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Paolo Avarello

The plan is not enough

edited by Marco Cremaschi

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Problems, policies, and research

Innovation and urban competitiveness in Ob. 2 regions of Italy

Competitiveness and urban policies

Towards a metropolitan agenda in the new programming

Urban policy: an only partial assent

Cities, districts and regional innovation systems: the intersection between innovation policies and territorial policies

The concentration of high-level jobs in the cities

Piedmont

Lazio

Tuscany

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Maurizio Marcelloni

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Francesca Rossi

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Yannis Tsiomis

Bruno Gabrielli

Interview with Manuel Salgado

Federico Oliva

Projects and implementation

An urban project for the Romanina

The centrality of the periphery

The preliminary studies

The history of a competition

Description of the preliminary layout

An approach to the urban project

The competition for the Romanina master plan. The challenge of the centrality

Creating a centre in the Romanina area

Strategies, rules and decision

Francesco Rubeo

Yodan Rofè

Giovanna Fossa, Robert D. Yaro

Cristina Bianchetti

Patrizia Gabellini

Luca Gaeta

Profiles and practices

Recovering historic centres: an urban project for Beijing, Baimixiejie, the White rice road

Making liveable and sustainable major urban streets: a renaissance for multiway boulevards

A comparative study of the New York and Milan convention-trade fair centers

The crisis of the relationship between power and authority in the changing city

Ludovico Quaroni: urban planning concepts before their time

Public land as leverage for urban projects

Anna Maria Colavitti, Giancarlo Deplano

Methods and tools

Museum-city and museum of the city: reflections on an utopia

Received books

Recovering historic centres: an urban project for Beijing, Baimixiejie, the White rice road

Francesco Rubeo

The Baimi Xiejie neighbourhood rehabilitation project is the result of the partnership established between the municipalities of Rome, Beijing and Paris, since 2004, in the framework of the European Commission aided Asia Urbs Programme. The Department of architecture and engineering of La Sapienza University (Rome), the School of architecture and humanities and social sciences of Tsing Hua University (Beijing) and the Institute of politic sciences (Paris) have also participated, with the Municipalities, under the coordination of Risorse RPR SPA, a company totally owned by the Municipality and Provincial Government of Rome. The project has been carried out in two years by 30 experts and 20 trainees in the ICB office (Information Centre Beijing), located in the target area. The relevance of this project is in its holistic approach toward the recovery and rehabilitation of Beijing historic centre, not only respecting the urban and architectural fabric but having, as main objective, the preservation of the social mix existing in the area. It is a truly innovative approach with respect to the Chinese cities development practice. As requested by the EU, it is a completely replicable model that gives to the Beijing Municipality the opportunity to open a new era of recovering and rehabilitating its historic centre. China today gives the feeling of a constant and intense mix with its stratifications, its vitality and speed. On one side stratification and vitality are history, culture and tradition

rediscovered as a network of social values weaved together with architectural and urban-historic aspects. On the other side, speed is the rhythm of the persisting growth sweeping everything. However it is still not too obsessive because absorbed by stratifications and vitality, generating apparent harmony in the most consolidated layers of the city. But the growth of social, economic and production differences is progressively breaking this balance: the city is a mirror reflecting these issues, making them visible to all. Beijing is growing at a frantic pace, urban space changes by the day and the historic centre, where the equilibrium of stratification, vitality and speed takes place, is progressively eroded to give place only to speed and simplification. The *hutong*, literally the alley, has been the place where a true balance between all social, physical and dynamic differences occurred, until a few years ago. "Richness and poverty", 'young and old', 'slowness and speed' have cohabited there sides by sides in semiprivate or semi-public mode, and the privacy and the promiscuity have been balanced by the spatial contiguities. Today the *hutong* is disappearing, crashed by an overwhelming city with its big networks and buildings. Also the need for rehabilitating the old neighbourhoods pushes toward the substitution of the old urban fabric and its social layers by demolishing the old *siheyuan* (traditional Chinese courtyard houses, now fractioned in sub units and decaying) to substitute them with modern 'in-style' ones or with big blocks. Nevertheless the old fabric still has a large extension, about 125 sq.km, and the substitutive approach is now showing its limits. Cultural limits, since the local authorities are reaching

awareness about the danger of loosing identity and tradition; social limits, mainly related to massive relocation issues; economic limits, since the loss of the historic centre is a loss of assets that should instead be valorised and developed to enhance real estate, economic and turistic growth.

The Baimixiejie (the road in the centre of the 6 ha target area chosen by Beijing municipality for this pilot project), the white rice diagonal road, exists from the Yuan Dynasty, as part of the DaDu City that later became Beijing (1369); it was part of the Shi Cha Hai lake's bank, important pole in the rice commerce. After the decrease of the lake's size the Baimixiejie became part of the orthogonal fabric, though preserving its diagonal shape, and the area around it, because of its environmental qualities and the proximity to the Imperial City, became the residential place of important officers. Even if the buildings have been substituted through time, the target area's layout is still recognizable today as it was in Qing Dynasty (as documented in Qian Long Emperor's map, 1750) and several *siheyuan*, once owned by important officers, still exist. The ancient layout and buildings represent a very important asset of the area. From 1949 the *siheyuan* have been confiscated to the original owners and fractioned to be donated to the people by the People's Republic Government, and the yards have been filled with new buildings creating a complex micro-fabric. This process has brought the progressive settlement of a growing number of families in each *siheyuan*, once single-family, withdrawn residences, creating instead a labyrinth of narrow alleys connecting new micro-courtyards, full of life, historic memories and social relations and, at the

same time, places of equilibrium of intimacy and family life.

The living conditions of this micro-fabric, made by one storey buildings with very high density, are often limit-conditions due to the lack of networks and basic infrastructures; this is the reason why the old fabric demolishing process had started, giving way to the development of a new city. The Urban Project is the model we have used to approach this complex situation, considering, at the same time, urban environment rehabilitation tasks and economic, financial and social issues, working in a context that doesn't pay attention to the values of historical and social stratification. Alternative scenarios of rehabilitation have been offered to the local authorities and the feasibility evaluation has been elaborated to help the construction of the Urban Project, on one side, and, on the other side, help the local authorities for future implementation, in the target area and in other parts of the city (replicability of the model). Following the 4 phases of the model's construction: analysis and compatibility framework construction; construction of alternative scenarios; choice of the most balanced scenario; deepening of the chosen scenario and replicable model. The issues that have been developed in the Urban Project are the following: environmental feasibility (at urban environment level); socioeconomic feasibility; economic and financial feasibility; legal, administrative and procedural feasibility. The deep analysis of the neighbourhood, including a door-to-door inquiry, has disclosed the delicate social interrelations and precious urban values, manifesting a low compatibility with strong intervention scenarios. The

objectives of the project have been consequently set as follows: preserve the social layers and networks, recover the architectural and cultural heritage, recover and regenerate public spaces and urban fabric and, at the same time, enhance living standards, build networks and infrastructures. Economic, financial, legal and administrative feasibility has to be pursued in parallel to ensure the sustainability of the process. A system of guidelines has been made to guide the intervention on the urban system, giving two possible options for implementation: a unitary intervention, with unitary management to be carried out in relatively short time; a progressive implementation, with punctual intervention carried out through a longer period. By basing the urban design on the existing historic layout, the project foresees the reorganization of the buildings along the boundaries of the area, the reconstruction of the most decaying fabric made by buildings with no value, the conservative restoration of the *siheyuans* removing the self made illegal buildings and the construction of new services. The one storey typology is maintained, using two storeys only when is strictly necessary to maintain more local population and improve living standards. The rehabilitation model is developed in two different fields: public spaces and built environment. The first issue needs particular care to respect the complexity of the *hutong* characters. The second focuses on typological research to find the best solutions in the restoration and reconstruction processes both, following the tradition and the needs of the people (the failure of other local experiences has shown the importance of the link between typology and traditional way of living).

The economic and financial plan has been conceived to be a support for the local population and local economy, giving compensation to the people who can't afford rehabilitation costs, defining a financial strategy based on public funds and/or external funds, maybe coming from the development of a profitable project somewhere else, to compensate the negative balance of the regeneration process. The main strategies identified for the management of the implementation process are three: public management (with public funding); private (with public funding or, more coherent, compensative development on another area); public-private partnership, with the constitution of a mixed capital New Company. The guidelines, the economic and financial plan with social instances, the procedural model, the management model, the timing plan for intervention and the criticality framework are the output and the tools elaborated by the Asia Urbs chn5-08 team for an effective implementation of the Baimi Xiejie Urban Project. This model, given to the Beijing Municipality, proposes a totally innovative approach for intervening in the historic centre. The 'deletion of the past' is now showing its big limits: the growth in cultural awareness is bringing the upper social classes to return to the *siheyuan*, while the local population is instead opposing the consequent massive relocation to the suburbs where the social links and traditional values are miserable with respect to the *hutong* lifestyle. The model, due to its replicable character, especially in the economic and social issues, can be applied to every part of the old city of Beijing and to

other Chinese historic centres with similar conditions of decay, using a model that can really guarantee rehabilitation and development in continuity with tradition and that valorises the past.