

City and place identity in SIP Suzhou:

Re-learning forgotten lessons from modern western urban design theory

By Raffaele Pernice

Senior Lecturer in Architecture and Urbanism
University of New South Wales - Faculty of Built Environment

Abstract The impressive urban growth of China in the last few decades has been largely based on a sustained and state-sponsored economic development which by financing infrastructure development, fostering industrial and manufacturing production, and promoting an aggressive campaign to modernize the country, has deliberately pursued economic and social policies aimed at concentrating activities and people and reshaping and redesign many urban areas of the cities, with the result that the urban landscapes are changing rapidly, with mixed results, but at the cost of neglecting the safeguarding of the genuine spirit and still valuable features of the local places. Reflecting on the recent urban transformation in Suzhou, the paper intends to stress the importance of re-learning the lessons taught by a few highly influential architects and planners, and how the rediscovery of their theses and principles could be a precious resource to look at in order to initiate a different discourse on the design of vibrant, meaningful and beautiful urban spaces more in tune with the local identity.

Keywords: Urban Design Theory, Place Identity, Chinese Urbanism

Introduction

Cities in China are very often built as economic engines filled with enormous quantity of cloned copy-cat architectures and chaotic and often unwelcoming mono-functional and hyperdense urban districts which regularly clash and contrast with communities designed around more remarkable urban spaces, venues, and landscapes projects which are incredibly vibrant, entertaining, walkable and share and integrate urban functions and economic activities (Campanella, 2008; Friedmann, 2005). The current wave of new high quality and refined urban design projects throughout several location in China reflect a growing awareness of the importance of a good built environment for the people in general, and witness of a progressive shift from a production-oriented to a more recent service-based economic system (Logan, 2002; Wu, 2007), and therefore towards a fundamental consumers-focus social structure, following a pattern of economic and urban development showing some striking resemblance with what occurred in post-war Japan in the period 1950-70s and S. Korea in the 1970-1990s. Yet in its frantic race towards urbanization and economic growth many cities have simply decided to get rid of the valuable aspects of the traditional urban spaces, seen as an impediment to overcome more than an asset to protect.

Suzhou in Jiangsu Province is a city with over 2500 years of history well represents this trend common to many other Chinese cities. The famous gardens and the waterways are the best



Figure 1. Suzhou Center
(Photo: the author, 2019)

known urban elements of the historical districts of Suzhou, which was described by Marco Polo as the “Venice of Orient”, as the Venetian traveller compared the numberless water canals of this Chinese city to the sea water canals of the Italian city (see figure 1). Currently 2 large urban development schemes have characterized the urban reshaping of the city, namely the development of SSIP - Suzhou Singapore Industrial Park and SND - Suzhou New District, which have led a drastic transformation of the city in terms of fundamental infrastructures, new ur-



Figure 2. Suzhou ancient city: Pinjang road (Photo: the author, 2018)

ban blocks and modern housing (see figure 2), services and green provisions, and the overall organization of the circulation networks.

Suzhou is classified as one of the second-tier cities in China. This industrial city of 5 million people is set in the Yangzi-River-Delta, along the axis which connects Shanghai metropolitan region to Nanjing. Suzhou has experienced a radical urban development and impetuous economic growth focusing on the promotion of industrial innovation and high-quality service production. A combination of foreign direct investments (FDI) and domestic investments have fuelled and impressive GDP growth which has directly impacted on the overall transformation of the city into an important commercial and highly regarded cultural and technological innovation center in Jiangsu Province (Xu, 2017). One of the main urban development project that have driven the recent success of Suzhou as a global city with an illustrious heritage and an ecological touch was the development of the SIP project as high-tech industrial park, filled

and integrated by a variety of research institutes, liveable green residential areas, tempting new commercial complexes, various national and international academic institutions and medium to large industrial factories and firms of local and multinational companies.

Building SIP as symbol of Global Suzhou

The large urban area of Singapore Suzhou Industrial Park (SSIP, now commonly referred to as simply SIP-Suzhou after the partnership with Singapore ended due to unsettled conflicts during the process of development of the area), set up originally as a joint venture between Suzhou Metropolitan government (under the sponsorship of the Chinese government) and Singapore government, was intended as a prototype and demonstration project of a modern and exemplary industrial district conceived on the most advanced planning strategies and up-to-date urban design concepts as developed in Singapore, with the intent to provide a model of new town from which other Chinese cities could learn from. Indeed this large project was built with the deliberate scope to create a comprehensive urban entity of districts and developments zones within a new town not far from Suzhou, and fill it with first class industrial infrastructures, clusters of planned islands of mostly self-secluded residential complexes essentially as gated communities and high-standard services and technology incubators, while promoting and “branding” the new image of the city at a national and international level (Pernice et al., 2017).

Like many other Chinese contemporary cities also Suzhou seems to display not the integration but the mere coexistence of 2 cities in one, neatly separated by time, scale and forms. The historical city center is the core with its original footprint, monuments, old buildings and architectures embedded in vanishing neighbourhoods of fine grained fabric of narrow streets and still largely human scale urban spots with their traditional rites and century-old memories and more passionate people clashes and physically dwarfs in comparison to the new residential developments, built as extensive urban island of towers, elevated highway and massive street for cars and sterilized architectural objects lost in vast green parks and landscaped areas that could be appreciated only from the sky. It is really 2 cities in one, the small and largely low-rise charming historical nucleus of the millennial core which is surrounded by the new, big and vertical globalized promethetan downtown expansions of the new gigantic limbs built around a backbone of huge circulation infrastructures and super dense residential suburban districts, all showing poor urban and architectural quality and no real distinctive features is a bombastic celebration of the everyday architecture.

In the planning and design of new forms of the residential superblocks which define the urban residential landscape of many fast-growing cities, with an eye on how to foster a more social view of the urban life and promote a more balanced social system in the contemporary city (Kan and al., 2017; Lu, 2006), the neighbour-

hood center, conceived as basic urban element by Clarence Perry in 1929, assumes the function of a fundamental nucleus of efficient and essential services to the community, but also a very important urban place created to foster a sense of social cohesion in the contemporary sprawling Chinese city (Pernice et al., 2014). Yet the organizational model of the design of this fundamental urban element reflects a completely passive attitude towards fostering innovative spaces and the a-critical acceptance of often unfit types and building models and images from alien cultures which can hardly be integrated with the local context and the “genius loci” of the place. Widespread copy-cat architectures practice and the very frequent a-critical acceptance of foreign models and schemes (such as the presence of enormous corporate buildings with flashy architectural styles and forms, high-rise complexes urban developments and a car-oriented planning of the cities), as well as the evident conflict between economic considerations and ecological responsibility (many old canals in Suzhou have been filled in to make room for new roads), are indeed the most serious culprits in the flaws recognizable in the development of several new urban projects in SIP, but also elsewhere in urban China, which simply do not neglect to consider the local history and cultural and social specificity of the place, which are completely and insanely sacrificed to bland commercial architectures for the sake of economic growth, visibility and media branding and exposition.

Rediscovering a few lessons from the legacy of Western urban design theory

In the last century among the great and important contributions to the search in the field of urban design theory there are 3 Americans (Jane Jacobs, Kevin Lynch, William H. Whyte) and 3 Europeans (Aldo Rossi, Jan Gehl, and Christian Norberg-Schulz) who in some of their key publications have provided probably some of the clearest academic lessons, and suggested some remarkable trajectories of research to professionals in terms of the directions on how to conciliate the need for modern life with great consideration for the social and cultural aspect of the life in the city, preserving the peculiarities of the local traditions and the identity of the place by considering multifaced aspects of the urban milieu. Their urban design frameworks have been outreaching, covering several aspects, from the importance of the traditions and history of the place, the need for vibrant urban spaces which conciliate with environments aspects of the area, social and economic factors which need to balance, integrate and harmonize with human needs and people ambitions, both as individual and as larger community.

The United States has been leading the innovation in urban planning and architectural theory since the second half of the 20th century. In her important work published in 1961 with the title "Death and Life of Great American Cities", the activist and urban sociologist Jane Jacobs studied the reasons behind New York urban vitality of city downtown through the scientific observation of complex dynamics of the particular

urban context of Greenwich Village, and utilized different empirical methods: participant observation; informal interview; documentary evidence to support the argument, building his theory from this particular case, explaining and highlighting the direct connection between the mixed use of the urban space and human scale of the built environment, and its livability and social success of the community. Jacobs was the first to launch a clear attack to the inhuman scale and abstract forms and unpractical spaces of the modernist planning and architectures, as a reaction essentially to two factors: the progressive loss of the familiar and distinctive sense of community previously distinctive and present in the old neighbourhoods as a main tool for social cohesion in the city; and the loss of the traditional image of the city as something coherent and comprehensive, so that the modern (or Modernist) city appeared now to be more complex and chaotic than ever.

Almost at the same time Urban planner Kevin Lynch wrote and published "The Image of the City" (1960), another hugely influential book in which he analyzed how people remember and describe the cities. During his studies on the relations between urban spaces and human reaction he found out that most people established a "generalized mental picture of the external physical world". Through an analysis of the response of the people to their urban environment, Lynch realized that the mental picture of the people was very similar, and their images emerged in a biunivocal process: people made distinctions among the various physical parts of the city, which then organized in a per-

sonally meaningful way. He therefore detected and summarized the 5 key elements of the built environment which can be used as reference elements in observing, decoding (reading), and eventually designing and visioning new urban and architectural elements of the city: Paths: “channels along which the observer customarily moves”; Edges: “the boundaries between two areas”; Districts: “represent medium-to-large sections of the city”; Nodes: “points of intense activity”; and Landmarks: “physical reference points”.

Sociologist William Holy White conducted studies on the use of urban spaces in the 1970s and 1980s New York, and he is the author of “The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces” (1980), which focuses on the physical analysis of public spaces in New York and social activities within as used by common users. Built on solid empirical methodology, and on an extensive variety of surveying tools, the book provides many design guidelines for architects and urban designers in shaping urban spaces on the reason some urban spaces are highly successful while other, which still how what the conventional architectural and urban theory deems as good modern design fall short of people and activities. Among the most interesting findings and common sense design suggestions, there are: “What attract people most to urban spaces are other people...people tend to sit most where are places to sit...[p.28]”; “If you want to seed a place with activity, put out food [p.50]”; “What attracts people most, it would appear, is other people [p.19]”; “The most-used places also tend to have an higher than average propor-

tion of woman [p.17]”; “If a place has a markedly lower than average proportion of woman, something is wrong. Where there is a higher than average proportion of woman, the plaza is probably a good one and has been chosen as such [p.18]”; “Zoning is certainly not the ideal way to achieve the better design of spaces... for economics alone, it make sense (though) [p.15]”; “The best-used plazas are sociable places with a higher proportion of couples you find in less-sued spaces, more people in groups, more people meeting people... [p.18]”.

The European stance on issues related to the space quality and cultural value of the urban life in the city has different roots and a more intellectual approach, which differently from the American urban culture has an incredibly fundamental importance because of it long and various traditions, and inbred with the many cultural experiences, practical experiments and theoretical principles produced in different time and space for over 300 centuries.

In his writings, especially the book “The Architecture of the City” (1966), Italian Architect Aldo Rossi called for a rediscovery of the urban and architectural traditions of the historical European urban culture and criticized the lack of understanding of the city in current architectural and urban design practice. Against the policy of slum clearance and sterile urban renewal projects (ideology of **tabula rasa**) so popular during the economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s, which caused a drastic alteration of pre-existent urban environment causing in addition a profound loss of the social and cultural fabric

in the communities affected, Rossi argued that a city must be studied and valued as something constructed over time; of particular interest are urban artefacts that withstand the passage of time, either the individual building or the urban footprints, voids made by the ancient streets and public spaces; he also held that the city remembers its past (which he called “**our collective memory**”), and that we use that memory through the monuments and other relevant buildings in the history of the city, which should be reused and adapted, and not destroyed; that is, monuments and the memories related to them give structure, identity and significance to the city both in terms of physical form and social and cultural dimension.

Just a few years later Danish architect and urban designer Jan Gehl first published “Life Between Buildings” in 1971 (1st English edition is in 1987), a study built on the works of other scholars, such as Jane Jacobs, William Whyte, Oscar Newman, Christopher Alexander and focused his attention for use of spaces as opposed to “function” of space. By distinguishing three main types of human activities in the public space (these are: Necessary Activities, linked to job activities, study, moving in general; Optional activities, as they are consequences of a choice, when time and environment are favorable; they are expressed as a pause; and Social Activities, which are the consequence of previous activities and depend upon the co-presence of many people in the space (actually with little relevance) he derived as key concept that The Spatial characteristics strongly influence op-

tional activities and have less influence on the necessary ones, and therefore the Space is not determinant of an activity, but it suggests or allow for one or more activities.

Finally, Norwegian architect and theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz published “Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture” in 1979. **Genius Loci** refers to ancient Roman cultural and religious tradition, which believed that every physical space was inhabited and protected by local spirits, and that architectures and urban and natural landscapes were inherently host of a specific sense of space directly linked to the history, art, traditions and culture of the people who populated them. The human experience is something related with the cultural value of the objects in and out the space, and this relate with his historic background, aesthetic language, the overall tradition and historical reflection, and poetic intentions.

By learning the meaning and substance of the things beyond the pure physical appearance, Norberg-Schulz stressed the importance of this comprehensive concept which refer to the often hidden characteristic of the place which need to be detected, sublimated understood and then integrated in any new action or will of construction, as it will become an integral part of the new space but reflects the history, the territory and natural landscape, and the people who lived before.

Final Remarks

This short article is an invitation to reconsider the cultural basis and the intellectual directions on which the planning and design of the built environment has been recently based in transforming urban Suzhou and many new Chinese cities. The process of fast urbanization in China during the last decades has disclosed several problems and contradictions which are typical of a country and a society that has been striving in the last decades to modernize its economy, urban environment and cultural features rapidly: increasing need for urban mobility and a evident car-oriented urban development which inevitably clashes with the needs of the preservation of the fragile pattern of the traditional city; the importance of further industrial development versus the need to protect endangered eco-systems and precarious natural environments; the importance of protecting social harmony more and more endangered by the extremisms led by a rampant capitalistic model of economic growth, are just some examples of the challenges faced by Suzhou and by extension by all other Chinese cities.

Like Suzhou, many other Chinese cities are progressively approaching a post-growth, post-industrial condition which is confirmed by the reality of demographic decline, slow growth, shrinking cities, resources depletion, environmental concerns, growing localism and ageing society, all factors which invites to set up a new and comprehensive urban and architectural agenda for the rest of the 21st century. Obvious targets should be then on putting more efforts

to conciliate heritage protection, ad hoc regeneration projects, and a clear emphasis on more sustainable forms of urban development.

In this first quarter of the 21st Century's new brave world then the rediscovery of the lessons of highly regarded theorist giants in urban and architectural theories, whose principles seem somewhat forgotten or at very least ill-applied in the real world, might be of exceptional help and foster and inspire, not only in china but also elsewhere, new generations of young designers and planners to undertake liberating and useful broader reflections on what should be the new direction of contemporary urbanism. By illustrating the errors of the past but also reasoning on the good of the local traditions and indicating the most appropriate direction in seeking to generate new visions for the future of the cities and their urban life through a critical review of the often meaningless transformations of the urban real caused by many recent large-scale public projects, their work could act as catalyst in the search and production of new ideas which inspire innovative forms of urban development and cities architectures.

Raffaele Pernice Biography:

He is a Licensed Architect and Senior Lecturer in Architecture and Urbanism at the Faculty of Built Environment at UNSW Sydney. He received a PhD in Architecture from Waseda University in Tokyo, Japan and a Laurea degree in Architecture (BArch + MArch) from the University IUAV of Venice, Italy. Dr. Pernice has extensive research and teaching experience in Japan, South Korea, the Middle East and China, and his interests and activities, which lay in the nexus between architecture and urbanism, range from practice to theory, criticism and history of architecture, urban design and city planning. r.pernice@unsw.edu.au

References

- 1 Campanella, Thomas, J. *The Concrete Dragon: China's Urban Revolution and What it Means for the World*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008.
- 2 Den Hartog, Harry. *Shanghai New Towns: Searching for Community and Identity in a Sprawling Metropolis*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2010.
- 3 Ellin, Nan. *Post-modern Urbanism*, Cambridge & Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996.
- 4 Friedmann, John. *China's Urban Transition*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2005.
- 5 Gehl, Jan. *Life between buildings: using public space*. Island press, 2011.
- 6 H.Y. Kan, A. Forsyth & P. Rowe, *Redesigning China's Superblock neighborhood: policies, opportunities and challenges*, *Journal of Urban Design*, (2017): 22 (6), 757–777.
- 7 Jacobs, Jane, *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York: Vintage Books, 1992 (1st edition 1961).
- 8 Lynch, Kevin, *The image of the City*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1960
- 9 Logan, John R. (ed.), *The New Chinese City. Globalization and Market Reform*, Oxford: Blackwell Publisher, 2002.
- 10 Lu, Duanfang. *Remaking Chinese Urban Form. Modernity, Scarcity and Space, 1949-2005*. London & New York: Routledge, 2006.
- 11 Norberg-Schulz, Christian, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, New York: Rizzoli, 1979.
- 12 Pernice, Raffaele and Dong, Yiping, "The Making of a Contemporary Neighbourhood Center in SSIP-Suzhou, China. Case Studies on an Architectural and Urban Type in Contextual Transformation"; *Proceedings of IUSAM 2014 - Inter-university Symposium on Asian Megacities: "Smart Urbanism for Asian Megacities"*, Hanyang University, Department of Engineering and Planning, Seoul - South Korea, 27-30 August