

Cultural heritage conservation in historic Wuhan Urban renewal and the creative industry

Summary

The best strategy for sustainable urban development and to limit urban sprawl is care for the existing cities. This is especially a challenge in rapidly urbanizing countries like P.R.China. Wuhan, one of the most important cities in central China, is famous for its unique historic inner city. In order to give the historic urban areas a new future plans are developed for protection and redevelopment. An important strategy in these plans is the use of the creative economy as motor in the development.



International cooperation

Recently ICES, the international urban design studio has prepared plans for the Yiyuanpian project and the Qindao Road Sector in historic Hankou. Arcadis has provided international consultancy support. In an international symposium on urban planning (2007) as part of the Wuhan-Arnhem friendship week ICES Wuhan, the Municipality of Arnhem and Arcadis have discussed strategies for urban renewal in historic inner cities and especially the role of the creative economy.



And previously, in the period 2002-2005 Jiang'An District of Wuhan municipality cooperated in the China-EU Environmental Management Co-operation Programme (EMCP), together with Huazhong University of Science and Technology and Arcadis. The general objective of the China-EU Environmental Management Co-operation Programme is to develop and improve environmental management in China and to strengthen the national capacities in this field through increased contacts and exchanges between China and the European Union, with the ultimate objective of promoting sustainable development. This paper first provides a short outline of the unique historic areas in Hankou Wuhan. Then the strategies as developed in the EMCP project and the symposium are described, followed by an outline of the Yiyuanpian and the Qindao road urban renewal conceptual plans.

The historic district Hankou, Wuhan

The area along Yangtze River in Jiang'An district is unique in the world. Adjacent to the Chinese historic city from 1861 concessions from France, Germany, England and Russia were developed. Every concession employed architects from its own home country. Especially along the river bank (presently Yanjiang Dadao) impressive buildings for consulates, banks and trading companies were developed. But also the housing is interesting: in Wuhan the Linung housing type (which can also be found in Shanghai) was developed. In 1911 uprising started in Wuhan against the imperial rule, which spread over China and ended the rule of the last emperor Pu Yi. The fighting led to extensive destructions in Hankou, after which the concessions were rebuilt. Tensions in 1925 and 1927 led to the handing back to China of the concessions in 1927. Many historic buildings from European architects have survived. Presently the historic area is like a living museum of architecture.



The importance of urban renewal

The policy to protect and improve the historic area is based on a number of reasons. Initially it involved mainly cultural reasons. The area is testimony of a period in history and the area contains a large number of buildings of architectural value. Then social and economic reasons became more important. The inner city is home to many inhabitants, of which many elderly, and the tourism and entertainment industry in the old city provides extensive employment. Only recently two other factors became important for the policy towards urban

renewal. Sustainable development has become a key issue in Chinese policy. The second factor is identity. As cities become more and more identical, the specific identity of a location has become an important issue. The historic area of Hankou has become part of the trade mark of Wuhan, only second to the Yellow Crane tower.



Constraints and challenges

In the historic urban area the following constraints in the urban renewal process are most important.

- Rising land prices - located near the financial and business districts of Wuhan, land prices are high
- Limited public resources for redevelopment – as public funds are limited, it is important to develop strategies in which funds from private resources are attracted
- Ownership – the majority of the buildings is owned by corporations, both private and public, or combinations. Small ownership is scarce, making it unattractive for individuals to invest in improvements.
- Resettlement and compensation – due to the present overcrowding it is inevitable that a part of the population has to resettle. Some families, especially with children, have indicated willingness to move, but compensation should be clear and fair.
- Loss of social coherence – recently part of the existing population has moved to suburbs, while their housing is rented to poor immigrants from the country side.
- Weak groups – part of the population of the historic district is aging and care should be provided both for affordable housing and public amenities.

In addition to the social and economical issues there are constraints with regard to traffic and public services. The growing number of private cars conflict with the narrow streets, and parking space is very limited. The car traffic leads to air pollution, noise and dangerous situations. The space for pedestrians and cyclists was diminishing, however recently the sidewalks in the historic district have been improved.

Key issues

The following key-issues for sustainable urban renewal are as follows.

1. Organisation and financing, including issues as public private partnerships.
2. Legal issues, including laws on the protection of buildings and entities
3. Social issues: resettlement and compensation
4. Technical issues, including transport in historic cities

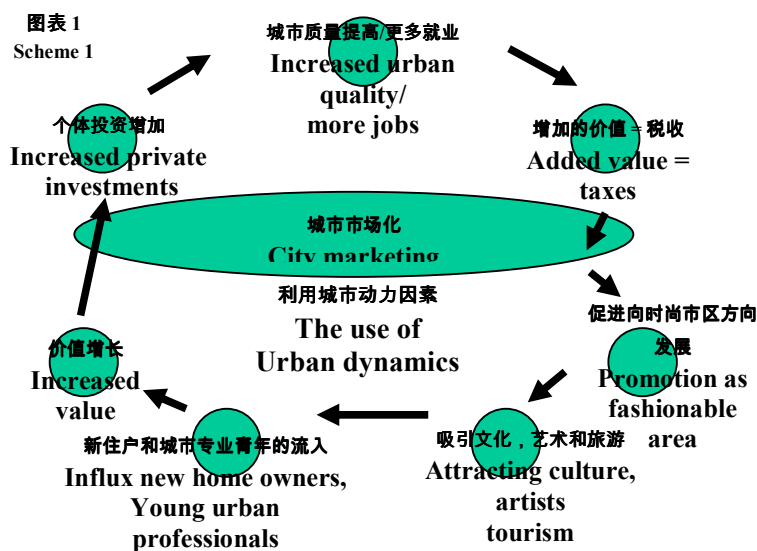
In the discussions a basic question with a high priority emerged: how to gain the support for urban renewal and protection of the area from all parties involved, including all government levels, the private sector and the public. This question involved the need to develop a strategy to get the protection and urban renewal high on the agenda.

The use of urban dynamics: finding the key to the engine

The use of urban dynamics means that economic and social processes in cities are used in our advantage. The funds of the government are usually limited, which means that it is necessary have to find private investment. But the question is not only how to attract

investors, but especially how to attract those investors which want to invest in the improvement of the historic buildings. In this strategy the government works to promote qualities of the area in order to find investors. It is like getting a motor started. The question is how to find the key for the engine.

Experience shows that culture has an important role in the process, a role which is often underestimated. When it is possible to promote an area and make it fashionable, it is possible to attract new inhabitants, especially young urban professionals who start to improve and invest in their own housing. Artists and other “innovators in society” can play an important role. With art galleries etc. people are attracted to the old area and start noticing the special qualities. More people will visit the area and spend more money. The prices of property will rise, which makes it interesting for homeowners to invest in their own houses. This process of gentrification can generate funds to provide for improved social housing and services.



Public private partnerships, combined developments in “package deals”

Renovation of old buildings in the historic district is usually less profitable than new developments. To make the renovation in the old district more attractive for developers it is suggested to create “package deals”. This means that developers can only obtain licenses to develop in new areas when they also participate in renovation in the old historic centre. As they can make more profit on the new developments they can be satisfied with less profit in the historic centre. This package deal option can for instance be used for new developments along the light rail line. The money of these funds can be used for the improvement of special historic buildings, to create an information centre and museum, to produce promotion material etc. But it can also be used to provide special facilities and low-cost housing for disadvantaged groups in the old area, for instance for old people.

Individual home ownership for private improvements

Improvements made by private homeowners can greatly improve the quality of the area. When people start investing in their property the quality of a whole area can be raised. Already some houses (for instance in Jiang’An Village) have been improved. It will be interesting to experiment and promote more examples of such small-scale private improvements. For home owners this can be very interesting as it is foreseen that, as the

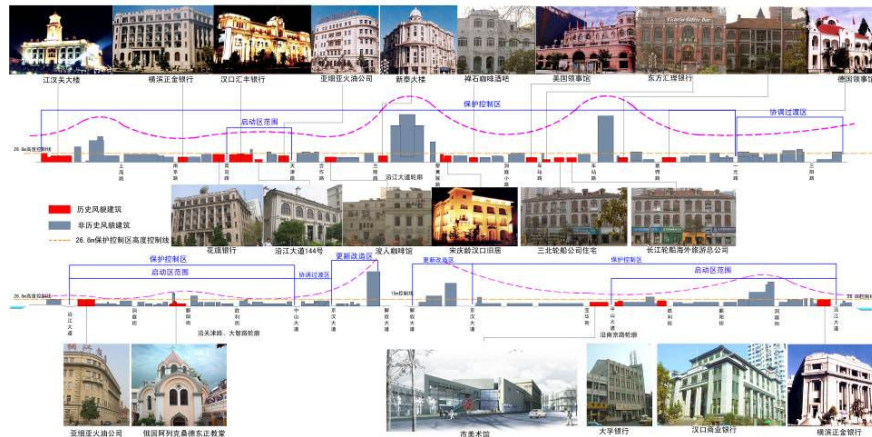
historic area will become more unique and fashionable, property prices will rise above the average and the improvements will turn out to be an excellent investments.

Social plan

For the improvement of the housing areas, the Linungs, the following strategy was developed. The first step in the strategy is to make an inventory of the existing population. This strategy includes community consultation and the preparation of an inventory of the wishes of the local population. Preliminary consultations have shown that when the housing is improved a part of the population wants to stay (especially old people and young individuals), others (i.e. families with child) want to shift to the suburbs. For the people who want to leave a resettlement scheme will be developed including alternative housing and compensation. For old people who remain proper facilities will be created. This fits in the approach to urban development in China where social and physical planning are closely related. Apartments for new inhabitants, as young urban professionals, will make investment in the improvements to the area possible.

Protection of the area and the selected buildings

Over 100 buildings in the historic Hankou area have been listed as historic buildings. These buildings are protected from demolition. Part of these buildings already have been improved and provided with suitable functions. For buildings which are presently vacant suitable functions will be determined.



Traffic and transport improvements

As historic cities were built for slow traffic only, transportation is a serious problem in historic cities. The old city is a place for walking and cycling. However, in order to function the old city must be easily reached by all means of transportation. Public transport will be improved in future, by the construction of several subway lines. For private cars car parking may be created along the edges of the historic area. A rearrangement of the one-way streets for cars is suggested so through traffic will be impossible.

The narrow roads determine the quality of the historic city. In order to maintain the special character for future generations to enjoy the width (profile) of these roads should be maintained. This means that in the historic area no roads should be widened, and the existing line of the front of the existing buildings should be kept, even when new buildings are built.

Cycling is an excellent mode of transport in the old city centre. Unfortunately cycling has become less popular in Wuhan. Cycling will be promoted in the historic area. Tourists, especially young tourists, like to use bicycles for sight seeing.

Landscaping

Trees are most important for the special character of the historic area. Already the government is very careful with plantations. All street trees and other trees should be maintained. New trees can be planted along the roads and other locations wherever possible. A detailed inventory of all trees shows the location and condition of the trees.

Removal of illegal structures

Many buildings in the historic area have been added with all kinds of illegal structures. The removal of the illegal structures in the area will greatly enhance the quality of the area. In some areas, especially inner courtyards, the illegal structures can be replaced with small gardens and children playgrounds. This enforcement of the ban of illegal structures may also apply to shopkeepers, especially in the most important historic parts. The fronts of the shops should be kept in accordance with the original style of the building.

New architecture in the historic context

A city is a living organism. Where derelict buildings of less importance in the historic area have to be demolished new buildings will be built. It is important to design these buildings in the character of the old city. This means that certain features, as building line, building height, materials and colour should fit within the character of the existing city. This does not mean that the new buildings have to be of historical appearance. Good architects can design modern buildings that fit well in the character of the old city.

In order to promote the quality of the design of new buildings in historic surroundings a architectural design competition for architects may be organized, and especially for young planners and architecture and urban planning students.

Heritage open house day and historic city festival

In order to promote the renovation of old buildings it is important to show good examples. In Europe one day of the year the historic building "open house day" is organized. This means that all old buildings in the area are open for the public and provide information for visitors. The "open houses" may include important historic buildings but also improved housing. The open house day may be combined with a Historic Area Festival.

A lively historic city with many activities

With all improvements it is very important not to take the life out of the city. The example of Singapore shows that when a city is renewed too much, it loses its attraction for tourists and inhabitants. Therefore there must be space for street life for people to enjoy. The renovations and improvements should be in such way, that the special character of historic area is maintained. Therefore there should be sufficient space for outdoor restaurants, night markets etc.

Tourism promotion, museum and historic area information centre

A historic area information centre is important, as providing knowledge will improve appreciation of the area both for visitors and residents. The information centre can be combined with a museum. The museum can show all kinds of information and historic documents on the old city. The museum can be housed in one of the beautiful old villas in the area, and one or two rooms could be fitted with furniture from the 19th century to provide the atmosphere. For tourists the museum would provide an excellent introduction to the historic area. Guided walking and cycling tours through the area will be available.

Urban renewal for sustainability and urban identity

With the rapid economic development the demand for improvements to the existing built up areas in China have come into focus. Urban renewal can play an important role in the policy towards sustainable development. Instead of demolition and redevelopment a careful urban renewal, especially of important historic areas, can contribute to the quality of the urban environment, including the demand for a specific identity of locations.

Yiyuanpian project and conceptual planning of the Qindao Road Sector

The Yiyuan historic area is of high importance for Wuhan, both from an economical and social point of view. An important reason to develop plans for the Qindao Road Sector area is the construction of a new tunnel for cars from Hankou to Wuchang under the river Yangtze. The tunnel is drilled and will not cause destruction nearest to the river. However the construction of ramps and access roads will have significant impact on the area. ICES has made detailed and thorough investigations in the area on all aspects of urban planning. The analysis includes social and economical aspects. A SWOT analyses has been prepared for the area defining opportunities and threats. Analyses have been made of the historic street patterns and individual buildings. As inner city location convenient transport is vital for the functioning of the area. In future the area will be served by several subway lines. The construction of the tunnel will improve access for cars. It is also intended to provide parking space, which is presently nearly nonexistent.



Creative industry as motor for redevelopment

In the planning four themes are mentioned: memory, culture, vitality, experience. The area nearest to the river is characterized by large monumental building of high historical and architectural value. Here main functions for trade and commerce are located. Culture and international cultural fusion are keywords in the planning of this section. This is also the area where a new information centre, located in one of the old buildings, can be found.

Creativity and the development of the creative industry is the core of the plan. Around Qindao road, old buildings, such as an old warehouse, will be converted into studios and outlets for the fashion industry.

Between the fashion shops and workplaces there is ample room for small pubs and restaurants.

In the north there are Linungs. The historic Linungs with their characteristic pattern are to be retained as small communities in the city centre.

Further north the area opens up towards the commercial areas around Zhongshan Dadao. This area is already important for arts. Nearby the new Wuhan modern art museum can be found.

Public space

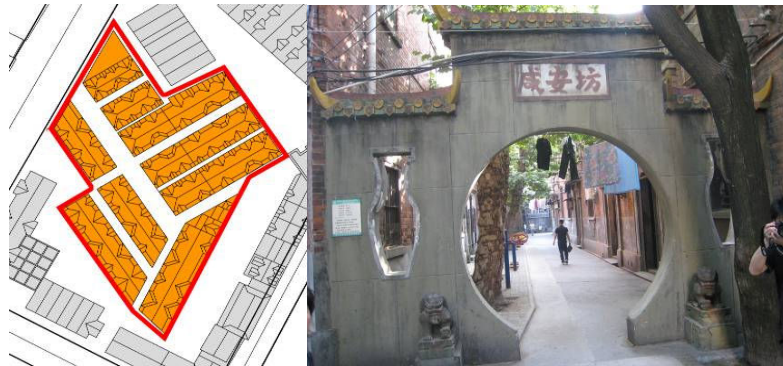


On top of the tunnel (which has to be kept free of development) a new pedestrian promenade is created. This pedestrian promenade binds the surrounding areas together. Walking over the promenade provides a sequence of spaces and experiences. The public area is designed with a variety of forms and experience. In the heart of the area a new square is located. A clock tower provides a landmark for the area. The design of the landmark may be the result of a competition.



Protection and reuse of historic buildings

The historic buildings located in the area will be retained and used for new purposes. These historic buildings include monumental bank buildings along the river, historic warehouses and offices, and even a Russian Orthodox Church building. The monumental buildings along the river front are already reused by national and international companies. A major task is to convert a former warehouse into a building for the fashion industry. Special challenges are the Linung housing projects in the area. These small housing communities have a high cultural value. How to retain these areas for social housing for local residents is a dilemma which is presently under consideration. One possibility could be to dedicate the historic linung area for senior citizens, and to include social and care facilities for the elderly.



Finally

The historic areas in Wuhan are unique in the world. It is a challenge to protect these areas and at the same time provide them a new future as part of a dynamic city. Avoiding urban sprawl starts with proper urban renewal. Reuse of the existing buildings and continuing to build on the compact historic pattern is vital for sustainable and durable urbanization. It is not only sustainable, but it provides liveable cities with a clear identity. And as such it contributes to the main challenges in urban development for the next century.

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