping suburbanization swallows up semi-rural villages on the outskirts, which initially form enclaves within the city's urban fabric, but inevitably fall to the demolition hammer. The near-complete erasure of traditional Chinese housing complexes in Shanghai, for instance, meaning a demolition of the residential forms based on collectivity, is associated with an almost exclusive replacement by high-rise apartment blocks. This is causing a radical change in the city's social structure with increasing anonymity, isolation and estrangement of citizens as the result of a disappearance of existing age-old traditions and values.

All this calls for a renewed focus on differentiation, a diversification of the building stock through small-scale development at the neighborhood level, with attention to the design of public spaces (other than commercial) and the preservation of landscape and history. A critical urban and architectural programme for Chinese cities would include a reinterpretation of Chinese traditional architecture and urban planning involving spatial relationships, traditional building techniques and use of local materials, such as stone, wood and bamboo. Old Chinese traditions of Feng Shui, yin & yang, painting, poetry and garden design can be used as sources of inspiration. An outstanding example of this approach is shown for instance through the work of Chinese architect Wang Shu, who did not study abroad and received the Pritzker Prize on 28 February 2012, the highest international award in architecture.

Features such as corridors, courtyards and the relationship between indoor and outdoor spaces are important determinants of the spatial order. These architectural projects, with careful attention to design (as opposed to mass construction of monotonous blocks), are then embedded in the historic urban landscape where density is not expressed in a standard tower, but in a volume in which architecture and public space are optimally integrated. As such, the existing urban conditions can be improved, while retaining a memory trace that enables local population groups, existing as well as newcomers, to take root in an area. In this way uniformity can be avoided and existing urban and social structures used to provide continuity in cities that are in a constant state of flux. New buildings in the existing urban landscape or existing buildings which have been adaptively reused, such as derelict factory sites, function as the nexus between old and new, between history and modernity.

### Expert Meeting Programme

Representatives from universities and research institutes, as well as specialized agencies working with the Historic Urban Landscape approach had been invited to **WHITRAP** (World Heritage Institute of Training and Research for Asia and the Pacific) in Shanghai. Institutes represented included the Cultural Relics Protection and Archaeology Department of the **State Administration of Cultural Heritage** (SACH), the **China Academy of Urban Planning and Design** in Beijing, the School of Architecture of **Tsinghua University** in Beijing, the School of Architecture of **Southeast University** in Nanjing, the College of Architecture and Urban Planning of **Tongji University** in Shanghai, the **UNESCO** Cluster Office in Beijing, **UNDP** (United Nations Development Programme), **ICCROM** (International Centre for the Study of Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property) in Rome (Italy), the **Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design** in Jerusalem, the **University of Paris I – Sorbonne** in Paris (France), the **Brandenburgische Technische Universität** in Cottbus (Germany), and the **American Planning Association** in Washington DC (United States). The two-day programme included a series of 2 keynote presentations and 4 presentations on Day One (12 October 2012) as well as 2 keynote presentations and 4 presentations on Day Two (13 October 2012), which set the stage for 1½ hour roundtable discussions on both days. The Meeting Programme is included in Annex 1 and the abstracts of the presentations in Annex 2.

### Identification, Conservation and Utilization of China's Urban Heritage Assets

Since 1982 a national system for urban heritage identification and protection has been put in place in China under which many city authorities have made good progress in the preservation of individual monuments and ensembles of cultural-historic significance. Under the over-arching *Law on the Protection of Cultural Relics of the People's Republic of China*, national historic and cultural cities (HCCs) have been identified and are protected under the separate 2008 *Regulation on the Protection of Famous Historical and Cultural Cities, Towns and Villages*, more than 100 of which have been officially designated since 2002.

While these protection measures and regimes are a major step in the right direction, the question was put forward whether it is a sufficient framework also for urban regeneration and the management of cities as 'socio-economic ecosystems'? The complexity of preserving and wisely utilizing urban heritage assets in highly dynamic metropolitan areas, such as Shanghai for instance, requires a specialized approach with updated knowledge and skills that is currently not available to local authorities in China yet. As was put forward, from 2004 to 2012 several national forums were organized, which discussed different themes and subjects around new concepts in urban planning and conservation. These need to be summarized and compared in order to arrive at a unified, systematic approach that integrates local (i.e. Chinese) philosophies and practices into the international concept of the Historic Urban Landscape to mainstream and optimize application in the Chinese context.

In the technical sphere, advanced data-collection, resource mapping and referential analyses are taking place in historic cities across China, primarily driven and facilitated by universities and advanced research institutes. These data sets need to be integrated in urban and regional planning, which is a strong practice at Tongji University. The next step then involves an identification of types of intervention permitted in different urban settings, with an emphasis on urban design (between city plan and architecture) and the 'creation of space', where history and memory are the inspiration for the new; as was put forward: the solution to problems is located in the place – the issue therefore is learning to understand the place.

Further to this, specific guidelines for evaluation and regulation of contemporary urban design and architecture need to be developed by local authorities to enable consistency and continuity for all actors involved, while facilitating the monitoring of change. In particular socio-economic and visual impact assessments as part of a

broader Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) need to be developed and promoted. As at the current moment the West is fully engaged in this process, it would be timely to team up and share skills to optimize international cooperation and knowledge exchange.

On 10 November 2011 UNESCO's General Conference adopted the *Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape* (UNESCO 2011), a new international instrument for the conservation of historic cities, which addresses the need to better frame heritage conservation strategies within the larger goals of urban sustainable development, in order to support public and private actions aimed at preserving and enhancing the quality of the human environment. The important next step involves the adaptation of this instrument to China's legal-institutional and socio-cultural context with provision of advice and technical assistance to city authorities with regard to the application of the Historic Urban Landscape approach. To this end a special programme is developed at Tongji University and WHITRAP in Shanghai, which explores the integration of this approach into the urban and spatial planning practices and socio-economic dynamics of the contemporary built environment in China.

#### Discussion on the Road Map for China

Three key issues guided the discussion during the Expert Meeting on 12 and 13 October 2012 in Shanghai, each of which will be elaborated on in this report, being:

1. The definition of Historic Urban Landscape, in particular whether it is an object or subject, and its proper interpretation in Chinese;
2. The three-fold objectives of the Historic Urban Landscape approach:
  - The management of change;
  - The improvement of living conditions for local populations, and
  - The creation of a virtuous cycle in urban conservation; and
3. Development of the Toolkit for implementation.

#### **1. Definition of Historic Urban Landscape**

In its new Recommendation UNESCO defines the Historic Urban Landscape as “the urban area understood as the result of a historic layering of cultural and natural values and attributes, extending beyond the notion of ‘historic centre’ or ‘ensemble’ to include the broader urban context and its geographical setting”. It can be explained as a way of seeing and interpreting the city as a continuum in time and space (instead of cutting it up and parcelling it out through ‘zoning’, including separate conservation areas, which thereby become ‘ghettos of historic preservation’), where countless population groups have left their marks, and continue to do so today. This recognition and understanding should underpin the city's management, including the conservation of its historic structures and spaces, which should be integrated into processes of urban and spatial planning and socio-economic development.

In fact, it was emphasized that this approach is useful for any type of heritage category, be it a single monument, an ensemble, site or cultural landscape, as the key resides in seeing and interpreting dynamic environments in which heritage assets are located and which have an impact on its conservation and management. As was further discussed, when such an approach is applied to the city, or parts of the city, this then becomes *de facto* a Historic Urban Landscape – in other words, the historic urban landscape moves from subject to object, and becomes both.

As regards the proper interpretation in Chinese (aside from a correct formal translation of the UNESCO text), it was explained that the Chinese have a difficulty with the terminology, which derives from similar difficulties with the term ‘cultural landscape’. A landscape, in the Chinese view, is *a priori* a cultural construct, prompting the question why this needs to be expressed in double terms. Although the term urban landscape is less enigmatic, nevertheless the close association with

cultural landscapes and their true meaning remains confusing, necessitating a thorough explanation and interpretation for Chinese local authorities in any follow-up, in particular to make connections with existing notions of inter-connectedness in historic cities in China, similar to the notion of *machi-nami* in Japan for example.

## **2. *Three-fold Objectives of the Historic Urban Landscape Approach***

The management of change (1), or the maintenance of continuity as some preferred to call it, was widely acknowledged and seen as the proverbial 'two sides of the same coin'. As outlined in the section above, the key to understanding and managing any historic city is the recognition that it's not a static monument or group of buildings, but subject to dynamic forces in the economic, social and cultural spheres that shaped it and keep shaping it.

It was also agreed, however, that this is not to say that 'anything goes' in historic cities, quite the contrary: thorough examination, interpretation and valuation of characteristics and attributes in historic urban landscapes will lead to critically informed decision-making as regards conservation action and development processes, to maintain continuity for those elements and aspects that provide the city with character and meaning – its identity –, while at the same time identifying those areas and spheres where investment and renewal can take place to generate jobs and revenues, which in part can serve to finance conservation efforts. The Historic Urban Landscape approach, in other words, aims to promote and strengthen a values-based, all-inclusive conservation process and subsequently to utilize heritage assets and local culture to direct planning and design of the contemporary city, in a mutually enhancing process, which thereby becomes more sustainable.

To make such an ideal situation a reality at the local level, strategic alliances need to be built between various actors in the urban scene, foremost between public authorities that manage the city and developers and entrepreneurs that operate in the city. The past decades have shown that, in spite of enormous progress achieved in the field of cultural heritage management, both in terms of theory and practice, nevertheless the speed of change happening at different levels and coming from different angles, coupled with diminishing resources, make urban conservation an increasingly challenging field of operation. This calls for efforts to broaden the stakeholder group, raise levels of awareness, and seek innovative schemes whereby public, private and civic sectors actively engage with each other in preserving and celebrating the city, historic and contemporary. With traditionally a strong involvement of the Chinese state in all matters pertaining to society, which includes current conservation policy and actions, and vast resources for financing, what would be the modalities for public-private partnership in conservation in China? What financial incentives can be developed to engage the private sector, on a project basis as well as for longer term strategic commitments?

Of particular interest in the above-identified efforts and needs underpinning the Historic Urban Landscape approach is the quality of life and improvement of living conditions for local communities and population groups (2). Stressed by both ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) and IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) since long, the need to include local communities in the conservation process is advocated because of sustainability considerations on one hand, and reasons of property and citizen's rights on the other. It were these combined concerns that prompted the World Heritage Committee to adopt an additional Strategic Objective in 2007, at its 31<sup>st</sup> session in Christchurch, New Zealand, adding a 'fifth C' of Communities to the 'four C's' of Credibility, Conservation, Capacity building and Communication that were adopted in 2002 (at its 26<sup>th</sup> session in Budapest, Hungary). Considering the phenomenal speed with which Chinese society is transforming, having lifted millions of Chinese out of poverty, but leaving many citizens lost in a sea of modernity and in search of traditional values, how, and by what means, could civic engagement with and community involvement

in historic urban landscape conservation be strengthened?

What methods of communication and conflict negotiation need to be developed, and how can this then be integrated into local government decision making and management? It was suggested to include citizen opinion surveys and to engage them in a visioning process for the city, prior to major planning and design activities, both in real time and with the use of new social media. With the changing paradigm of planning from a technical to a politico-social process in the West, where planning flexibility is based on a shared vision with alternatives for future directions, what could China learn from this approach? Dialogue and consultation with stakeholders and local citizen groups often lead to a longer decision making process but will definitely speed up the implementation, as ideally it has tackled upfront any contentious issues or conflicts arising from project development.

All the above considerations and concerns relate to the creation of a virtuous cycle in urban conservation (3), understood as an iterative process that is self-strengthening, where one policy with related actions leads to another, thereby reinforcing the earlier and setting a favourable path for the following. During the meeting the creation of reading rooms for children in Bogota, Colombia, was discussed, which was a government-led initiative to improve educational standards and facilities in the city. These reading rooms were well-designed public buildings set in a garden compound in the densely built-up slum areas of the city, where in general a lack of public green spaces existed. Next to reading for the children, rapidly these buildings and spaces were used for a variety of other community and leisure activities as well, and the overwhelming success led to communities elsewhere in the city establishing similar public facilities set in green spaces in their part of the city, setting in motion a wave of community-led initiatives related to education, conservation and regeneration.

Given its strong volunteer ethic, how can a virtuous cycle of community-driven conservation and regeneration activities be set in motion in Chinese cities? What can we learn from projects such as that of urban heritage protection in the neighbourhood of Tianzifang in Shanghai? Here a bottom-up approach of scholars, professionals and concerned citizens led to urban regeneration, in contrast to the overtly commercial urban development projects such as Xintiandi, also in Shanghai, which had little to do with urban conservation, nor with community involvement. As was presented during the meeting a system of awards for exemplary projects, such as the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Cultural Heritage Awards for Conservation, create a positive 'ripple effect', often setting in motion a virtuous cycle of conservation and regeneration activities in the areas surrounding awarded conservation projects.

### **3. Development of the Toolkit for implementation**

The UNESCO *Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape* specifies four sets of tools to be considered, which are reproduced here, including the questions and issues formulated above.

- **Civic engagement tools:** How, and by what means, could civic engagement with and community involvement in historic urban landscape conservation and management be strengthened? Given its strong volunteer ethic, how can a virtuous cycle of community-driven conservation and regeneration activities be set in motion in Chinese cities? What can we learn from projects such as that of urban heritage protection in the neighbourhood of Tianzifang in Shanghai? What methods of communication and conflict negotiation need to be developed, and how can this then be integrated into local government decision-making and management?
- **Regulatory systems:** Is the 2008 *Regulation on the Protection of Famous Historical and Cultural Cities, Towns and Villages* a sufficient framework also for

urban regeneration and the management of cities as socio-economic ecosystems? If not, what type of local ordinance or decree would be needed to facilitate this task? When examining this issue, it's advisable to consider the additional development of standards and guidelines for the conservation of urban heritage that include an integrity statement describing the completeness or wholeness of the site, in terms of existing functional relationships, together with a conservation report elaborating its management objectives.

- **Knowledge and planning tools:** With the changing paradigm of planning from a technical to a politico-social process, where planning flexibility is based on a shared vision with alternatives for future directions, what could China learn from this approach? Furthermore, how can a web-based tool be developed for local government officials, whereby through a modeling exercise indications of impacts of interventions can be determined upfront in the decision-making process?
- **Financial tools:** With traditionally a strong involvement of the Chinese state in all matters pertaining to society, which includes current conservation policy and action, and generous resources for financing, what would be the modalities for public-private partnership in conservation in China? What financial incentives can be developed to engage the private sector, on a project basis as well as for longer term strategic commitments?

#### The Way Forward: a Road Map

The above formulated issues and questions will guide the special programme at Tongji University's Advanced Research Institute for Architecture and Urban-Rural Planning, with institutional assistance of WHITRAP in Shanghai, on the implementation of the new UNESCO Recommendation with application of the Historic Urban Landscape approach in China. In the coming three years this approach will be tested in several pilot cities in China, the outcomes of which will become part of an advisory report to the State Administration of Cultural Heritage (SACH) in Beijing on the merits and benefits of historic urban landscape conservation. Next to this, also a group of pilot cities will be selected outside China in the wider Asia-Pacific region to provide for regional comparisons and broader insights into the process.

- **Site Selection**

The selection of pilot cities will be based on:

- a) conservation and development challenges and needs over the next 3 years;
- b) local Government buy-in and commitment to follow up on the outcomes of the research and technical advice provided;
- c) site condition (state of conservation) and potential for improvements.

- **Site Characteristics**

Ideally a wide and diverse array of urban sites should be selected, ranging from clearly demarcated protected towns in a rural landscape, with full integrity and authenticity, to historic urban areas as part of metropolises, which are under severe development pressures and with only limited arrangements for protection and conservation. In principle two categories shall be looked at: a) sites where conservation efforts have been going on for some time already and where the Historic Urban Landscape approach can serve as a control mechanism to complement and strengthen activities; and b) sites where little has been done and where the Historic Urban Landscape approach aims to establish a change in existing attitudes and regimes.

- **Time Line of Tongji University's Special Programme on HUL**

2013 Outcomes: developing site selection criteria; establishing Strategic Cooperation Agreements with local authorities; developing training courses and workshops on

HUL for local authorities; establishment of a web-portal for HUL.

2013 Indicators of success: number of pilot sites selected and Strategic Agreements established; number of HUL training seminars and workshops conducted; number of local Action Plans developed; and HUL web-portal established.

2014 Outcomes: integrating the Historic Urban Landscape approach in local conservation planning and urban development frameworks; and broadening of constituencies in the conservation planning process.

2014 Indicators of success: number of local planning and development projects and activities generated; and number of private sector and civil society partners involved.

2015 Outcomes: strengthening of local capacities to implement the Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape and apply the related approach.

2015 Indicators of success: number of local Government staff trained and involved in the process; number of special units or departments at the local level established; and number of revised or updated policies and/or (master or management) plans.

In 2016 an overall stock-taking will be conducted, also as part of the research programme evaluation by Tongji University's Advanced Research Institute for Architecture and Urban-Rural Planning, and Outcomes and Outputs (i.e. specialized guidelines, consultancy and research reports, peer-reviewed academic papers, and training manuals) assembled into an overall advisory report to the State Administration of Cultural Heritage (SACH) in Beijing.

- ***Final Reporting back to UNESCO***

Last but not least, all this will become part of a comprehensive report to UNESCO's General Conference, which has asked at the adoption of the new Recommendation to be informed of the countries and cities that have been working with this new instrument, its usefulness and the results. UNESCO Headquarters in Paris has decentralized this important task to WHITRAP in Shanghai and the report is due for October 2017, with regular updates before that to its Executive Board.