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# REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY ADAPTIVE REUSE MOVEMENT FOR INDUSTRIAL SITES IN CHINA

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## ABSTRACT

Within a relatively brief span of time, adaptive reuse emerges as a fashionable architectural and urban renewal activity for many of those economically vibrant cities of China. The author and his team are astonished by the level of proliferation and sophistication that some of these projects exhibit, regardless of the geographical location or characteristics of society concerned (as 'adaptive reuse' entails cross-disciplinary interactions such as social, economic and physical challenges). One thing that is a common sight in almost all of these urban rehabilitation projects is that for the present time there is an over-indulgence on creative arts as an universal norm to rejuvenating deserted or dilapidated buildings, turning them just like that into galleries for artists, photographers; or studios for fashion, graphic designers and architects. This unquestioned attitude towards creative arts as the best recipe to rejuvenate industrial or residential buildings challenges the author's attempt to examine the conceiving idea, market perception towards the roles of historic buildings notably industrial buildings, the interpretation of sustainability from a broad perspective – social, economics and environment. Though the study is primarily based on field study instead of literature research, it is feasible to observe that the deployment of creative arts as an economic driver presents itself as an imbalanced approach for sustainability sake. Such observation grants us a chance to recuperate the meaning of sustainability for sustainable urban development. The author refers to a number of selected case studies from Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou in order to unfold and discuss those sustainability strategies adopted by developers so as to generate an agenda for further research.

## KEY WORDS

Adaptive reuse, industrial heritage, creative industries, sustainable development

## INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development is the "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." ("Our Common Future", 1987)

It is well recognized that sustainable development is a holistic approach, and comprises three aspects of economic, socio-cultural and environmental development. They have

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been most recently referred to as the "interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars" of sustainable development (World Summit Outcome Document, 2005).



Figure 1: The three aspects of Sustainable Development (source: [www.susdev.gov.hk](http://www.susdev.gov.hk) )

By studying adaptive reuse projects in the major cities in China, it is observed that the major driving force behind rejuvenating old industrial and residential buildings is creative art and/or industries. There seems an over indulgence with creative arts as universal norm to rejuvenate deserted or dilapidated buildings, turning them just like that into galleries for artists, photographers; or studios for fashion, graphic designers and architects. The case study examined adaptive reuse practices in Guangzhou, Shanghai and Beijing, and drawn a remark based on the sustainable development framework.

## **WHAT ARE NEW VERSUS WHAT ARE OLD?**

### **EVOLUTION OF THE 798 ART DISTRICT**

Located in the Dashanzi area, "798" was originally an electronic factory, belonging to a industrial zone designed and built with the help of experts from the then East Germany. 798, together with other factories were abandoned in 1990s as a result of a new round of city planning for Beijing.

The potential of these stubborn buildings for artistic studios was discovered by teachers from the Central Academy of Fine Art, who relocated its campus within close proximity to the 798 area in 1996. Started in the Year 2002, artists as individuals or as organizations came there and started reorganizing and remaking the factory spaces, gradually adapting them into new uses of galleries, artists' studios, design consultant companies, bookstores, restaurants, bars and others.

Today The 798 area has become a culture and art hub for the young mid-class in Beijing. Though the avant-garde artists still play an active role, they seems no longer are isolated and alienated from the mainstream of the national art activity; on the contrary, their works are being appreciated and consumed by more and more people, collectors and consumers included. The 798 Art-Zone represents an image of artistic living, echoing the SoHo areas in New York and Tokyo. It brings together contemporary art, architecture, and culture with a historically interesting setting that nourishes a quiche urban lifestyle.



Figure 2: An overview of Dashanzi factory area in the old days



Figure 3: The No.798 factory as it was (source: [www.798space.com](http://www.798space.com) ); The 798 interior



Figure 4: The 798 interior; Outdoor exhibition

#### **COLLECTIVE MEMORIES IN THE CHINESE INDUSTRIAL HERITAGES**

Xinyi Club, Guangzhou and Red Town, Shanghai are similar to the 798 Art-zone in terms of their original function and converted use: industrial heritage witnessed the heydays of industrialization process in the socialism times of China, having been deserted and suddenly turned into mixed-used spaces including offices, exhibition centers, galleries and catering etc. By definition, industrial heritage consists of the remains of industrial culture which are of historical, technological, social, architectural or scientific value. Conservation of the industrial heritage depends on preserving functional integrity, and therefore, interventions to an industrial site should aim to maintain this as far as possible.

As one expected, the industrial heritage of China represents the hardship and aspiration to improve life and welfare during the first national economic reform (1950s) under the great leaders and in most instances with Russian aides.

The industrialization process for Communist China is not just about manufacturing or production. Its creation was based on the Marxist interpretation of how society should live - with family units feeding and supporting the work unit as factory. The factories we saw today are the home and playground for those who were raised in that era. This heritage or memories of a generation lived, worked and helped transformed our society is lost at a vast scale all over the nation.

It seems awkward that this kind of collective memory has not been addressed or respected in the adaptive process. As stated in the Nizhny Tagil Charter for the Industrial Heritage, new uses in industrial heritage adaptation should “respect the significant material and maintain original patterns of circulation and activity, and should be compatible as much as possible with the original or principal use. An area that interprets the former use is recommended”. These requirements are neglected in almost of the great pioneered projects under study. A coherent usage patterns are not systematically conserved. A prevailing strategy is to conserve and face-lift only the envelopes (facades and the structural shell, in most cases) while empty the buildings’ inside and stuffed with installations, equipments or trendy elements for new uses.

## **INTERPRETATION OF AUTHENTICITY**

Authenticity is considered the essential qualifying factor concerning values (the Charter of Venice). The understanding of authenticity plays a fundamental role in all scientific studies of cultural heritage in conservation and restoration planning (The Nara Document on Authenticity, 1994).

The authenticity concept cannot be the same for different types of cultural heritage. It can be interpreted in this way that the genuineness embodied in the materials; design; construction and artistic methods; and the setting, as required by the Venice Charter of 1964, is conserved at various levels according to its cultural importance and historic value.

The process of revitalization of the Xintiandi, Shanghai suggested such an attempt in the interpretation of a conservation strategy. Xintiandi is located in the Sinan Road Historic Conservation District. The traditional LiLong in Xiantianti is not of high historical value, but there are several State accredited historical monuments (e.g. the house where the 1<sup>st</sup> CPC national representative meeting was held) and these monuments demanded intensive protection. To balance the historical conservation with commercial development, three levels of conservation are carried out, including the highest conserving level (CPC meeting house), medial level and the lowest conserving level (maximum development) (Luo, 2001). As a result, in Xintiandi, the Old is sublimed by most New-uses either from a content point of view, or from a new look. There is in fact very little celebration of the LiLong alleyways, or the ShikuMen architecture in the new development beyond a mere skin-deep resemblance of the old.



Figure 5: Xintiandi, Shanghai – mixed use for offices, retails and entertainment that is built upon a re-created ‘old’ look



Figure 6: 210 Taikang Road, Shanghai

The No. 210 Taikang Road Art-Street demonstrates a respect for the alleyways or ShikuMenas. One is led to wandering and hovering in the mazes of the alleyways or LiLongs, encountering old (neighborhood of families) next to new (design shops/outlets, art studios, photography gallery, cloth wear or food). The precinct was created upon the prior occupation by a famous retired Artist couple who found a studio in the precinct in the 1930s. The precinct was rediscovered in the 1990s by another group of local famed artists. Since, the precinct has continued to prosper as a hub for artists gathering as well as a magnet for curious tourists and visitors.

### **ARTISTS ENCLAVE OR 500 TOP BUSINESSES**

798 is an impromptu evolution, an art initiative space in its origin. Its artistic adaptation started soon after the China Central Academy of Fine Arts was moved to its new campus close to the 798 area. Teachers of the CAFA as well as other art lovers associated with the CAFA were the first force to turn the deserted factory buildings into art studios and galleries. After it gradually gained its fame, business find opportunities there and began an economic intrusion, which is evidenced by the sky-rocketing rental prices for the infamous 798 Space and adapted areas.

In contrary, the Red Town in Shanghai and Xinyi Club in Guangzhou are both commercial-initiated adaptive reuse right from the start. The basic process is that the capital, after the commercial potential of renovation proposal was evaluated, hired architects to renovate the old sites, turned them into rentable event spaces including retail,

office, exhibition etc. In these redevelopments, creative industries are maintained as the eye-catching and selling point. Tenants are professionals of design, fine arts, music and other artistic fields. Therefore, the adaptive reuse approach by Red Town and Xinyi is more like a top-down process, from a business investment point of view, while 798 reflects a more original, bottom-up approach, that was initiated by the users.

Here lies an alleged contrast or confrontation between creative arts and creative industries: artists favor the old factory buildings because of its huge and flexible exterior spaces and interior volumes, and especially for the low rentals. Creative industries, however, are run by businessmen, they are potently interested in maximizing rentable spaces and rental prices. To realize this economic motive, they invest to update the facilities; introduce new uses such as Biz show from top-nudged businesses, party carnivals, and Saloons, etc. (as in the Xinyi operation) marketing and sales strategies are used here, and the artists involved are businessmen in this sense.

Social-cultural issues are linked with economic development. The connection and interaction can be manifested though industries of art, music and tourism. When such a connection is established, full awareness should be given to avoid adapting and commercializing culture to merely attract tourist and visitors. Cultures should be respected as living and dynamic contexts within which human beings everywhere find respective values and identity<sup>1</sup>. Culture diversity is as important as bio-diversity. So the hidden danger of using culture as a reuse/revitalizing catalyze should be taken into full consideration, so that the commercialism in the face of creative art would not monopolize and homogenize local culture. This is essential for socio-cultural and economic development towards a sustainable society.



Figure 7: Red Town, Shanghai – arts and sculpture gallery

<sup>1</sup> Source: <http://portal.unesco.org/education>



Figure 8: Red Town: sculpture plaza and sculpture space



Figure 9: Xinyi Club, Guangzhou – the former ship repairs shop is now used for staging Car Shows, Fashion Catwalks and Political Workshops

## CONCLUSION

The focus on the paper is to provide a review of the perceived role and image of industrial heritage that runs the risk of limiting the significance and contribution of industrial heritage towards issues such as connection with the past in the redevelopment process of cities.

A fundamental issue at stake is the degree of manipulation between economic, cultural and environmental sustainability.

The few representative examples such as the 798 Beijing, the Red Town Shanghai are unique cases of the predominance over heritage by a specific kind of clientele that overtaken the historical roles or contents of the heritage.

The predominance of creative industries as the main tool to revitalize industrial heritage all over in China seems an imbalance strategy that challenges our reinterpretation and understanding of the interactions between the socio-cultural and economic developments of heritage buildings, in that the overwhelming of fashionable juxtaposition of arts and fashion consumerism that is injected to the physical container devoid of an industrial-socialism stimulates a sense of post-modernism and a bourgeois taste, while leaving little room for any genuine space that could recall visitors' memories about what their



predecessors had achieved at their respective times, reflecting belief and aspiration. In these sites that the authors visited, there are almost few or none mentioning of the history and past contribution of the factory as a way to connect with past history. The transformation of a transistor industry (Factory No. 798) has abruptly been substituted and received a new look by an adaptive-reuse transplant operation. This displacement and detachment from history deprive visitors an opportunity to contact with a significant past that helped form and shape society. Arguably, works that are inspired by abstract and ideological pursuits such as You Zhongshun and Wu Zhihui have a void interpretation of the temporal existence of architecture.

It brings us to the second concern about the responsibility of whoever claims the right to redevelop industrial heritage. In the Guangzhou case of the Xinyi redevelopment, there the local authority has a mandate to create a history museum of the 13 foreign trading companies of the 19th century. At the interview with the authors, the developer explained how they have persuaded the authority to let them integrate the museum with the phase 2 development of Xinyi Club. The developer recognizes the historical content of the site as an asset for the redevelopment. Right or wrong, the developer has managed to combine the shipyard and repair function of the Xinyi Club with the history of the Pearl River as a trading port that actually was the main event at the Xinyi Club a century ago. Their efforts revealed their commitment to link the past with the present and future, which is essential for sustainable development.

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