

UNESCO / UN-HABITAT international seminar on “Historic districts for all : balanced urban revitalization between social cohesion and heritage conservation”, held in Seville (Spain) from 7 to 9 may 2008

COOPERATION BETWEEN CHINA AND FRANCE

The experience presented in Sevilla is based on cooperation in the field of the protection, management and enhancement of cultural heritage committed 10 years ago between, for the Chinese side, the National Centre for Research on historic towns associated with Tongji University in Shanghai and, for the French side, the « Direction de l'architecture et du patrimoine » of « Ministère de la culture et de la communication » associated with the « Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine » (« Observatoire de l'architecture de la Chine contemporaine » and « Ecole de Chaillot »).

My general presentation is followed by pictures of examples of works on the water town of Tongli and five others on the edge of lake Tai, the town of Lijiang in Yunnan province and the town of Lizhuang, Yibin in Sichuan province.

It is important to precise that this cooperation is based on a will of exchanges and common research but also on the friendship and trust developed between the partners of both countries, especially between Professor RUAN Yisan, Professor ZHOU Jian, Professor SHAO Yong of Tongji University and Professeur Françoise GED, director of the « Observatoire de l'architecture de la Chine contemporaine » in France, along with me.

Synthesis of social, urban and cultural preoccupations.

At the beginning of our cooperation, we started to work using a classic approach for architects and town-planners by issuing a plan for safeguarding and enhancement, inspired by the French “Safeguarded sectors” and “Protection of architectural, urban and landscape heritage zones”. After having conducted a precise heritage inventory, regulations for the protection of historic buildings, bridges, canals, networks of alleys, were established, including the control of heights and the appearance of future constructions. Notebooks of recommendations for the rehabilitation of historic buildings and the establishment of new constructions were also composed.

From the beginning, the necessity to improve the inhabitants' living conditions appeared; so our chinese colleagues started to conduct, along with the project, an analysis of social problems through field research, and also drafted the plans for necessary networks to improve comfort.

In order to avoid damages to the natural landscape around historic districts, and to preserve agricultural and water farming activities, boundaries were established for a buffer zone. This was completed by a specific regulation.

Mixed informations leded to conceive a new kind of urban gestion plans, synthesis of social, urban and cultural preoccupations.

Skills and training in the combined domains of town-planning and cultural heritage.

In any case, the best town planning scheme, like the best law of heritage protection are operational only if the knowledge, the skills to operate them are built and developed jointly. Town planning schemes, laws of heritage are like tools. This pencil is also a tool; it could be the best of the world, if I put it on the table, it will not write alone. A hand and a brain are needed to make it write.

One of the first priority is to bring the local authorities up to a full understanding of the benefits which can result of endowing the city services with skills in the combined domains of cultural heritage and town-planning. These skills have to be displayed in closed relation with the population.

We proposed to build or to rehabilitate a house, in the old district, as a privileged place, support of activities of training and informations for inhabitants and visitors. This "architecture and heritage center" would reflect a desire for balance: a contemporary architecture in the surrounding traditional buildings. It would constitute a place for displaying and retrieving information on the projects and the history of the city.

It would also allow to present small didactic exhibitions, objects and relics explaining to the population, as well old local know-how as the skills to rehabilitate old houses when it can be useful ...

The ageing of the inhabitants in historic districts.

In all the historic cities on which we worked the ageing of the inhabitants was obvious and we were confronted with large difficulties maintaining, even attracting a young population. It is a serious social problem. One of our main preoccupations for a sustainable development of these historic cities is to maintain population in place, to develop activities that interest the inhabitants, materially as much as culturally.

The opening of hosts' houses by the inhabitants has to be facilitated, local activities have to be developed from traditions or in connection with particularities of places, to create local jobs in order to keep the local population on site, and thus to facilitate buildings and sites maintenance.

We proposed local authorities to incite inhabitants to invest in quality products (organized, promoted and followed by charters and by "cultural" labels for traditional products and creations stemming from the crafts and the local industries) ... and with appropriate grants mainly taken from the incomes of tourism.

A common strategy

Tongli is one of the 6 canal towns our Chinese partners asked us to study with them. Those towns are relatively close and similar. We tried to persuade the Mayors and local authorities of those six historic little towns to cooperate, to think their future together, to try to build a common strategy and common projects. We used a image, asking them to imagine each of those historic towns as one classic musical instrument. Not six times the same instrument but six different ones; easy to understand that the effect is more striking and attractive when several instruments are played together. In an orchestra, each instrument keeps its own specificity within a shared harmonious way. From this image, we introduced the idea to associate towns in network for mutualizing goods, actions and equipments, showing as evidences the advantages of networks of water canals which structure the region: thus,

using and rearranging the existing connections between the “canal cities” in the region; emphasize the significance of the landscape as it is formed by the canals.

Balance between tourism and the maintenance of living culture.

The development of tourism helps the development of the economy but at the same time, the living culture suffers. Tourists shops proliferated everywhere in the historic cities: the qualities that visitors appreciate and come for, disappear progressively.

One of our principal preoccupations was that heritage conservation should not serve exclusively fast growing tourism development.

The tourism frequenting, in the typical historic little towns we worked on, has grown up 10 to 30 times in less than 15 years. For example in Lijiang ancient town it grows from 150.000 to 4.237.000 between 1992 and 2007.

Those cities are targets for tourists eager to discover urban atmospheres, heritage, history ... but the historic districts are quite small and the number of tourists is growing. This could be achieved by expanding the current tourist interest, by developing other heritage sites located, but it could not be the only solution; a balance must be found between tourism and the maintenance of characteristics of the places that actually constitute the features of the ancient city and its surroundings.

The increasing pressure of the tourism in some specific historic places is a problem becoming more and more important to resolve in China as in Europe; is it not paradoxical to want, in a concomitant way, the development of the tourism and the development of politics of protection in front of this strong pressure? We tried to look for a less hypocritical, intermediate way. This is a difficult task. Our guideline involves the promotion of a strategy for the protection and enhancement of heritage itself based on development.

Right from the start of our cooperation, in 1998, we opted for the principle of integrated protection, keeping in mind that the towns we work on should remain “living” cities. Protection should cover not only tangible heritage but also intangible. Beyond the built environment and the landscapes, we wanted to save, with inhabitants, the cultural context, the natural environment and the local traditions, while searching for new poles of economic activity.

Our Chinese partners tried, with us, to go towards a social inclusion system, using meetings and discussions, step by step. The result is not yet perfect but we moved ahead together.

Our cooperation is now reinforced by conventions signed recently between our Ministry and our different organisms. It includes technical advices and expertises, exchanges of Chinese and French professionals, seminars and workshops, training programs for local authorities and directors of urban-planning bureau, common exercises for Chinese and French post-graduates students ...

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