

Twenty-two Cities: Planning the Historic City 1946–2000

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As the recent proliferation of Charters, Recommendations, and scientific meetings shows, urban conservation planning is a continually evolving discipline, which has gained extreme importance and complexity in the modern world. The exhibition ‘Twenty-two Cities: Planning the Historic City, 1946–2000’, held at Tongji University Museum in Shanghai, successfully highlights such fact: the selection of historic cities that it showcases constitutes an outstanding example of how the original aims to spare the historic city from the effects of modernisation have finally led to the consideration of urban heritage as privileged arena to orientate the endeavours of contemporary globalisation.

With this aim, the exhibition curators (Professors Benno Albrecht and Anna Magrin for the original venue in the 2015 Milan Triennale; Dr. Anna-Pola Pola for its current version in Shanghai) offer an insight into this evolution, through the research, documentation and analysis of 22 different urban conservation plans with a clear global reach, a reason for which the selected cases represent four different Continents and a wide diversity of cultures. In this sense, we may argue that the focus of the original 2015 exhibition (entitled, ‘Exporting the City Centre’) (Albrecht and Magrin 2015), is still present in the 2018 selection, which places Italy, with eight cases (Rome, Assisi-Umbria, Urbino, Florence, Bologna, Brescia, Turin and Palermo) at the centre of this reflection, and incorporates the four European (Chester, Porto, Alcalá de Henares and Antwerp) and 10 non-European (Bursa, Tunis, Yazd, Cusco, Baghdad, Pingyao, Sana’a, Lamu, Quito, Luang Prabang) as the mirror against which to project the effectiveness of this global call for urban conservation.

The exhibition layout sets the basis to assess the reach of this international exchange. The distribution of the exhibition spaces at the Tongji Museum starts with the

incorporation of a comparative timeline at the exhibition entrance (Figure 1). This timeline aims to favour the reception of the discourse in China, establishing two paths; the first one focused in heritage conservation; the second one in general historic events; for both of which the history of China is confronted to a succession of significant events in the rest of the world. The timeline is later taken as the main narrative argument of the body of the exhibition, delineating a U-shaped chronological path which is drawn in the main exhibition hall of the museum. The exhibition layout is intelligently integrated in its singular space, with a careful modular adjustment corresponding to the structure of the building. The arrangement is complemented by a beautiful selection of pictures from the great Italian master Leonardo Benevolo’s personal archive, which hang from the central double height space of the main exhibition hall, creating a rewarding realm for contemplation (Figure 2).

Each case is threaded to the referred timeline in the main exhibition hall (Figure 3), and displayed within a module composed of two vertical panels and a stand. The first panel of each module contains current aerial views, in some cases complemented with models, plus schematic plans that are represented at the same scale for all the cases. This successfully allows establishing also an informative comparison frame that highlights the complex issue of size in conservation planning. The second panel incorporates excerpts from the original planning documents, which purposely illustrate the aims of the featured plans, and among which the statement of ‘conservation as revolution’ issued by the Bologna Plan in the 1960s inspiringly resonates as a still valuable reference. The case information is completed with the stand, containing schematic data of authorship for each project and a booklet with a



Figure 1 Entrance to the exhibition with the general timeline (Source: the author).

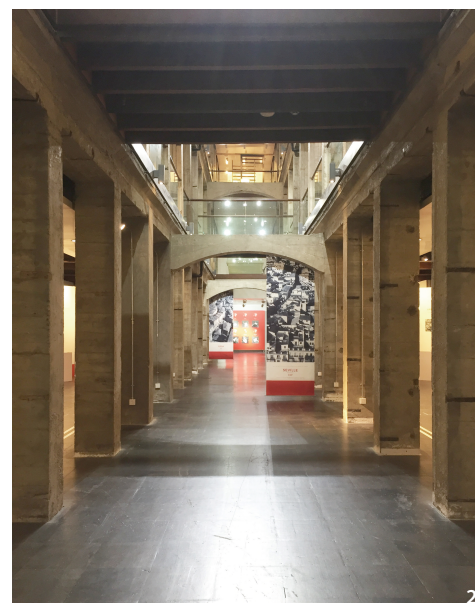


Figure 2 General view of the central space of the exhibition with Leonardo Benevolo's photographs (Source: the author).

selection of plans, drawings and schemes. Despite being schematic, the booklets are illustrative of the different planning methods applied and highlight affinities between design approaches, such as the visual analyses of cities like Chester and Urbino, or the diagrammatical outlines of the plans for Porto and Luang Prabang.

In this sense, the aims of the exhibition are fully achieved, and respond to the mission of its promoter, the World Heritage Institute of Training and Research for the Asia and the Pacific Region under the auspices of UNESCO (WHITRAP), to expand the reach of the urban conservation and sustainability goals of the World Heritage convention at an international level. The exhibition is also effective in expressing how heritage conservation has become a global movement that works with ideals that originated in the West during the Postwar years, like public participation (clearly manifested in the first civic contestation to the Rome plans in 1946), the connection with nature (claimed by Luigi Piccinato as a key for the Bursa plan already in 1956), and morphological and social continuity (as the mythic case of Bologna under Giuseppe Campos Venuti exemplified since 1960). Today, these ideals go well beyond the current fundamental creeds of the heritage discipline, defining much of the essence of contemporary urban planning culture.

Adding to this, it is important to remember how the selection reflects the fact that this spreading of the ideas of urban conservation constitutes an exceptional case of postcolonial reconnection between the West and non-Western societies. The geographical balance between

cases suggests this intuition, which is confirmed by their chronological distribution: replacing the former colonial schemes, the subsequent reaction that claimed for the acknowledgement of differences and vernacular idiosyncrasies from the 1950s onwards gave an important opportunity for the transformation of modern universal ideals into locally globalised aspirations (Dirlik 2003). In this sense, it is also necessary to point at how the choice of cases effectively demonstrates the impact of the Italian experience all over the world, in a work that was either developed or advised by Italian practitioners in eight of the international chosen cases, with planners like Ludovico Quaroni or Giorgio Lombardi playing a most significant role, particularly in the Islamic world in cities like Tunis, Yazd, Sana'a and Baghdad.

Besides the exhibition's success, there are elements that still lack conceptual connection in the overall scheme, such as the incorporation of six cities (Toledo, Jeddah, Split, Zanzibar, Charleston and Jerusalem) that remain detached from the narrative of the exhibition. The audio-visual content at the departure of the exhibition could be greatly informative as an introduction to the topic; even though the selection of videos is still limited for the complexity of the topics dealt. Last but not least, and referring to the exhibition title 'Twenty-two Cities. Planning the Historic City, 1946–2000', the initial chronological limitation of the year 1946 is accurate when referring to the new humanistic philosophical paradigms that contributed to the reconstruction of Europe after World War II, with Heidegger at their forefront. But its later limitation to the



Figure 3 General view of the exhibition layout (Source: the author).

year 2000 is still unclear. We certainly can infer that there are new approaches in the definition of heritage that have radically challenged the traditional perspective of planning in the last two decades. This is especially referring to the challenges of tourism, sustainability and poverty, and to the fact that management has, in a certain way, become a keyword of greater significance than planning. For this reason, and in light of the incorporation of the very recent cases of Antwerp (2002–2008) and Luang Prabang (2002–2010), maybe 2011, year of issuing of the *Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape* (UNESCO 2011), could have been considered a clearer milestone and a valid alternative to be reflected in the title.

In sum, this exhibition constitutes an important and necessary call of attention towards a complex, fundamental issue such as conservation planning, particularly in a booming city like Shanghai today. Its highly recommendable visit reveals a momentous exercise of intellectual production that on the one hand, deeply impresses due to its extensive documentation and archival work, and on the other hand, produces the immediate intellectual wish to advance in the enunciation of the principles and methodologies that have been transferred in this postcolonial process. Such theoretical elaboration would be especially useful in order to visualise the underlying heritage discourse to the visitors and the audience, opening the possibility to evaluate its impact and effectiveness. Hopefully, these theoretical reflections will be further developed in

the future exhibition catalogue for Shanghai. Such written legacy of the exhibition will, for sure, reinforce its contribution to the production of an autonomous narrative to face the challenges of conservation in a quickly developing country like China, and to effectively support the role of heritage as a motivator for development.

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