Conducting Heritage Tourism-Led Urban Renewal in Historic Urban Spaces: A Case Study of Datong, China

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Abstract

To boost the local fiscal revenue through capital investment promotion, urban renewal/ regeneration led by heritage tourism has become a critical way of creating the city brand, designing tourism destinations, and attracting property developers and investors to cities. However, current practices lack proper understanding and consideration in preserving and interpreting the authentic identity in urban China in recent times. This has led to simply copying and pasting historical forms and urban spaces, thus resulting in an identity crisis due to the reproducibility of tangible heritage – physical form, architectural style, superficial living style, etc. Against this backdrop, this research explores the involvement of both tangible and intangible heritage rooted in historical Chinese cities which are undergoing heritage tourism-led urban regeneration. It also attempts to understand the influences of authentic intangible heritage – social activities, cultural events, collective memories and others – in designing and shaping urban spaces to preserve and reconstruct the place identity.

To achieve these aims, a conceptual framework based on the relevant concepts relating to historical heritage and culture-led urban regeneration was developed to lead the research. Moreover, this research will examine and assess concepts and themes developed from the conceptual framework by employing qualitative research methods (including semi-structured interviews, on-site observation and photography, and analysis of relevant planning and designing schemes) in the case study of heritage tourism-led urban renewal in the old town of city Datong, China.

A new conceptual framework was then developed in this research, contributing to the field of urban regeneration and place identity in both theoretical and practical aspects. The developing process of the conceptual framework and its findings help to provide a theoretical way of exploring the manifestation of local history and cultural resources in preserving and reconstructing the place identity of the Chinese historical urban context undergoing heritage tourism-led urban regeneration.

Keywords: heritage tourism-led urban regeneration, Chinese historical urban landscape, reconstruction and preservation of urban space, urban history and cultural resources, place identity

1. Introduction

In recent decades, urban regeneration driven by history and culture is attracting the attention of many cities worldwide, and the role of history and culture as the leading factor is also highlighted

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in Chinese urban regeneration (Montgomery, 2003; Kana, 2012; Sepe, 2013; Zhai and Ng, 2013; Xie and Heath, 2017; Wang and Gu, 2020). Since the 1990s, thousands of historical towns across China have been subject to government-led rapid urbanisation and redevelopment. As a result of globalisation, the urban development of many Chinese cities has contributed to transforming the urban environment by constructing spaces and buildings with similar styles and functions, making different cities look monotonous and identical (Kinoshita et al., 2012; Sepe, 2017). It is argued that cities and urban areas which are being urbanised and subject to property-led urban regeneration are losing any differentiation between urban places, itineraries, social customs, and behavioural patterns, which together are contributing to a crisis of urban identity (Bentley, 1999; Harvey, 2006; Jiaming and Scott, 2013).

However, the development and implementation of urban conservation plans based on the guidelines and regulations exhibited a 'top-down' governmental approach, in which the joint conserving strategy is affected by various and overlapping plans approved by different government authorities (Qian, 2007). In this context, the history and culture-led urban regeneration and urban conservation have been taken as promotional slogans to initiate redevelopment and renewal projects for the local government's political achievement and economic gain (Zhai and Ng, 2013; Xie and Heath, 2017). Therefore, a number of key criticisms were identified in the planning process regarding China's urban conservation: namely, an unsystematic and unorganised strategy, ambiguity in the targets of the conserving plan, difficulties in defining the role of conserving urban areas, and conflicts between different controlling departments and the actual users (Liu and Wan, 2006, pp. 24-28).

Based on the above problems, this research aims to explore how urban history and cultural resources manifest in preserving and reconstructing urban spaces of historical Chinese cities. The research also aims to gain insight into heritage tourism-led renewal of the ancient Chinese urban area (and the old townscape) within the context of conservation-led urban renewal. To achieve these aims, the thesis is structured around the following research objectives:

To gain insight into and understand how historical and cultural resources are integrated with preserving and reconstructing historical urban spaces in the context of heritage tourism-led urban renewal in China.

1. To gain insight into and understand how historical and cultural resources are integrated with preserving and reconstructing historical urban spaces in the context of heritage tourism-led urban renewal in China.

2. To develop a methodological framework for exploring concepts and themes in relation to historical and cultural resources in the context of heritage and tourist-led urban renewal in historical Chinese cities.

3. To examine the processes of preserving and reconstructing urban spaces in the case of the old town of Datong, China, as a city undergoing heritage and tourist-led urban renewal.

4. To identify recommendations for improved planning and design of public urban spaces to meet the requirements of both local and tourist users within the context of Chinese urban cities undergoing urban renewal.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

To gain insight into and understand the role of local history, culture and tourism in influencing urban design and user behaviour, this chapter explores existing studies and theories that address relationships between critical themes of the research objectives – local history and culture, urban design and urban design identity. Moreover, understanding local residents' and tourists' experiences and feelings of the urban regeneration in the historic town or urban centre – a place that is both a permanent residence and a tourist destination – is critical in forming and shaping urban identity and place image with historical and cultural characters.

2.1. Shaping Place Identity in Urban Design

In the past several decades, the formation and definition of urban design and relevant theories have received contributions from a clutch of researchers, designers, and writers – Kevin Lynch,

Jane Jacobs, Gordon Cullen, Christopher Alexander, Aldo Rossi, Jan Gehl, John Montgomery, among others. Based on their concepts, the key to producing or making a good urban space is to understand the structured characteristics of the city or place and "the underlying dynamic of activity" (Montgomery, 1998, p. 95). Moreover, Lynch (1960) and Alexander (1979) stressed that 'mental maps' could contribute to the formation of personal senses and images of the city, which visitors and local users use as imagery signages and guides different urban places. The presence of a mental map was considered as the critical factor that distinguishes 'place' from 'space' as the urban place is the product of physical settings, activities, memories, and emotional components, and all of them offered a space with the unique meaning, sense, image, and identity (Hague and Jenkins, 2005; Sepe, 2013).

Within such a context, it is important to understand and recognise the valuable characteristics of place identity. All the characteristic components could serve as expressions of the distinctive urban place (uniqueness) and safeguarding of a sustainable urban image (continuity) in terms of facing urban changes (Lynch, 1960; Sepe, 2013; Sepe, 2018). The notion of identity is the product of both an individual's feelings interacting with specific places, which indicates that identity is a dynamic state that varies as circumstances and places change, but it is still possible to recognise and identify characteristics when integrating with the process of place-making (Relph, 1976; Sepe, 2013).

2.2. Concepts of Integrating Culture and Tourism in Urban Regeneration

The involvement of urban history and the local culture has become a driving power as well as playing a leading role in the developing process of urban regeneration in recent decades (Montgomery, 2000; Wansborough and Mageean, 2000; Carmona et al., 2010; Sepe, 2013; Sepe, 2018). Urban history and culture not only add value to the place identity but also serve as a reference point for urban regeneration, and how to express and interpret historical and cultural resources is critical in safeguarding and constructing a sustainable urban image (Carter et al., 1993; Sepe, 2013).

Figure 1. Conceptual framework developed from the chapter on literature review

Under such context, the research examined multiple concepts relating to the involvement of history and culture in urban regeneration in different aspects:

- Integrating culture with urban design: the Creative City (Jacobs, 1960; Hall, 1998; Landary, 2000; Florida, 2004; Sasaki, 2010; Kana, 2012; Sepe, 2013), Cultural Quarters (Wansborough and Maggean, 2000; Montgomery, 2003; McCarthy, 2005).

• Design and planning tourism destinations: designing tourism precincts (Getz, 1993a; Griffin and Hayllar, 2006; Ye and Jeon, 2020) and heritage trails (Galt, 1995; Howard and Pinder, 2003; Al-hagla, 2010).

• Memory, meaning, and social space: cultural heritage and social memories (Southworth and Ruggeri, 2010; Harrison, 2013; Dempsey et al., 2020), from 'third places' to 'fourth places' (Oldenburg, 1989 and 1999; Mehta and Bosson, 2010; Aelbretch, 2016).

Based on the application of those conceptual models and their characters mentioned in the previous section, this research aims to form a basic conceptual framework for the involvement of history and culture in urban regeneration in the Chinese historical urban context. As most culture-led or tourism-led urban renewal aims to reconstruct iconic districts and develop the physical environment, the critical issue is how to combine local history and cultural resources – distinctive characteristics, traditions and customs – within the mixed modern and ancient urban context. After examining the theoretical relationships between characteristics developed from the above concepts and the Chinese historical urban context, this research formed a general conceptual framework to lead the following research methodology (Figure 1).

3. Research Methodology

This research aims to present the methodology applied to identify the relationship between urban regeneration and the place-making process and to assess factors of local history and culture integrating with the historic urban context. Therefore, the methodology used in this research needs to focus on categorising the relevant conceptual factors from the literature review chapter and evaluate both existing and potential elements through the methodological framework. In this regard, a case study was selected to provide a detailed and intensive analysis of the historic urban centre, and the integration of both conceptual framework and research site could help to conduct developed research methodological approaches.

3.1. Introduction of the Case Study – The Old Town Centre of the City Datong

To achieve an understanding of the involvement of history and culture in culture-tourism-oriented urban regeneration and to explore different groups of users' views of the urban renewal progress in shaping and reconstructing place identity, a case study method was adopted for this research.
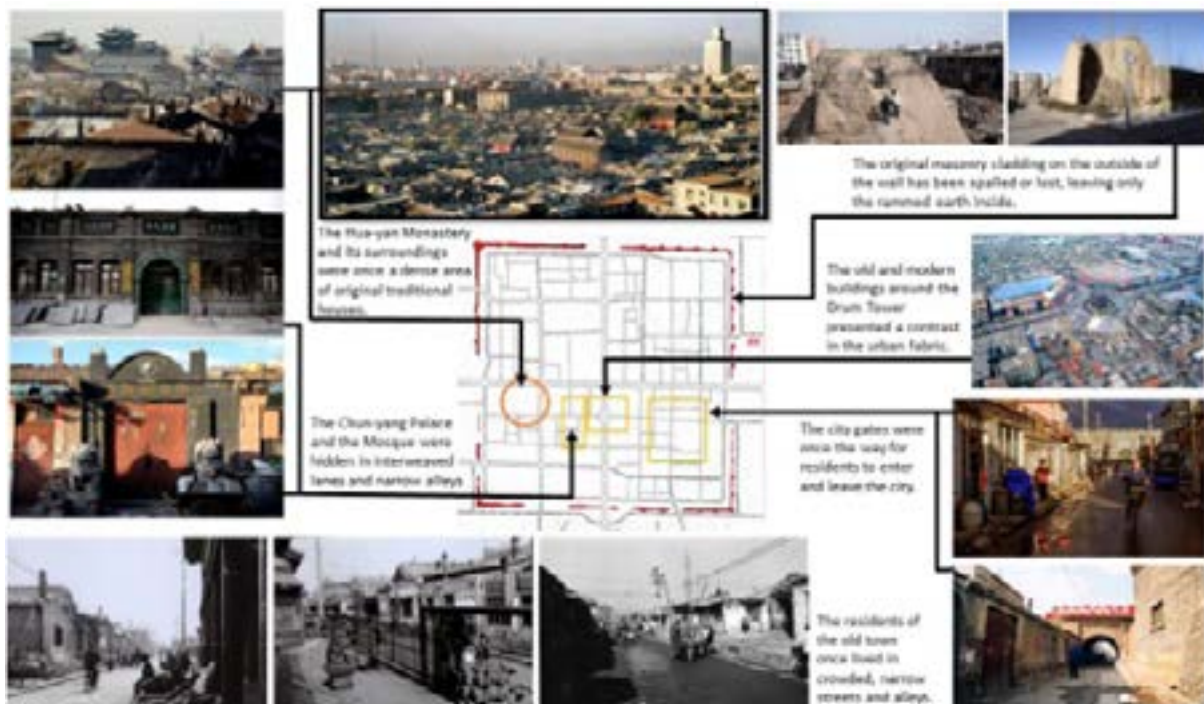

Figure 2. Map of the remaining historical sites and landmarks before the implementation of the urban renewal project (Images adapted from the Evening Newspaper of Datong)

The site selected for this research was the ancient urban centre of Datong, China, which has

been the subject of a government-led urban regeneration project focusing on cultural tourism since 2008. In 2015, the researcher began work on investigating the expression of local history and culture in the renewal of the old city centre, and several typical issues relating to the research questions were identified.

In aspects of planning strategy and implementation of urban regeneration, the physical environment got the most attention while the intangible dimensions (activities, experiences, meanings, etc.) received less attention and are therefore lacking any real manifestation in the whole project. Urban vitality and authenticity were two major issues encountered when the researcher conducted a pilot study in Datong – a place with elegant buildings and an improved environment with few people compared to the past, and both locals and tourists questioned the city's 'original image'. The following figures show the general situation before and during the implementation of the Old Town Renewal Project (Figures 2 & 3):
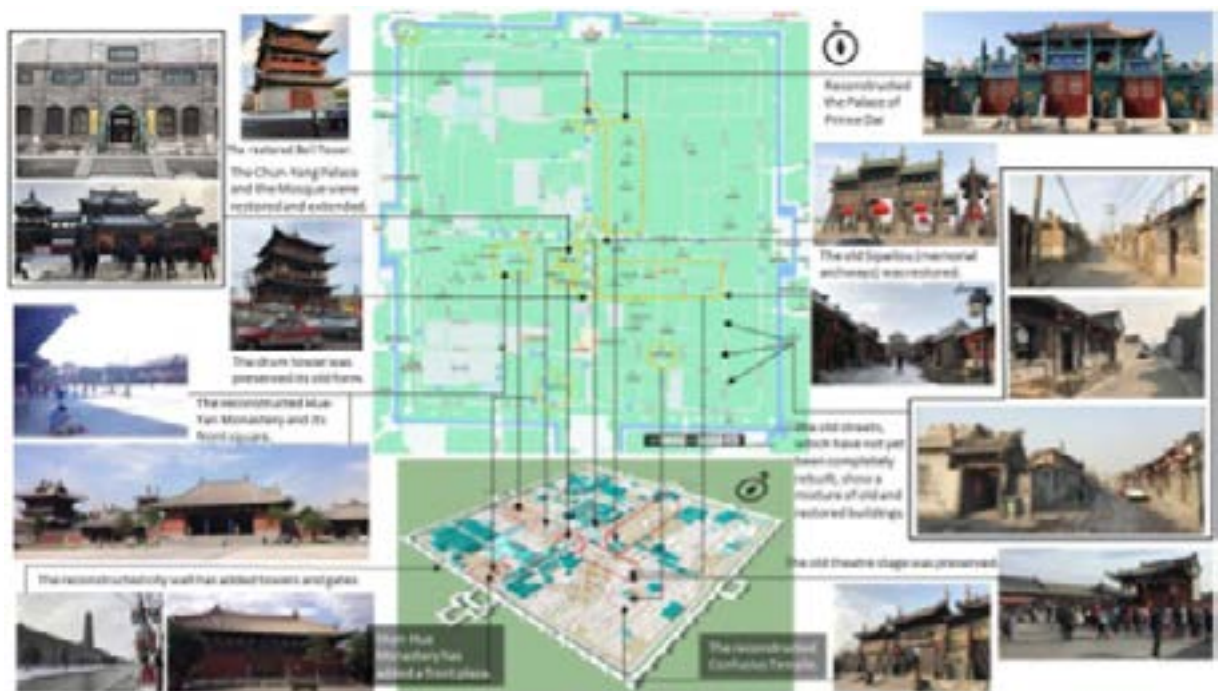

Figure 3. Map of preserved, restored and reconstructed buildings and historical sites at the stage of urban renewal project (2018)

Under such context, the researcher selected multiple sites in the ancient city centre of Datong to conduct the research methodology, identifying characteristic features which were representative of these sites for the research project's conceptual framework.

3.2. Conducting the Framework-Based Methodology

Along with the case study, this research employed other qualitative research methods of the semi-structured interviews of various user groups, observation and photography. Integration of framework-based synthesis and multi-dimensional approaches aims to form a suitable strategy with variability for policymakers, practitioners, or other decision-makers to be provided with detailed answers and structured results while retaining the "interpretative creativity and vividness" (Dixon-Woods, 2011, p. 2).

As the primary data collection method, interview questions were developed from corresponding aspects and themes based on the conceptual framework for all participants – on-site local residents, on-site tourists and local visitors, off-site locals, professionals and practitioners. The raw qualitative data collected from recordings, notes, and transcriptions created a vast amount of data. It is necessary to organise the management of all the collected data for the further process of interpretation and analysis (Spencer et al., 2014). In this regard, this research conducts three steps of the data analysing process: transcription of raw data, coding through NVivo software, and integrating coding concepts with the analytic framework.

Synthesised with the theoretical framework, all the codes were combined into higher-order groups of themes and divided into different sub-thematic categories to form the structure of developed nodes and codes. Moreover, the research examined possible links and connections between themes and explored how the concepts vary in interacting with different concepts manifested in the case study.

4. Research Findings

In accordance with the conceptual framework related to prior studies, the discussion of research analysis and findings examined the findings as integrating with the concepts and characteristics developed in the literature review to provide a comprehensive assessment and form the theoretical relationships between previous studies and new concepts. In such regards, seven primary aspects were categorised and discussed in this chapter as follows: integration of façade design and active frontage, preservation and reconstruction of different scaled urban spaces, the kinesthetic experience, users' activity preference and urban built environment, cultural activities and events in forming place identity, collective memories and the sense of historical process, influential factors of urban legibility and city image.

Based on the conceptual framework developed in the literature review, a number of findings were obtained from the methodological approaches conducted in the case study, focusing on examining the significant concepts and factors with regard to designing urban public spaces in the context of heritage tourism-led urban regeneration of the ancient city of Datong. Due to the limitation of pages, this paper will show several examples as follows:

4.1. Designing Street Spaces as 'Fourth Places' and 'Shared Spaces'

In addition to the request for more social spaces, research results indicate small spaces embedded in the street network show little influence on preserving the old urban layout and city fabric and help to create social places for different user groups. The design and locations of such spaces provide temporal gathering spaces for visitors and provide exhibition spots to show folk cultural elements to travellers (Figure 4).
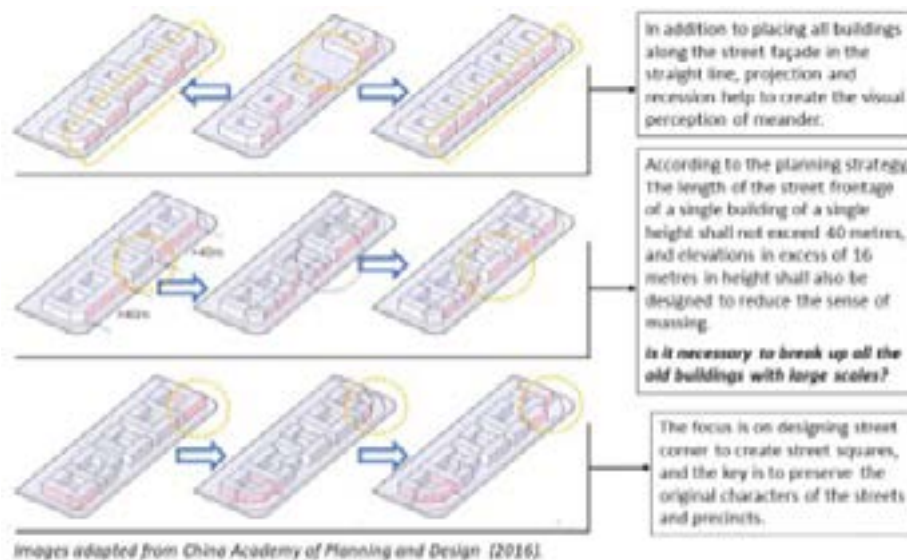

Figure 4. Creating Street spaces at different scales affects the quality of the kinesthetic experience, which was mentioned in the future planning strategy of Datong.

In terms of attracting visitors and inviting them to get involved in the living sceneries, the design plan should offer spaces and venues for tourists to interact with residents in different ways – sharing traditional food in an old restaurant and food stalls, resting in well-designed spaces with the presence of older residents and doing shopping in street markets (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Creating shared spaces for all user groups improves the quality of the immersive experience

4.2. People-Watching – A Way of Interacting with the Place and Local Users

The quality and design style of venues and settings for people to take a rest, such as steps, benches, fountains, and street café, are considered as factors that affect users' experiences when being the observers to watch others. Moreover, the permeability of street frontages helps to improve pedestrians' experiences by boosting the opportunities for people-watching (Figure 6).

Figure 6. The quality of the place affects pedestrians to conduct people-watching.

4.2. Creating Indexical and Iconic Attractors

It is necessary to preserve and interpret historical and cultural elements to attract people's attention and enhance their experiences and perceptions of the old town's authentic past. Both the iconic and indexical characters need to link with pre-existing knowledge and expectations of the place, which raises different user groups' interests and creates interactive dialogues over history, place, and place identity (Figure 7).

The use of iconic symbols combined with the spatial character of the site itself to reinforce the appeal of the historical and cultural elements.

Symbolic language on buildings with traditional architectural style. *Datong.*

Re-innovation of local cultural elements. *Kuanzhaixiang, Chengdu.*

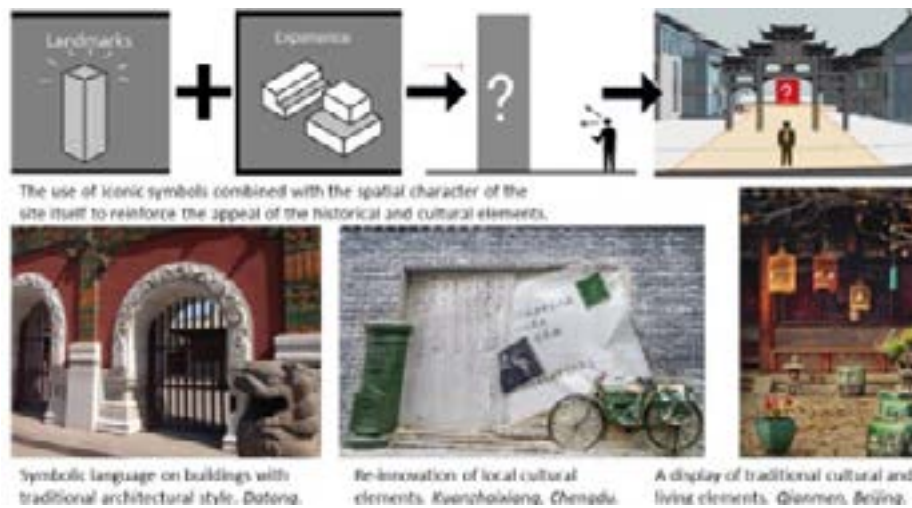A display of traditional cultural and living elements. *Qianmen, Beijing.*

Figure 7. The Innovation of iconic characters contributes to the formation of authenticity.

5. Conclusion

The research aims to explore how urban history and cultural resources are manifest in preserving and reconstructing urban spaces of historical Chinese cities and gaining insight into the heritage tourism-led renewal of the ancient Chinese urban area (and the old townscape) under the context of conservation-led urban renewal.

In order to achieve the research aim and objectives, a range of literature was examined to form the fundamental conceptual framework, including place identity and urban design, culture and history in place-making, tourism in urban regeneration, and social spaces and collective memories. In this regard, this research provides a structured way of understanding each aspect relating to the history and culture in urban regeneration, especially in preserving and reconstructing traditional Chinese urban spaces. By connecting and linking the results and findings to the theories discussed in the literature review, the new concepts and criteria examined in this section help to develop the theoretical framework generated in the prior studies for application in the context of historical Chinese urban areas undergoing heritage tourism-led urban renewal.

Furthermore, the conceptual framework and its corresponding concepts and measures developed from this research provide detailed guidelines for academics and practitioners to explore more potential aspects and concepts focusing on the research and development of other cities. Individual concepts and clusters of factors could be shaped, modified, and refined for different cities with diverse backgrounds but facing similar issues caused by heritage tourism-led urban renewal. Therefore, this research helps to provide a structured perspective for further works with similar backgrounds and targets – to preserve and reconstruct place identity in the heritage tourism-led urban renewal in historical Chinese cities.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Endnotes

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