

New in Old: The 'Urban Renewal' Thematic Exhibition of the 2019 Beijing Design Week

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Received December 6, 2019; accepted December 16, 2019.

The use of culture as a motivator of urban regeneration has been a key in urban policies since the 1960s and 1970s, with the paradigm of New York City's SoHo district as a reference (Zukin 1982). According to the apologists of culture-led (creative-led) strategies, the arrival of cultural activities, entrepreneurs, artists in areas subject to decay gradually boosts the material recovery of the built environment. The progressive establishment of new social relations would consequently confer new life to inner cities, almost in a thaumaturgic way (Florida 2002). Beyond these paradigms, the work of sociologist Sharon Zukin (1982) already revealed how the process in New York City was far from 'organic', and followed the entrepreneurial interests of the great fortunes of the city to reactivate the real estate market in derelict areas instead. This showed from a critical perspective the 'hidden' dimension of urban heritage renovation, linked to city branding and gentrification.

Policies of urban and rural revitalisation in China have frequently explored this avenue in the last decade. Municipal and district governments found an important legitimisation adhering to international networks: the institutional framework that UNESCO gives to these initiatives through the Creative Cities Network has been a key for the proliferation of events since cities like Shanghai and Beijing joined the Network as cities of design in 2010 and 2012 respectively. Whereas in Shanghai the efforts to join culture and revitalisation have mainly focused on the recovery of the former industrial facilities as open spaces along the Huangpu River, the strategy in Beijing has followed a more socially-oriented and complex approach by means of primarily focusing on the intervention in the traditional housing neighbourhoods in the inner city, or *hutongs*.

An evaluation of the exhibition 'New in Old. The "Urban Renewal" Thematic Exhibition of the 2019 Beijing Design

Week' needs to start from its connection with the referred initiatives and policies. For this case, the exhibition takes place in the framework of a wider urban renovation initiative, the Beijing Design Week (BJDW), which started in 2012, the same year of the incorporation to the UNESCO Creative Cities Network. Since its origins, the BJDW initiative has operated at multiple scales. At an international level, its promoters have aimed to connect with global networks with a phenomenal institutional support (Zhu, Chen and Lian 2018). Simultaneously, it has worked together with local communities of traditional neighbourhoods such as Dashilar, Beitasi and now, Qianmen East. By means of bringing culture to these less-favoured locations in the city, the aim of the BJDW has been to contribute to their gradual recovery through surgical architectural interventions in the *hutong* areas, as well as through the improvement of urban space and the update of infrastructures.

Consistently with this purpose, the venue of the exhibition reflects on the principles of respectful urban renovation that at an architectural and urban level inspire the BJDW, which can be traced back to the experiences in Italy in the 1960s and in Germany in the 1980s (González Martínez 2017). The exhibition is held in a renovated space by the team Origin Architect (Li Ji) located in the Qianmen East area; one of the last historic Beijing neighbourhoods to adhere to this developmental trend. The original space has a long history, having been used as a temple, a residence and as a warehouse, which is manifest in the traces of the plan. The intervention playfully incorporates a new materiality in the site thanks to the use of transparent bricks. This material particularity allows for the unexpected interaction between the interior of the exhibition spaces inside of the very simple, traditional one floor structures of the *hutong*.

The exhibition is arranged by the curator Xiaodi Zhu with a strong architectural and scenographic purpose, as a journey through memory within the enclosed spaces and courtyards of the site. Old pieces of furniture, mainly recycled from old homes and schools, serve as exhibitors of the contents, which are organised in a series of oversized books, each one reflecting on a single selected project. The stroll through the different rooms is pleasant as an experience, thanks to the unique intertwining of open and enclosed spaces. Nevertheless, the spatial arrangement meets some difficulties for the comprehension of the contents: being a selection of more than 100 projects, they are necessarily distributed in different rooms among which no specific sequence appears to prevail. Even though a summary of the featured projects within each space is offered at their entrance doors, the relationship between would benefit of a reinforced overall argument that could help visitors to prefigure the general orientation of the contents. Despite this spatial discontinuity, the idea of distributing one project in each of the books is a successful one, as it allows for a serendipitous reading, leaving time for the comparison of ideas, motivations and outcomes of each featured project. An important drawback dealing with the materiality of the exhibition is the huge size of the books, as it does not allow for an easy handling and reading. Plus, the extreme thickness of some of the samples motivated their quick deterioration from the exhibition opening.

Adding to the referred issues it is necessary to reflect on some conceptual flaws that motivate a broader discussion. The first one appears in the title: the choice of the expression 'urban renewal' in English inevitably leads to the imagination of the very controversial process of demolitions, displacements and the subsequent erasure of memory that happened in the inner cities of the United States during the 1950s and the 1960s, particularly under the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson (Jacobs, 1992). It is our contention that this idea represents quite the opposite notion to the respectful and sustainable approach that the exhibition would like to promote. Furthermore, one is also left wondering to which extent the simple, old dichotomy of 'old and new' that motivates the exhibition, is able to grasp the complexity of its social, economic, cultural consequences beyond the expected contrasted visual effect of avant-garde designs against the background of derelict urban settings, which could be also understood as the 'attractive', or 'marketable' herald of gentrification. In this sense, this exhibition would have offered an excellent opportunity to go in-depth into open conservation debates, such as those

reflected in the 2005 Vienna Memorandum and the 2011 UNESCO Historic Urban Landscape Recommendation (UNESCO 2011) and already discussed in the Getty Conservation Institute in the 2013 'Minding the Gap' Symposium, later continued in the *Contemporary Architecture in the Historic Environment* by this same institution (Lardinois et al. 2015).

The second flaw appears in the choice of the case studies, as the exhibition information and the exhibition catalogue avoid to define the selection criteria. The organization of content in five main sections—Urban renewal; Historical Area and Residential Building Renovation; Industrial Building Renovation; Public Building Renovation; and Suburb Building Renovation—may prove effective to delineate certain commonalities between the projects. But despite the generous scope of the five sections, the question raises about the representativeness of the selection in geographical terms; either for the cases in China, as well as for the international cases. Being the contents also strongly related to the role of architects, the exhibition could have also offered a good possibility for inclusiveness from a perspective of gender. The issue of criteria is especially relevant for the selection of international cases: they appear somehow disconnected from the Chinese cases. For example, they incorporate the role of other stakeholders rather than architects, whereas this criterion would have been particularly useful to showcase other many interesting experiences on urban renovation raising from the grassroots in China. Furthermore, the information for the international cases is arranged in a different way than that of the Chinese cases, appearing as a juxtaposition that could be enriched through further crossed research, exploring the differences and similarities in terms of concepts, methods and values.

In sum, the exhibition is valid as a showcase of a variety of design projects whose common feature is the use of preexisting structures as raw material or context with different sensitivities, even though in some cases, the link is as feeble as merely the fact of having been built in places where historic buildings had been previously demolished. Among the most interesting featured examples, this review would highlight the richness of experiences in the renovation of ancient *siheyuan* in Beijing, which due to its extent and complexity, would have well deserved a section of this exhibition by itself, even an independent show: Could it maybe be a task for the 10th anniversary of the BJDW? It is also our contention that the attention to the smaller scale that the *hutong* areas represent can offer important opportunities to think about the consequences

of the introduction of contemporary architecture beyond the limits of architectural design, and to explore its deeper social, economic and cultural dimensions. This may be helpful to achieve the ultimate purpose of a balanced and harmonious development, where the past, and with it, culture and society, are meaningfully reassembled to produce the new living city of future.

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