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Planning as a problem

The complex balance of the sites entred on the Unesco list: the case of Lijiang

Claudia Mattogno

In the old city of Lijiang, the traditional architecture, using bricks of unbaked clay, displays the features of the various ethnic groups (Han, Bai, Hy and Tibetan) with the dominant one (the Naxi). This great goal of internal tourism, but also of flows from South-east Asia, is located along the ancient tea and horse-trading route, in the north-western part of Yunnan, in a strategic position on the confluence of passes giving access to the plain. In 1986, it was recognized by the Chinese government as a historic city of national importance; then ten years later it was struck by a violent earthquake and in 1997 it was entered on the World heritage list.

Commercial activities in all the ground floors of the buildings have replaced every other type of activity. A large part of the original inhabitants have transferred, transforming their houses into more profitable bed and breakfasts, coffee shops, internet points, handicraft stores, etc. A glowing display of goods has invaded almost the whole of the urban space, radically changing patterns, habits and ways of life.

Some Unesco reports speak of 'spatial pollution', referring to the concentration of mediocre elements of urban furniture and gaudy signs, in addition to which there is the pollution caused by the mass of refuse produced by tourists. To attenuate the commercial pressure, the village of She He has recently been constructed a few miles away, with houses and shops based on the original building patterns: a large open-air shopping centre with recreational events that attract large

numbers of visitors.

The small rural settlements help to protect the land and its productive use and, at the same time, guarantee the delicate morphological balance of the site, threatened by the expansion of transport and airport infrastructures.

The identity of the place is manifest also through the presence of water. The rivers (Jinsha river and White river) accompany the hydraulic engineering structures of the rice fields and the canals. The latter penetrate the urban structure and are useful for the transport of goods and persons, they give form to areas of collective use, they facilitate the carrying on of small-scale domestic and commercial activities, and they create accurate patterns within the gardens. The ensemble of the urban spaces displays a unitary paving, testifying to historical prestige and commercial wealth that has contributed towards the originality of the building typologies. The types of domestic architecture, which use wooden elements for the bearing structures, masonry of bricks made of lime-plastered unbaked earth, and roofs of glazed grey tiles, reflect the cultural presence of different ethnic groups. The compactness of the building fabric is broken up internally by courtyard building typologies, permitting a sort of spatial permeability between the urban exterior and the living spaces, screened by the traditional town walls. Restoration activities have enabled this heritage to be rehabilitated, upgrading the hygienic and functional characteristics to the requirements of present-day life, contributing towards rediscovering the work of artisans.

The regulations imposed by the Safeguard plan refer to the proper execution of the works and to the conformity of the intended uses by means of a system of

protection with three successive belts starting from the centre. In the first, innermost one, the regulations are very strict and allow exclusively restoration works. In the two other belts the inclusion of new buildings is possible, subject to rigorous controls of height and checks of architectural conformity. Unesco's most recent guidelines help to raise the problem of collective responsibilities for establishing forms of ecologically sustainable tourism. The broadening of the concept of heritage, from the single form of architecture up to and including coherent urban ensembles and the intangible manifestations of culture and traditions, enables more congruous development policies to be identified. The adjustment of the principles of conservation and improvement to include the specific elements of the places can make an operative contribution towards the restoration of the buildings, but also and above all towards improving the inhabitants' quality of life. This can be the result of a diffusion of the network of services and of equipment, of a reassessment of the cultural and social aspects, of an increase in incomes including the entire local population and not concentrated in the hands of just a few groups. Being listed offers an economic support and brings with it the advantages of protection; however, it requires concrete commitments which foresee the drawing up of a legal and institutional framework, an updating of competences and of control provisions, specific technical regulations aimed at guaranteeing the correct nature and the success of the operations, and the organization of adequate training activities. In the case of Luang Prabang, for example, the Safeguarding

plan adopted in 2000 foresees an articulated series of instruments aimed at covering the various sectors and needs that emerge. Upstream of every measure four inventories have been prepared, relating to civil buildings, monasteries, residential typologies and areas of water, which by means of photos and drawings pinpoint the location of every artefact, document its uses and construction characteristics, heights and state of maintenance. The plan, in its turn, consists of eight different sections pertaining to the survey of the types and architectural particulars, the placing of traditional materials, the congruency of the colours, of the fencing and of the vegetation, the current road categories and surfaces, the network infrastructures and lastly the monasteries. Technical standards, together with codes of proper practices for construction, are intended to support the use of traditional technologies and adequate materials, so as to revitalize local competences. The organization of these activities, as well as those of professional training, is entrusted to the 'Maison du patrimoine', managed by Unesco in collaboration with local operators and international cooperators. To avoid bringing historical testimonies down to the level of a mere 'theme park', a twofold approach is of fundamental importance: being able to unite tourist and local economic resources and to cater for the territorial dimension of the assets, from both the functional and the economic-cultural standpoint. At Luang Prabang, a neighbourhood contract has been stipulated, assigning to the village chief the task of directing the process of collective decisions relating to small-scale public works, necessary for the

community, and holding him responsible for maintenance and for respecting the rules of construction foreseen in the Safeguard plan.