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ISUF 2022

ŁÓDŹ–KRAKÓW

XXIX INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON URBAN FORM

Urban Redevelopment and Revitalisation. A Multidisciplinary Perspective

6th June – 11th September 2022, Łódź–Kraków

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A Multidisciplinary Perspective**

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Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| Antonucci Denise, Santiago Gonçalves Willian – Paraisópolis <i>Favela</i> , São Paulo, Brazil: Urban Morphology through the British School..... | 1 |
| Batunova Elena, Davletshina Albina, Neugebauer Carola – Protracted Transition. Management of residential built heritage in the historic center of Rostov-on-Don, Russia..... | 16 |
| Beltran-Borràs Júlia – On the Search for Transparency between Contemporary Design and the History of the Place..... | 29 |
| Benabdallah Nawal – Urban projects in Casablanca: New Urban forms in experimentation..... | 40 |
| Bisbal Grandal Ignacio, Mariona Oliver, Sabatini Downey Francisco, Silvestro Jose María – Residential real estate financing and urban form in Latin American medium-sized cities: Comparative study between Concepción (Chile) and Mendoza (Argentina)..... | 53 |
| Bolton Liam Thomas – A Quantitative Analysis of the Exoadaptivity of Buildings in London..... | 69 |
| Cai Jiaxiu, Lin Xiaoyu, Liu Hanlu, Liang Xinying, Lin Yuxin, Wang Qi – An across scale comparative morphological analysis Mapping the landscape structure of Lingnan and Jiangnan..... | 81 |
| Chaiwat Pamancee, Neis Hans Joachim – A refugee pattern language – Rpl 9: Design and construction for refugees..... | 90 |
| Che Jihyun, Kim Saehoon, Lee JaeSeung – The impact of COVID-19 on the economic resilience and spatial vitality of urban commercial cluster..... | 104 |
| Chen Liran – Study on the Evolution of the Relationship between Urban Housing Space and Topography in Chongqing’s Mountainous Old-town Riverfront in China’s Reform Era: An Environmental History’s Perspective..... | 118 |
| Chen Changyu, Wan Hongyu, Wang Fan, Huang Chengcheng – Human-centered urban design analytics integrating data-informed and evidence-based approaches: A micro-renewal case in Shanghai..... | 132 |
| Chen Yishan, Yang Qiao, Wu Mingbo – The impact of the Three Gorges Project and heritage protection on the form of Shibao Town, China..... | 142 |
| Cheng Yue, He Yong, Shangguan Keer – Element Identification of Spatial Disorder in Northeast China’s Cities – A Study Using Photovoice Method..... | 154 |
| Chizzoniti Giuseppe Domenico, Lolli Tommaso, Maruelli Elisa – The multicentric renewal of small cities through public space. The post-earthquake situation of Montorio al Vomano (TE) – Italy..... | 166 |
| Chu Tong – Study on the Evolution of Urban Form Types in Historical Districts from the Perspective of Industrial Agglomeration Process: A Case Study of East Beijing Road Hardware Street in Shanghai..... | 181 |
| Crapolicchio Martina – Describing and prescribing. Transitional Morphologies in Rimini, Italy..... | 190 |
| Crosas Armengol Carles, Gómez-Escoda Eulàlia, Villavieja Martínez Enric – From Land-Use Planning to Mixed-Use Configuration. Similarities and Differences in two Urban Fragments of Barcelona Metropolis.... | 200 |
| Dai Xin, Tang Luojie, Tan Wenyong – A Structural and Morphological Analysis of the Road Network of Ancient Mountain Towns: A Case Study of China’s Longxing Town..... | 212 |
| Dayal Arpita – Shifting Spaces of Resistance: A Processual Study of the Recent Protests in the Everyday in Delhi..... | 224 |
| Della Scala Valerio, Dini Roberto, Lanteri Silvia – Riabitare Alicia. Through different shapes and scales of urban regeneration in Salemi..... | 236 |
| Delgado Alina, Torres Juan Carlos – A Morphological Analysis for the Inclusion of Social Housing Projects in the Centre of Guayaquil, a Restriction or an Opportunity..... | 249 |
| Deng Hao, Chen Fei – Urban Corners in Guangzhou: Desing, Morphology and Everyday Life, 1757–1949 | 264 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Djokić Vladan, Milojević Milica P., Milovanović Aleksandra, Djordjević Aleksandra, Pešić Mladen – ISUF vs. HERSUS Glossary: Correlating Urban Morphology to Heritage Awareness and Sustainability of Built Environment..... | 281 |
| Ellenbogen Nirit Rivka, Trivic Zdravko , – Dynamic Place Attachment as Enabler in Redevelopment Programs of Singapore Public Housing Neighborhoods..... | 294 |
| Fava Lins Ana Clara, Ferreira Leite de Mello Caroline, Zigiatti Monteiro Evandro – The role of the open public spaces during the pandemic: A case study of ‘Parque Ibirapuera’..... | 309 |
| Fusco Giovanni, Araldi Alessandro, Emsellem David, Overall Denis – Taxonomy of contemporary urban forms in France: Towards an Urban Atlas through Multiple Fabric Assessment..... | 323 |
| Ge Xuan, Wang Guoguang, Zhang Shifu – Study on Clustering of Urban Morphology Control Units Based on Risk Theory..... | 341 |
| Gohaud Emilien, Schuetze Thorsten – Morphological regionalization for the urban renovation agenda in Daegu, South Korea..... | 353 |
| Gloaguen Thomas, Zaleckis Kęstutis, Gadal Sébastien – Development of new indexes of the ‘Generic City’ in the Baltic coastal city network..... | 365 |
| Gomez-Escoda Eulalia, Fuertes Pere – Proximity and temporality: The role of weekly markets in the metropolitan food system of Barcelona..... | 379 |
| Gopal Arathy, Mathur Mayank, Singh Mandeep – Change in Urban form along streets in Historic cities with Religious cores..... | 392 |
| Gortazar-Balardi Ander, Markusiewicz Jacek – Combined Accessibility Index for Public Transport Networks The case of Donostia / San Sebastián..... | 410 |
| Guo Fangjie – Chinese Economic Transition and the Evolution of Liuhua Clothing Wholesale District in Guangzhou, China..... | 420 |
| Guo Weihong, Ding Yaqian, Yang Guang, Liu Xiao – A Comparative Study on the Spatial Capacity of University Campuses in Guangdong Province..... | 432 |
| Hafizoğlu Eda, Sema Kubat Ayşe – A Historico-geographical approach of Fringe-Belt Phenomena in Kadıköy, Istanbul..... | 448 |
| He Fang, He Yong, Sun Liang – A Study on Color Application and Perception in Urban Neighborhood Renewal Based on Simulation Comparison: Taking the Case of Kuangdaxuefu Street in Xuzhou, China.... | 466 |
| Hu Miaofen, Yan Shuiyu – The Study of Xi ‘an Unitary Settlements’ Redevelopment Strategy in “Mobility Space” Aspect..... | 477 |
| Hu Yushan, Yang Li – Construction of flood control planning model for historical and cultural towns near the river: Taking Daxu Ancient Town as an example..... | 483 |
| Huang Xiaoying – A Research Study on Historical Preservation and Urban Renewal of the Bund..... | 493 |
| Huang Qilin, Jiang Zhengliang – ‘Landscape’ and its atlas analysis of Coastal heritage cities in China..... | 502 |
| Hwang Ah Sun – Suggestion of the necessity of urban redevelopment combining cooperative planning theory and urban form characteristic analysis..... | 510 |
| Iskusov Nikita – The Right to Housing: Differentiation of Practices in implementing Resettlement of Emergency Housing Stock Policy in Arkhangelsk..... | 519 |
| Jalan Advaita – Metamorphosis of Cultural Identity of Traditional and Non-Traditional Gated Communities: A Study of Vadodara, India..... | 534 |
| Jang Gukhwa, Kim Saehoon, Lee Jae Seung , – The evaluation of heat-mitigation strategies on outdoor heat stress in the waterfront public spaces..... | 550 |
| Jin Jiayi, Bertolino Nadia, Huang Kexin – Gender Walks in the City: An Exploratory Study on Gender-Responsive Urban Planning..... | 565 |
| Jiang Shan, Zheng Liang, Chen Yile, Zheng Jianyi – Comparison analysis on typical historic cultural districts with AI machine learning technology – Taking Portuguese and Macao districts as examples..... | 576 |
| Jiang Qiaochu, Zhou Qi – The Functional Transformation on Urban Railway Heritage: A Case Study of Pukow Railway Station..... | 588 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Jing Wanqi, Han Chenyang – Morphological characteristics of the waterfront ancient fortress settlement in South-eastern Shanxi based on System Theory: Space Syntax Analyses of Fort Diji in the Qinhe River Basin, China..... | 601 |
| Josipovič Damir – The paradox of empty apartments and huge daily commuting in Ljubljana: Failures of the urban management..... | 616 |
| Karaselnikova Maria – Peculiarities and Pathways of Single-Family Housing Development in Russian Major Cities..... | 624 |
| Karaselnikova Maria, Maltseva Daria, Iskusov Nikita, Fadeeva Ekaterina, Mardanov Linar, Pisareva Maria, Kharitonov Mikhail, Elkina Elizaveta – Reality vs Regulation: Informal Practices of Spatial Development in Krasnodar, Russia..... | 637 |
| Karbalaei Hassani Elham – The effects of supergrids and superblocks on the transformation of the historic urban fabric of Kashan city in Iran..... | 653 |
| Kilje Bim, Stojanovski Todor – Urban Morphology and Anthropology – Synergies and a Joint Language..... | 663 |
| Kleszcz Justyna – Revitalisation of urban infrastructural and industrial facilities for the function of urban agriculture – examples of good practice..... | 671 |
| Klopfer Florian – Climate (In-) Justice in German Cities? Assessing the Relationship between Land Surface Temperature and Affordability of Housing..... | 683 |
| Kopp Lukas, Rypar Vit, Havlova Zdenka – From street network topology to generic accessibility indices: Supraposition of Graph theory measures on morphological localities..... | 696 |
| Kowalski Kamil, Hanzl Małgorzata – Transformation of urban tissue along downtown arteries Morphometric evaluation of resilient urban form..... | 719 |
| Krawecka Margaret, Thornberg Josep Muntañola – Dancing on the peripheries: Performative architecture and cultural diversity in the city of Barcelona today..... | 730 |
| Kroc Tomasz, Szewczyk Kacper – Transformation of urban spaces of preindustrial cities in contemporary Lodzkie Voivodeship. Heritage preservation perspectives in interdisciplinary approach..... | 745 |
| Kubat Ayse Sema, Kurtulus Irem, Kucuk Caliskan Ezgi – Decoded city: Reading the Historical Peninsula of Istanbul under the shadow of different empires with multi-methods and approaches..... | 762 |
| Kubin Stefan Johannes, Psenner Angelika – Siegfried Sitte: Forgotten Urban Designs..... | 768 |
| Lee Ming-Chun – Greenways as an Integrated Urban Planning and Design Strategy: A Case Study of Charlotte Metropolitan USA..... | 779 |
| Leung Ming Tze, Lin Minqi, Yu Peiheng – An Investigation on the Use of Deep Generative Model in Urban Land Use Planning..... | 788 |
| Li Ningcongying – Morphological design strategies for the renewal of Jiangnan vernacular buildings under the concept of sharing..... | 799 |
| Li Jun, Feng Jiang – Roads, plots and building types in the implementation of urban renewal planning: A case study of Canton, China in the early 20 th century..... | 811 |
| Li Xiangbei, Li Wenxia – Redevelopment and Revitalization of Urban Units: A Case Study of the Extended Area of Longmenhao Historical Block in Chongqing..... | 827 |
| Li Keran, Lin Yan, Xie Yuhu – Research on the informal urban space and the methods of urban design: Based on two Chinese handscrolls in Qing Dynasty..... | 840 |
| Li Xu, Luo Qiuyi – Research on Evolution law and driving factors of rural settlements in hilly areas of western Chongqing from the perspective of urban-rural interaction – A case study of Yongchuan District in Chongqing..... | 855 |
| Li Xu, Wang Xiaofang – Research on Climate Adaptation of Bayu Traditional Settlements..... | 864 |
| Li Hui, Zhu Yuan – TOD-Led Urban Evolution: An Analysis of the Renewal Strategy of London King's Cross..... | 875 |
| Lin Li, Deng Hao – Urban Design Thinking of Early Modernist Pioneers – Taking Adolf Loos and Giuseppe Terragni as Case Studies..... | 886 |
| Liu Rongling – Research on the types of old community public spaces of elderly-young interaction – Take Hebei Province of China as case study..... | 895 |
| Liu Shuhu, Kang Zhen, Feng Manling – An analysis of the spatial evolution and construction experience of the Ancient Fuzhou City..... | 905 |

| | |
|--|------|
| Liu Yihan, Li Jianwei – Polarized Historical Preservation Trajectories: Comparative Studies of Tongli Town and Yaowan Town..... | 915 |
| Liu Yiran, Pezzetti Laura Anna, Zhao Chen – Cognizing Chinese Historic Urban Space by Integrating Morphology and Narrativity. Taking the Mendong Area in Nanjing as an Example..... | 925 |
| Liu Yidan, Tang Lian, Ding Wowo – Typo-morphology in the Urban Renewal Application – Case Study of Urban Design Project in Changting Town, China | 936 |
| Lu Tingying, Wang Yanchu – ‘Floating Island’ and ‘Veranda’: Sharing Media in Urban Shanshui..... | 962 |
| Luescher Andreas, Shetty Sujata – Reimagining Urban Identity within a Legacy City..... | 974 |
| Luo Zixin, Zhu Yuan – Research on Resilient Strategies for Urban Redevelopment in Rail Station Areas.... | 986 |
| Ma Zhijie – Evolution of production-living-ecological space in peri-urban area: A case study in Machong Town, Dongguan City..... | 997 |
| Mader Malgorzata – Amsterdam’s Post-war Buildings Transformations in Bottom-up Processes. The Role of Municipal Housing Policy, Architects and Collaborative Groups of Future Residents in DIY (Klushuis) Affordable Housing Idea..... | 1011 |
| Mahajan Manu – ‘Cultural Turn’ in Old Delhi – post Metro..... | 1026 |
| Mancini Francesco, Glusac Tanja – Fragment, Field and Frame: Reflection on Heritage, Contemporary City and its Identity. The case of Perth, WA..... | 1040 |
| Maretto Marco, Finizza Chiara, Monacelli Alice – The role of the neighbourhood ‘social-building’ unit as a tool for the construction and transformation of the contemporary city. Two case studies in Venice and Tokyo..... | 1052 |
| Marshall Stephen – Towards an urban mereology: A generic framework for urban part-whole relationships..... | 1067 |
| Martyka Anna, Jopek Dorota – Importance of medieval urban tissue in the contemporary realities of a rural commune in the Polish Subcarpathia. Cases of Dębowiec, Jaślińska and Osiek Jasielski..... | 1079 |
| Mawlan Muhetar, Xia Yue, Liang Gu, Huang Chenyi, Tang Lian – Measuring the perceptual quality of pedestrian public space in contemporary Chinese cities – Taking Xinjiekou area in Nanjing as an example..... | 1093 |
| Mustafiz Al Mamun, Tasnim Tasfia, Tabassum Labonno Tasnuva, Afroz Sharmin, Jahan Israt – ‘How to preserve the historical essence through recognising and the effective use of historic urban structure?’ – A Case of Kalurghat Bridge at Chattogram..... | 1106 |
| Meng Chengyu – Exploring the relationship between polder morphology and land system..... | 1119 |
| Mitrović Nikola – Urban Highway Areas: Reconsidering Morphological Elements of the Approach to Urban Studies..... | 1125 |
| Moreno Daniel – Evolution of urban renewal and verticalization: The case of the Santiago Metropolitan Area between 1990 and 2019..... | 1132 |
| Naghibi Maryam, Forgaci Claudiu, Faizi Mohsen – Spatial fragmentation as an opportunity for resilience building through urban acupuncture: Learning from Tehran and Bucharest..... | 1144 |
| Neis Joachim (Hajo), Pamaneé Chaiwat – A world of thousand independent regions. Transforming the World to Small Countries as ‘Independent Regions’..... | 1157 |
| Nekrasova Ekaterina – Revitalization of Brownfields in Russian and Baltic Cities: Comparing Interaction Models between Stakeholders in Development Projects..... | 1173 |
| Ni Haozhan, He Yong, Di Yizhuo, Wu Hao – Research on renovation strategy of existing residential areas in Shanghai from the perspective of residential satisfaction..... | 1191 |
| O’Connell Derry –Adapting the Town to a Diffusing Retail Interface..... | 1202 |
| Oguz Irem, Kubat Ayşe Sema, Kaya H. Serdar – Exploring the Effects of Tourism on Fringe Belt Areas: The Case of Antalya, Turkey..... | 1208 |
| Oikonomou Maria, Christodoulou Charis – Evolution and transformation processes of urban form: Urban tissues in Thessaloniki, Greece..... | 1225 |
| Okretic Gabrielle, Mudo Eloise, Viana Franklin, Adrião Yara, Adilson Manuel, Mendes Brenda, Holanda Virginia, Farias Cicera – Academic contribution to collective building of the city – An experience in the countryside of Ceará – Brazil..... | 1236 |
| Okretic Gabrielle, Mudo Eloise, Viana Franklin, Adilson Manuel, Adrião Yara, Mendes Brenda, Holanda Virginia, Cicera Farias – The collective construction of planning in small cities– the experience of technical assistance in the construction of the Master Plan for Carnaubal..... | 1248 |

| | |
|---|------|
| Pichihua Yeimis Milton Palomino – The Latin American city recodified? Pandemic and emerging urban legislation..... | 1272 |
| Pietrogrande Enrico, Dalla Caneva Alessandro – A piazza for Pedavena in the Belluno Dolomites: Towards recognition of an urban identity..... | 1279 |
| Prouin Clément, Fusco Giovanni, Caglioni Matteo, Overall Denis – Morphogenesis of urban peripheries in the 20 th century: Examples from the French Riviera..... | 1288 |
| Psenner Angelika, Tobisch Susanne – On Streets. Streets as an Element of Urban Fabric..... | 1304 |
| Qian Zhu – Political, legal and administrative conditions for urban ecological tissue renewal: an investigation of a national wetland park in China..... | 1328 |
| Racine François – Reading and understanding built environments in Quebec (Canada): Urban morphology at the service of a sustainable urban design approach..... | 1341 |
| Remesar Antoni, Vergel Javier – Bon Pastor (Barcelona) A neighbourhood with a future? What future?..... | 1357 |
| Rezgui Hana, Ait Haddou Hassan, Camilleri Guy – Towards an organizational model of BIM practice based on collaborative engineering..... | 1368 |
| Riondino Vito Antonio – The places of the crisis as a gnoseological field of new interpretative processes... | 1377 |
| Rociola Francesco Giuseppe – Jerusalem beyond the walls..... | 1386 |
| Sandalack A. Beverly – The Causes and Consequences of School Closures in Inner-City Calgary..... | 1398 |
| Sandalack A. Beverly – Landscape Approaches to Climate Change, Economics and Pandemics – Rethinking Calgary Parks and Open Space Systems..... | 1411 |
| Sarihan Elif – The Concept of the Urban Palimpsest. The Urban Fabric Transformations in Inherited City image..... | 1424 |
| Schroeder Stella – Transformation processes in informal produced public spaces..... | 1438 |
| Şik Seyrek Cansu Iraz, Widera Barbara – Comparative analysis of vertical green façades with movable panels from the perspective of their thermal performance and applicability in sustainable urban areas..... | 1451 |
| Siliang He, Yinsheng Tian – Fringe Belt Phenomenon in Chinese metropolis: A Case Study of Guangzhou... | 1463 |
| Stellacci Stefania – Re-building untold histories to preserve historical fragments along the street <i>Rua do Benfornoso</i> in Lisbon..... | 1475 |
| Stojanovski Todor, Kirt Strandbygaard Sofie, Maudsley Ann, Abarkan Abdellah – Swedish and Danish typomorphology – The historical approaches and new conceptualizations for informing urban design..... | 1484 |
| Sukhbaatar Amgalan, Togtokhbayar Munkh-Erdene – ‘Redevelopment’ from low-rise collective housing to free-market-driven towers: Neighborhood-scale urban morphology in Ulaanbaatar..... | 1497 |
| Sun Yuan, Wang Zhu, Zhou Congyue – Evolutionary analysis between geographic typology and urban morphology of Jiangnan historical watertowns in northern Zhejiang, China..... | 1505 |
| Tomczak Joanna – A study on the space composition designed by Stanislaw Niemczyk in the context of evolving religiousness and spirituality..... | 1518 |
| Toprak Ilgi – ‘Serial vision’ as a method for exploring street vitality and urban change..... | 1530 |
| Trabattoni Luca, Capotorto Margherita – The city of entertainment as an experimentation field for improving the daily public space..... | 1537 |
| Trisciuglio Marco – From Iconographies to Morphologies. An Overview on European and Chinese Urban Forms through 10 Images..... | 1551 |
| Turk Didem – A Deep Learning Approach for Urban Block: Automated Extraction Tool for Urban Forms..... | 1560 |
| Uribe Alaniz Francisco – Re-imagining Crowsnest Pass: Findings ways of redeveloping/reskilling a coal mining community..... | 1570 |
| Usó Martín Fernando, Palomares Figueres María Teresa, Such Carmen Jordá, Bernad Iborra Federico, Martínez Carmel Gradolí, Pascual Herrero Vicent – Modern urban form renewal at Cheste Workers University..... | 1587 |
| Usui Hiroyuki – Optimal floor height to estimate building height from the number of storeys considering building use in the Tokyo metropolitan region..... | 1601 |
| Utzig Lukas, Karimi Kayvan – Urban segregation of London social housing estates: Measuring access to the city and the question of regeneration..... | 1611 |

| | |
|--|------|
| Utzig Lukas, Vaughan Laura, Misselwitz Philipp – Retain or Rebuild: Different Pathways of Redevelopment in Urbanising Chinese Villages..... | 1622 |
| Vannelli Giovangiuseppe – Think outside the box. Towards new transient morphologies: The case of post-emergency housing..... | 1634 |
| Venerandi Alessandro, Zamani Vahid, Porta Sergio – On the relationship between urban form and amenities: A new perspective from Qom (Iran)..... | 1650 |
| Vicuña Magdalena – Urban verticalization morphologies: applying the anatomies of density theory in three Chilean metropolitan areas..... | 1663 |
| Wang Yanchu – From a Historic Place to a Sharing Campus: Case Study of the Santa Teresa Campus of the University of Florence..... | 1674 |
| Wang Han, Bao Li – Exploration design on public and open space along the city wall based on typomorphological research..... | 1687 |
| Wang Hanyan, Xu Kai – Opening-up of extra-large blocks in China..... | 1703 |
| Wang Zhongwei, He Yong – Research on the Configuration of Supporting Facilities based on the Perspective of Living Circle – A Case Study of Wujiang District, Suzhou, China..... | 1715 |
| Wang Zhixuan, Sheng Qiang – Differences of breakfast Spatial Distribution in Real and Virtual Space: An empirical study in the central city of Beijing..... | 1728 |
| Wang Jiayin, Yang Fan – Research on the urban residential space fabric based on complex network analysis. Evidence from built-up urban area of Shanghai..... | 1739 |
| Wei Jia, Lijun Wang – A study on the type pedigree of Chinese traditional settlement centrality spatial schema.... | 1754 |
| Wei Hanyu, Wang Guoguang – A Review on Dynamic Conservation of Ancient Cities from the Perspective of Urban Morphology..... | 1763 |
| Wei Hanyu, Chen Jiaxin, Wang Guoguang – Spatial-temporal Changes and Driving Forces of Nanning San Jie Liang Xiang from 1947 to 2020..... | 1774 |
| Wu Yihao – Morphological Transformation of Historic City Center in Modernization based on Map Archive – Case Study of Hangzhou..... | 1790 |
| Wu Jianchi, Feng Jiang – The intertidal zone and waterfront – A study on the morphological mechanism of the marshland zone in the south of Guangzhou city..... | 1802 |
| Wu Yilong, Liu Yuqiu – From formality to informality: “Sharing Planners’ as a design method in urban development of Tilanqiao Lilong residential area..... | 1818 |
| Wu Jingfen, Sheng Qiang – Spatial Resilience of Local Places: A comparative study on Beijing’s breakfast service before and after Covid-19..... | 1829 |
| Wu Jingfen, Sheng Qiang, Li Xinyi – Research on Quantitative Evaluation and Influencing Factors of the Vitality of Newsstand – an example of Beijing..... | 1841 |
| Wu Jingfen, Sheng Qiang, Zeyang Xu – The spatial resilience of the community’s commercial vitality: Comparative study on spatial renovation of Beijing Hutong district before and after..... | 1852 |
| Xia Xuefei – To solve the problem of low utilization of space under viaduct by sharing strategy..... | 1864 |
| Xie Yuhu, Lin Yan, Li Keran – Research on the integration path of historicity and life of urban Space – Taking Xuzhou Context Axis as an example..... | 1877 |
| Xiong Xiangrui, Wang Yanhui, Sabaté-Bel Joaquín – Historic structure and cultural consciousness: The space regeneration of Jinling Machinery Manufacturing Bureau, China..... | 1885 |
| Xu Chen – Spatial form compact development path of coal mining cities – take Tangshan as an example..... | 1898 |
| Xu Jiaqi – Exploration of the Renewal Strategy of Historic and Cultural District by the Mean of Sharing – an example of Shanghai Tilanqiao Area..... | 1912 |
| Xuanbing Yang – Scale and composition, a strategy of redeveloping the historic area in Shanghai Old Town..... | 1926 |
| Yang Li, Hu Yushan – Impacts of daily supply on the layout of small commercial outlets in old communities: A Case Study of Shapingba street, Chongqing, China..... | 1938 |
| Yang Mingxing, Tian Yinsheng – Research on the resilience assessment method of urban form based on ‘resolution’..... | 1949 |
| Yang Shuya, Tian Yinsheng, Li Gang – The System of Floor-area-ratio (FAR) Transfer for Historical District Preservation and Renewal: Guangzhou’s and Taipei’s Experiences in a Comparative Perspective..... | 1956 |

| | |
|---|------|
| Yoon Soyoung, Kim SaeHoon, Lee JaeSeung – Strategies to enhance the competitiveness of the city by realization of publicness..... | 1964 |
| Zamani Vahid, Mohammadi Mahmoud, Ghalehnoee Mahmoud – Morphological Investigation of the Urban Form of Qom (Iran) at the Micro-scale: Spatial Distribution of Streets and Activities..... | 1970 |
| Zeng Yue, Yuan Qifeng – Social determinants behind water towns in Pearl River Delta, China whose historical tissues survive the impact of industrialization: Take three towns within the Sangyuanwei world heritage irrigation structures as examples..... | 1979 |
| Zhand Sepehr – Political reform and the form of the city – Reading through the adoption of modern planning in Tehran using space syntax..... | 1990 |
| Zhang Nan – Changes in the landscape pattern of the north bank of Xiyuan based on drawing archives (1669–1980)..... | 2008 |
| Zhang Nan, Huang Qilin, Jiang Zhengliang, Li Sai – The Types and Distribution of Urban Image ‘Composite Pattern’ – An Empirical Study based on Qingdao, China..... | 2019 |
| Zhang Suxin, Jachna Joseph Timothy, Ma Yuanhong – The dialogues in the regeneration of metropolitan heritage conservation areas: Case of Pingjiang Area, Suzhou..... | 2024 |
| Zhao Dongqi, Pezzetti Laura – Interpreting urban voids as the morphological reading tool of Historic Urban Landscape: The case study of former British concession in Tientsin..... | 2035 |
| Zhu Yuan, Wang Hao – Isochronal 3D-station realm model and Multi-data based urban renovation strategies in TOD development – a case in Heifei, China..... | 2046 |
| Zhuo Xingyu, Hu Yushan, Yang Li – Spatial analysis and protection of traditional villages based on spatial syntax: A case study of Linlue Village of the Dong ethnic group in Sanjiang, Guangxi..... | 2055 |
| Zhuoyuan Sun, Yong Huang – Discussion on the effect of topographic barrier on the morphology of Chinese mountainous cities: an example of Southwest China..... | 2064 |
| Zlatinova-Pavlova Veneta – Balancing the Quality of Public Good within the Dynamics of Urban Form. Experiences from the redevelopment of residential areas in Bulgaria..... | 2074 |

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From Iconographies to Morphologies. An Overview on European and Chinese Urban Forms through 10 Images

Abstract A recurring misunderstanding pushes Western architects to transfer the images, the uses and the symbols of European cities’ spaces to projects located into the Chinese cities, that in reality show different and specific images, uses and symbols in their own urban spaces: the idea of the Western square as a place of individual interplay, able to create the ‘society’, cannot work in the same way in China, where the role of the street as the place of the family life and the urban community’s awareness cannot find a correspondent in Europe.

The ‘Transitional Morphologies’ Joint Research Unit (at Southeast University and Politecnico di Torino from 2018) operates on the formal analysis of the dynamics in urban form between Asia and Europe in order to improve the design practice through new technical and conceptual tools and often adopting comparative methods.

The aim of the paper is to describe the methodology, the contents and the outcomes of a comparative research activity developed by the Author within the context of the Joint Research Unit in the last seven years (2015–2021) in Nanjing, at SEU School of Architecture.

Keywords Chinese Urban Form, Chinese Urban Culture, Chinese Urban Morphologies.

Introduction and Background

The starting question of the work was explaining how urban morphology and iconographic studies on urban contexts can collaborate in order to map the features of urban spaces in different cultures, even adopting comparative methods for analyzing. The original plan consisted in describing the form, the size and the use of ‘urban spaces’ in the European City, as well as in the Chinese one, through a diachronic sequence of ten images (from the Middle Ages until today).

The methodology adopted consisted in showing an image (often a painting or a fresco, but also a photograph or a photogram or a drawing) of a specific and well known European urban landscape and analyzing it in detail, recalling similar images and similar spaces or study cases in Asia.

The 10 Western study cases are:

1. the rising of the Italian City in the ‘Effects of Good Government’ (by Ambrogio Lorenzetti in Siena 1338);
2. the invention of perspective in one of the three panels showing the *Ideal City* (the one now in Baltimora, maybe by Fra’ Carnevale 1484);
3. the life, reality and atmosphere of an ordinary European City considering ‘View of Delft’ (by Jan Vermeer 1661);
4. the urban design as *drama* in the engrave ‘View of the Basilica of St. Peter’s Square at the Vatican’ in Rome (by Giovanni Battista Piranesi 1740);
5. the rules and the invention’s interplay (or the logic of composition) demonstrated by the so-called ‘Palladian Building’s ‘capriccio’ (by Canaletto 1759);
6. the perception of the modern city in ‘The Carnival in Boulevard des Capucines’ (by Claude Monet 1873);
7. the industrial city in ‘Periphery’ (by Mario Sironi 1920);
8. the urban space described ‘into a camera’ as ‘The Kiss in Front of City Hall Paris’ (by Robert Doisneau 1950);
9. the complexity and the contradiction in the contemporary city through ‘Wings of Desire [The sky upon Berlin]’ (the movie by Wim Wenders 1987);
10. the dystopian city between science fiction, comics and contemporary urban space told by the ‘Incal’s’ city (by Moebius and Alexander Jodorowsky 1981–1988).

Methodology

Through the sequence of the 10 study cases, it is possible to tell the story of the development of urban forms in the development European urban culture: from the spontaneous settlement of citizens (rich of symbolic and social values) to the idea of the city as a geometric project, from the role of merchants and communities in creating urban spaces to the rhetoric idea of the city as a theatre's *scena*, from the image of the city as a collection of objects lead by designers' phantasy to the 'technical flows' (and vertical) city at the end of 19th Century, from the industrial city made by factories and chimneys and roads to the realistic city portrayed by a camera as it were a document, from the attention of movies towards the contemporary cities (its complexity and its contradictions) to the comics and science fiction glazes towards the future of the city.



Figure 1. The Effects of Good Government (by Ambrogio Lorenzetti in Siena, 1338) and Along the River During the Qingming Festival (清明上河图, Qingming Shanghe Tu, by ZHANG Zeduan, Song Dynasty): comparison between details
Source: Ambrogio Lorenzetti 1338, Zhang Zeduan, Song Dynasty.

All the 10 examples are part of the imaginary of Western scholars and ordinary people. The 10 steps of the sequence are emblematic of a specific phase in the historical development of urban form (as topic for urban morphologists' studies and research).

However, from a comparative point of view, what is important and interesting is finding a series of 10 images, coming from the Chinese culture, able to describe, in parallel with the 10 Western ones an analogue sequence or, at least, a list of other 10 study cases that could show either analogies or differences with the starting list.



Figure 2. The Atlas with the sequence of the 10 Western images
Source: author's own work.

Results and Discussion

1.

Around two centuries before the fresco by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, during the Song Dynasty, Zhang Zeduan painted his 'Along the River During the Qingming Festival' (清明上河图, 'Qingming Shanghe Tu'). It is a scroll, 25.5 centimeters high and 5.25 meters long, describing the activities of common people in a Celebration Day (or maybe just a sunny and brilliant day) in the ancient city of Bianjing (today Kaifeng in Henan).

Watching that scroll, slowly and carefully, is like watching a movie, feeling to be part of an urban tale of the Chinese life of so many centuries: persons, animals, objects, jobs, houses, chariots and other vehicles. Any moments inside the city walls are portrayed as well as any moments in countryside. Some elements, like the market, the city gate and the great bridge are the Chinese antecedents of the fresco in Siena.

The main street, and not the main square, seems to be the most important urban space. Scholars counted the objects in the scroll and made the list: 814 humans, 28 boats, 60 animals, 30 buildings, 20 vehicles, 8 sedan chairs and 170 trees. But only about twenty women appear and only women of low social rank are visible out of doors unless accompanied by men.

There are several versions of that painting and, like in the play of tradition/transmission, every one changed (a little or a lot). The ‘Suzhou Imitation’ is a remake by a Suzhou workshop artist of the Ming dynasty, the ‘Qingming in Ease and Simplicity’ was a remake by an unknown artist of the Ming dynasty, while the ‘Qing Court Version’ is an 18th-century remake by the collaborative effort of the Qing court artists Chen Mei, Sun Hu, Jin Kun, Dai Hong, and Cheng Zhidao. Another 18th-century remake is due to Shen Yuan.

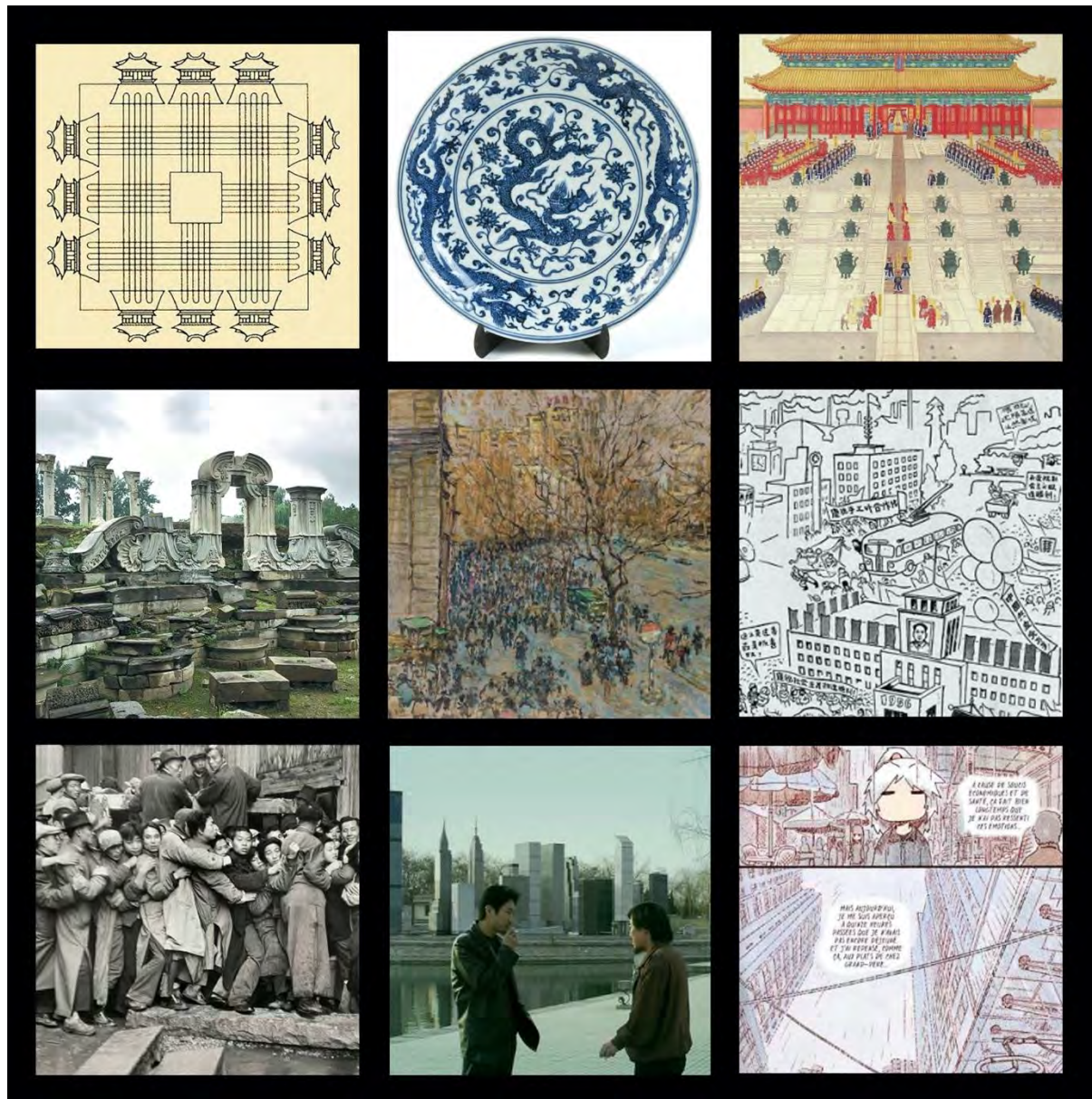


Figure 3. The Atlas with the sequence of the 10 Chinese images
Source: by the author's own work.

2.

In ‘Sanlitu Jizhu’ (part 1, vol. 4), book on various Confucian rituals, finished in 962, at the beginning of the Song Dynasty, the description of the ideal form of the Chinese capital cities (Wangcheng) was made with a picture that is very similar to some Roman, Persian, Egyptian, Assyrian pictures of the same topic: the city at the center of Universe.

A sharp description of the ideal form of Chinese capital cities can be found in a previous historical record called the *Kaogongji* (考工记), 'Record of Trades', or 'Records of Examination of Craftsman', or 'Book of Diverse Crafts or Artificers' Record', a classic work on science and technology in Ancient China, compiled towards the end of the Spring and Autumn period (from approximately 771 to 476 BC, first half of the Eastern Zhou period):

The city is of nine li in square perimeter with three gates on each side, each gate opening to a broad avenue divided into three parallel ways, of which the middle one is for vehicles, the left for male pedestrians, and the right for female pedestrians, thus forming a square lattice within nine ways running from north to south and another nine from east to west. In the center of the city stands the imperial palace with the ancestral temple of the imperial family on its left and the She, or the Altar of the Earth, on its right. In front of the palace but still within the forbidden walls, is the imperial court while behind the Forbidden City lies the market (Anonymous 771 – 476 BC).

3.

European people of 16th century loved a lot Chinese porcelains, there was a very important global trading of them, so they tried to discover a way (the famous 'northwest passage') to reach China from a water road, passing through Canada and Bering Strait, in order to avoid the complicated trips along the Silk Road. Netherlanders were the greatest merchants of that century.

Within the *corpus* of the Vermeers' paintings, 'The View of Delft' and 'The Little Street' are just like the cover and the introduction to a collection of human tales. The artist generally painted the rooms of the houses of Delft, where the same golden light enters in the lives of women and men, describing, with a deep taste for detailing, all the materials and objects that are part of the life of human beings: a lacemaker is working carefully, a woman in blue is reading a letter, a couple is drinking a good wine, a girl is watching in a mirror the effects of a pearls necklace on her face, a milkmaid is dropping milk in a vase, a geographer is studying a globe or some maps, an artist is painting the portrait of a girl, some girls are playing a guitar, a keyboard, a flute, a soldier meets a smiling girl, another young girl seems happy or in trouble (we cannot understand) with her blue and white turban and her pearl earring.

In one of that room there is a man with a strange hat. In another one a plat in foreground seems to be a precious Chinese Ming porcelain with blue and white ornaments. The strange hat of that man in fact is coming from Canada (according to Timothy Brooks' book of 2008, 'Vermeer's Hat') and in that painting there is also the map of those water views, useful maybe to arrive in China for Netherlands ships.

But in the end, the new commercial path proved just as difficult to navigate. Thus, it was the inhabitants of Delft who took the initiative to produce their own precious porcelain with white and blue figures, imitating the Ming tradition, with deep roots in ancient Persia. For these porcelains, known as Delft porcelain, the small town of Vermeer is nowadays famous all over the world.

We will never know if the plat in foreground of the painting entitled 'Girl reading a letter in front of a window' has been made in Delft or in Jingdezhen (or in Nanjing itself), but the story is linking the two cultures in name of global trading, aesthetical taste and overall daily life objects.

4.

The use of Western perspective in a theatral image is evident in a picture of a very famous Chinese album (ink and color on silk) by Qing Kuan (Zhao) and other court painters, portraying 'The Grand Imperial Wedding of the Guangxu Emperor and Empress Longyu' (happened on February 26th 1889, in the last years of Qing Dynasty). The picture shows the opulence of the wedding ceremonies and the nuptials held in the outer court are shown with brilliant colors and with vivid detail. According to the tradition, a lot of persons, member of the imperial court, are keeping a specific position, becoming part of the space and of the architecture (as they were the columns of San Peter rather than not the persons in the Roman square).

The wedding ceremonies between the Emperor and Jinfeng was an extremely extravagant and spectacular occasion in a year maybe fundamental for the history of Modern China (in 1898 the same Guangxu undertook 'The Hundred Days' Reform or Wuxu Reform') but also still deeply placed in the sense of tradition of late Qing.

The picture in perspective is showing the 'Hall of the Supreme Harmony' and its court, seen from a high point on the 'Gate of the Supreme Harmony', where (according to imperial traditions) the route of the Emperor's wedding procession had to pass. But on January 16th 1889, the Forbidden City had caught fire and the Gate of the Supreme Harmony burnt down. There was no time to rebuild it and so the Empress Dowager Cixi ordered the construction of a tent resembling the gate. Built in paper and wood, it had exactly the same height and width as the original gate, with the same decoration. So, it was an illusion, useful to represent a drama, like into a theatre.

5.

A very original part of the Yuanming Yuan Garden in Beijing was designed for the Emperor Qianlong by the Italian Jesuit Lay Brother Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shining, 1688–1766) in the same years in which Canaletto was painting his Venetian ‘Capriccio’. It was the Western mansions (Xiyang Lou) section of 18th century European-style palaces, fountains and formal gardens.

The Italian Jesuit and also great artist (able to keep together Western and Chinese fine arts) designed a ‘Capriccio’ and ‘Pastiche’ at the same time. The admiration of the Emperor for the European decorations, ornaments, plans, façades and gardens and his desire to re-create a Western side of the Imperial gardens pushed Castiglione in making a real ‘collage’, combining mazes, pavilions, arches and columns.

Surely, in the context of the Imperial gardens, Xiyang Lou (the hill, the triumphal arch, the palaces, the fountain) was a clear heterotopy, a space that has nothing to do with the surroundings. It will be destroyed in 1890 by that British Lord Elgin, whose father had partially destroyed the Parthenon in Athens. It will also be rebuilt (as a ‘Capriccio’ in a new theme park) in 1997, in Zhuhai, Guandong, 2300 km far from Beijing. Tourists love any ‘Capriccio’ a lot.

6.

The Paris that Monet and the other Impressionist painters portray is the new European city, now dominated by the idea of progress (railway stations), by technology (light everywhere, first gas and then electric), by innovative means of transport (trams and subway lines, but especially cars). It is a ‘City of Flows’ which the technical urban planning manuals begin to represent in section: height of buildings and trees, width of the road, the role played by the subsoil, where all kinds of systems are located.

If in the contemporary late Qing Dynasty era, China, for cultural and historical reasons, seems far from this process, the development of Shanghai starting from the 1920s as a modern and innovative city that looks to the West (‘the eastern Paris’), allows to rediscover the attitude of the Impressionist painters even among some Chinese artists who are gradually rediscovered nowadays and who all have a close relationship with Shanghai (and sometimes even with Paris). Pan Yuliang (woman artist from Yangzhou, 1895–1977) was educated in Shanghai, destined to have great success in Paris from the end of the 1930s, extraordinary in working on a Chinese version of the Parisian experience of Auguste Renoir (one of the most famous impressionists).

Guan Zilan (also a female artist 1903–1986), who introduced *Fauvism* in China as one of the artistic outcomes of Impressionism, was born in Shanghai and there remained all her life after a period of training in Japan. In Shanghai Ren Weiyin (1918–1994) studied and there opened his studio after 1937, as a painter with an existence that is intertwined with the political history of modern China. His painting ‘Nanjing Road in Shanghai’ seems to repeat very closely the lesson of Claude Monet: ‘Boulevard des Capucines’ seems to be here, close to the Huangpu River.

The ‘Bund’ and Nanjing Road in Shanghai become the places chosen to tell the story of the new Chinese city. Some largely spread pictures, between 1920s and 1940s, describe exactly that urban landscape. Some of those pictures are still showing on the foreground the World War Memorial (later destroyed by the Japanese Army). Shanghai in 1930s is a city that can be described in section just as Paris: it is another ‘City of Flows’ as Paris was half a century before.

7.

The factory as an urban building is the great protagonist not only of the architecture of the modern movement (as a completely new typological theme in the Twenties), but also of the radical change of the city. Chinese figurative art, like the art of Europe, also celebrates the entrance of the factory (and of the periphery) into the urban landscape, but it does so a little later, in the years preceding the ‘Great Leap Forward’ (1958). First of all, the propaganda posters, often anonymous, are by now very important in helping realizing the imagery and cultural climate of an era of Chinese history (so much that they are multiplying museums, such as the PPAC in Shanghai, and private collections, such as the Hafna Foundation, which exhibit them as pieces of art). The new urban themes are the same as those of Sironi: railway stations, trams, trucks, factories, workers' houses and chimneys.

A whole series of artists are also involved in that new urban landscape, deriving from the teaching of Feng Zikai (1898–1975): their drawings, between the comic and the satirical, play with tradition and give a vivid portrait of the new industrial China of the 1950s.

Among all the images, Wu Kuiqiang's table ‘Socialism is Great’ (1953) is taken from a comic in the ‘Shenyang Daily’, the newspaper of one of the first large industrial centers in modern China. Between locomotives, chimneys, factories and workers, the cartoon returns the same world of propaganda posters, but with a type of representation not so far from the painted scroll ‘Along the River During the Qingming Festival’ (12th century). Tradition seems to be always alive in the folded side of Modernity.

8.

LIFE magazine was also deeply interested in China, sharply in the Doisneau years, in one of the maybe most complicated historical moments for the Country. The pictures printed on the pages of the American magazine remains nowadays as quite interesting witnesses of urban spaces and the daily life in them.

The young American photographer Jack Birns (1919–2008) was sent to Shanghai in 1946 and there he described (beyond the open support for Nationalist Party) life and spaces of a city already international and cosmopolitan and yet full of contradictions, between elegant foreign diplomats and businessmen and poor and neglected local people.

Just two years later, again for the same magazine LIFE, one of the most famous photographers of the twentieth century, Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908–2004), will take the photo of the market crash during ‘The Last Days of the Kuomintang’. He will later move on to Beijing, where in 1950 (just the year of the Doisneau kiss in Paris) he will describe the theater of the new China, in an also romantic *dilemma* between tradition and innovation, cultural description and political celebration. Some of his photographs would go down in history.

Wilson Hicks, picture editor of LIFE magazine from 1937 to 1950, once said: ‘the photographic journalist of tomorrow should be a bachelor of arts, a master of photography, a doctor of journalism. Then, in tomorrow’s World of the Image, he could become an editor someday, whereas today he is prepared only to be a photographer’ (Words and Pictures: An Introduction to Photojournalism, Harper, New York 1952). Effectively, reporting the urban space of a city nowadays is a precis job, that requests sharp skills.

Often photography fixed forever some urban scenario and the kiss by Doisneau is now on puzzles, T-shirts, mugs. But, at the same time, everyone could portrait the urban space he/she loves with his/her ‘smartphone camera’, making new interpretations of it and multiplying its images.

9.

Cinematograph became, above all in the last 30 years of 20th century, an extraordinary instrument to tell and document urban space and natural/cultural landscapes, always showing facts at the present (even past facts) in the meanwhile it is there, in front of spectators. What frescoes, paintings, engravings, drawings and even photographs had just suggested (it’s possible diving into reality while watching a picture), thanks to cinema is immediate and clearly evident.

It may be possible that Wim Wenders is the real hero of this idea of cinema and of the interplay between spaces and persons: from ‘Alice in the Cities’ (1974) to ‘Paris, Texas’ (1984), from ‘Faraway, So Close!’ (1993) to ‘Lisbon Story’ (1994), from ‘Buena Vista Social Club’ (1999) to the ‘Salt of the Earth’ (2014), his long carrier demonstrates the possibility offered by movies to introduce spectators to urban (and natural) space through an intense and poetic storytelling.

Obviously Fenyang in Northern Shanxi Province is not like Berlin in Germany, a county level city in China is not like a capital city of Europe, but Jia Zhangke (born 1970 and generally regarded as a leading figure of the ‘Sixth Generation’ movement of Chinese cinema) is maybe the Chinese movie director more similar to Wim Wenders in describing together the places and the lives of people in it. In fact, he is also strongly interested in using space to describe society, specifically the Chinese society of nowadays, and European public of cinema fans love him a lot. Even if he is much younger than Wenders, it is possible to consider him as ‘the Chinese Wenders’.

‘Mountains May Depart’ (山河故人, 2015) is maybe his masterpiece. In three temporary acts (1999, 2014, 2025), it tells the story of a woman in Fenyang (played by Zhao Tao, wife of Jia Zhangke, actress in many of his movies).

When she is 25 year-old, the lady must decide between two suitors: a gas station owner (whom she has little connection with but could drastically improve her material living conditions) and a poor laborer in a local coal mine and finally decides to marry the first one in the hope of leaving Fenyang. In 2014, she is now divorced from the husband and still lives in Fenyang, known as a prominent and generous woman in the city. The husband, remarried and got richer, lives in Shanghai with their 7 years-old son, Daole (English ‘Dollar’), who very seldom goes to visit her. In 2025, the son is attending college in Australia in a globalized world, constantly fighting with his father, loving his Chinese language teacher (an older woman). After talking with her, he decides to go back home to see his mother again.

The dramatic plot has been represented in three different film frame formats (one for each historical period of the story), as a tribute to the art of storytelling through cinema. The urban spaces of the movie are first of all the ones of Fenyang, where the events of 1999 are located: a county-level city, with a traditional part, site for Spring Festival celebrations, some small shops and above all the coal mine and some institutional buildings. Shanghai, where the 2014 facts are located, is the international face of China nowadays, represented overall as an expected goal into the hall of a railway station. Melbourne in Australia, as the globalized horizon/social dream of contemporary Chinese middle class, is a smart city of the next future, full of skyscrapers and speed highway, seen from a plane or a helicopter.

Like Wim Wenders, also Jia Zhangke creates specific spaces rather than stages. It can be observed in relation to the protagonist of his movies: especially the theme park in ‘The World’ [世界] (2004), the flooded town Fengjie at the Three Gorges Dam in ‘Still Life’ [三峡好人] (2006), the industrial plant in the short movie ‘Black Breakfast’ (2008), the Shanghai Bund in the documentary ‘I Wish I Knew’ [海上传奇] (2010), the constantly changing Chengdu settlement of 24 City [二十四城记] (2010), even in the short movie shot on iPhone XS ‘The Bucket’ [一个桶] (2019).

10.

In fact, the case of ‘The Black Incal’ is the same that happens with many of other visionary architectures of the 20th century authors (from Le Corbusier to Hilbersheimer, from Wright to Arata Isozaki, from Yona Friedman to Archigram): at the beginning those are just visionary *manifestos* and then, gradually, they became reality, transforming themselves into the precise mirror of the great contemporary metropolis, in Asia, in the United States and in Europe. Rem Koolhaas, in 1978, perfectly described this paradigm with his unforgettable book ‘Delirious New York’.

Even China does not shun this phenomenon: many authors of contemporary comics (漫画), who often collaborate with Western authors, have described the spaces of the city: from the Nanjing in 1937 described by Zhou Zongkai (2014), to the Shanghai of Golo Zhao (2012), from the solitary Beijing illustrated by the young ‘blogger’ Yao Ren (2017) to the Spring hutong’s landscape of a water-colored Beijing by Jun Nie, from the Kunming crowded villages described by Li Kunwu (2014) until the impressive and vivid Hong Kong urban spaces in the drawing by Stella So Man-Yee (2018).

However, one of the most interesting episodes of the use of the visionary paradigm for urban spaces in recent years’ China is the science fiction novel ‘Folding Beijing’ (北京折叠) by the young Tsinghua PhD Candidate Hao Jingfang. In her vision, Beijing³ (within the 6th Ring) is divided by three classes physically, sharing the same earth surface in each 48 hour cycle: the first class with 5 million population occupy the space for 24 hours from 6 am to 6 am, after which the earth’s surface turns upside-down; the second class (25 million middle-class people) enjoy 16 hours from 6 am to 10 pm until the buildings fold and retract; the third class (50 million lower level people) can be awake for 8 hours till 6 am, to treat rubbish of the other two cities in another unfolded and high rise buildings city.

When each class is turned down or folded, the residents there are put into sleep: travelling between classes is tightly controlled and violators go into jail. The moment of change from one city to another city, from one Beijing to another Beijing, is called ‘the transition’.

Conclusions

This paper has been written to confirm the methodological value of comparative studies. Admittedly, the 10 Chinese images cannot sharply correspond to the 10 Western images. However, that is not a real weak point. In deeply reading differences and similarities, we could better understand not only the discontinuity of Chinese urban culture (and perhaps Chinese urban morphologies) in comparison with European urban culture (and perhaps European urban morphologies) but above all, the intimate features of European urban forms in themselves. In the present condition of urban studies between China and Europe, only a comparative attitude seems to be able to show intriguing results to be reached. It is an attitude that deserves to be cultivated and used (and the Sino-Italian team ‘Transitional Morphologies’ is engaged nowadays exactly with that challenge).

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