



Echoes of Italian lessons on the typo-morphological approach: A planning proposal for Gulangyu Island, China



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ABSTRACT

As an island with a colonial urbanscape, Gulangyu (located off the coast of Xiamen, a city in Fujian Province in southern China) has been deteriorating into a touristic 'thematic park' since the last decade, resulting in a decrease of its original inhabitants and habitability conditions. Inspired by Italian lessons of various and evolved interpretations of the typo-morphological approach, this paper explores the possible interpretations and implications in Gulangyu in a two-pronged project: (1) by 'systems'-four local characterized systems related to the specific physical urbanscape and matching practices of uses; and (2) by 'parts'-four typical featured areas with respective typo-morphological features and facing crucial challenges. This provides a deep understanding of the island's situation and further develops and coordinates a specific framework of strategies for solving its distinctive problems. In particular, it helps in seeking to balance its preserved historic heritage, improvement of the local built-environment to meet contemporary needs and the development of a tourist economy - an urgent and salient task on the urban agendas of historic areas worldwide. As one of the first studies of the Italian typo-morphological approach in historic areas of China, this paper also demonstrates the notable possibility that such European, or more precisely, Italian ways may be practiced in the Chinese context, which may inspire further research and practices in China and beyond.

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1. Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed an increasing amount of historic centers in contemporary cities becoming 'thematic parks' oriented to a tourist urban economy, resulting in a loss of original inhabitants and habitability conditions (Bonfantini, 2016). In China, apart from the devastating blow created by rapid urbanization, a new threat to the country's built heritage has emerged from a trend to developing touristic supermarkets and thematic parks dating back to at least 1997, when the Chinese cities of Lijiang and Pingyao were first inscribed in the World Heritage List (WHL). Since then, due to the consequent tremendous economic and political profit involved, historic heritage has been widely regarded as a 'cash cow' and providing a 'superexcellent' opportunity to attract economic

investment and improve the image and 'soft' power of the country. However, lured by short-term interests, most local Chinese governments only focus on conserving physical appearances, which usually involves merely maintaining a few monuments, while overlooking (or even the intentional promotion of) the shrinkage in infrastructure and replacement of the population for developing tourism. Gulangyu, an island with outstanding colonial urbanscape, is a typical case, with a growing conflict between heritage conservation, tourism development and habitability.

Fortunately, this current risk has been gradually recognized in the last fifteen years, and not just in Europe, as the updated broader definition of the heritage issue has progressively occupied a salient position on urban agendas (Bonfantini, 2015; Geppert, 2015). In particular, the *Recommendation on Historic Urban Landscape* (UNESCO, 2011) adopted by the UNESCO General Conference in 2011, as the only such recommendation specifically dedicated to historic cities rather than historic centers or sites, considers the impact of dramatic tourism development and urban transformation.

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In this paper, however, we examine an earlier approach developed in Italy dating back to the 1950s in the context of Gulangyu Island. Italy has an extraordinary and remarkable tradition of urban conservation both in theoretical and practical experimentation that is widely considered to be one of the country's most important and significant contributions to international urban planning (Albrecht, 2015; Bonfantini, 2012; Gabellini, 2015). In particular, its typomorphological approach has made a prominent methodological contribution, providing a powerful perspective for understanding urban dynamics and its layering process (Bandarin, 2015; Bonfantini, 2004; Gasparrini, 1994).

Following this introduction, section 2 provides a literature review and section 3 explains the various interpretations of the Italian typomorphological approach and accompanying planning devices for 'zoning'. Section 4 then illustrates both the basic situation and research questions relating to the Gulangyu case and the analytical method of two layers' interpretation of 'zoning'-by 'systems' and by 'parts'. Based on a series of analyses of the historic evolution of typomorphological features and field survey, the four local systems and four characterized parts of Gulangyu are outlined in section 5 to discuss the respective salient planning issues and corresponding optimizing strategies, and develop suitable guidelines. Some reflections on the significance and implications of the study are provided in section 5, with suggestions for potential further improvement.

2. Literature review

With the rising public concern over the retention of historic continuity, pursuing a balance between heritage preservation, economic development and social sustainability has become an increasingly prominent issue on Chinese urban agendas. As Whitehand and Gu (2007) indicate, research into urban conservation in China has made a quite limited contribution to the international debate. There are few general historical and theoretical treatises (e.g. Qian, 2007; Steinberg, 1996; Xie & Heath, 2016), although some works debate specific economic and social issues, for instance, power structure and funding systems (Shin, 2010; Su, 2010), and social capital and public participation (Tan & Altrock, 2016; Yung & Chan, 2011; Zhai & Ng, 2013). In terms of methodological development, some issues have been explored concerning classified building types, e.g. energy efficient (Singh, Mahapatra, & Teller, 2013) and refurbishment (Corrado & Ballarini, 2016), and divisional urban sectors, e.g. neighborhood vitality (Dhingra, Singh, & Chattopadhyay, 2016a) and urban elements on the Historic Urban Landscape (Dhingra, Singh, & Chattopadhyay, 2016b). However, of the three prestigious urban morphology schools, the British Conzenian approach is the only one to have been introduced into China, with geographical morphological analysis used for managing and conserving the Chinese historic urban landscape (e.g. Whitehand & Gu, 2007; Whitehand, Gu, Whitehand, & Zhang, 2011).

Indeed, compared with the well-adopted international notions of heritage, there has been a considerable gap in introducing and applying Western advanced methodologies for conservation into China. In particular, the achievements of outstanding Italian planning practices based on the typomorphological approach, both from theoretical and methodological perspectives have been little utilized in China to date. There are only a few extant general introductions (e.g. Duan & Qiu, 2009, pp. 119–142; Liang & Sun, 2007), one primary study of the rehabilitation of the former French concession of Tianjin (D'Agostino, 2015), and some typological analyses in Suzhou, Shanghai and Guangzhou (e.g. Chen, 2009; Gu, Tian, Whitehand, & Whitehand, 2008; Li & Gauthier, 2014). A series of elementary methodological studies of limited width and depth have either introduced its general theoretical and

practical achievements to China, or focused on one specific aspect with the analysis of the evolutionary processes of building types and urban tissue. These have had little profound influence, however, particularly on improving the current planning of China's historic centers and cities. In other words, they have not provided a specific interpretation of how to apply the approach for analyzing and solving the many prominent challenges currently facing Chinese planning practices. In response, this paper, for the first time, analyzes and develops detailed interpretations and implications of the Italian typomorphological approach for present planning practices in China, more precisely, in Gulangyu, which is rapidly becoming a lower-level characterless 'thematic park'.

3. Outline of the Italian typomorphological approach

As a reflection of the destruction of historic centers by large-scaled postwar reconstructing activities, Italy since the 1950s has demonstrated a series of prestigious practices in urban conservation, particularly through the exploration of the typological, morphological and mixed methodologies (Fig. 1).

The typological approach can be dated back to the 1950s, with the emergence of a clear trend focusing on the study of building types in Italian architecture and urban planning practices. This involved the diachronic and synchronic analysis of building types as a measure, which enabled the provision of a powerful and convincing reference to how building types and their aggregated urban forms made up urban areas, and which should be preserved and/or developed in future. It also paved the way for the typological paradigm, in the renowned revitalization of Bologna's historic center during the 1970s, where the typological studies guided the 'inserted' completion (Fig. 2) and private interventions for the maintenance of existing buildings by shaping targeted regulations (Cervellati & Scannavini, 1973; Maffei & Whitehand, 2001; Marzot, 2002).

However, this typological approach attracted criticism for being too concentrated on the evolution process of physical forms of one or a few types of buildings. Thus, the alternative, morphological, approach emerged, which defined a new way for treating historic cities through the comprehensive description of their morphological characteristics that was not just limited to conserving monuments, but extended to urban tissue and social balance. The preservation planning of Urbino by Giancarlo De Carlo around 1960 was widely considered as the milestone of this approach. It regarded the historic center as an aggregate of various morphological units divided into 26 sectors (1–26) (Fig. 3), through the principal consideration of the homogeneity and similarity of the morphological characteristics of urban tissue (De Carlo, 1966; Vanderburgh, 1992). Clearly, the planning proposal for Urbino focused more on urban 'sectors', or 'units', and the quality of the fabric, rather than the single 'bits' in Bologna, where the intervention was ruled through the study of building types.

Following Bologna and Urbino - the two landmark achievements of Italian urban planning - further significant developments were made in Italy in the last decades of the 20th century, many of which are less well known internationally. Caltagirone's remarkable mixed typomorphological approach in the 1980s (Fig. 4) (Leone, Iacona, Merlo, & Quartarone, 1988), for example, outlined seven spheres (A-G) of context, covering the historic center's various systems of offices, convents, palaces, houses, former offices, green areas, etc., according to their homogeneous morphological characteristics. Typological analysis was also developed inside the blocks surrounded by main road networks, with the further classification of sectors 1–13, where most buildings were residential with homogeneous features of the time, connected street

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