Conservation problems in the urban context of Shenyang Imperial Palace: from Buffer Zone to Historical Urban Landscape

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1. Background:

Cultural World Heritage Sites in urban contexts, particularly those located in countries experiencing rapid economic transformation, encounter numerous problems with regard to the maintenance or enhancement of their settings because of the pressures caused by development and rapid changes in lifestyle and land use. In this paper, we consider a World Heritage Site, which offers a thought-provoking case study of some of the problems that may occur. The site is the former Imperial Palace at Shenyang in North Eastern China (what used to be Southern Manchuria), dating from the early years of the Qing Dynasty. It is one of only two Imperial Palaces to survive in their entirety in China (the other is the Forbidden City in Beijing). Established between 1624-1636 as the Qing regime approached maturity, it is actually one of three World Heritage Sites in Shenyang, but while the other two (The Tombs of Nu’erhachi and Huangtaiji) are located in parks, the context of the palace is the original square (and formerly walled) city that formed the core of Shenyang, and which became its Buffer Zone when the site was designated.

The modern city of Shenyang is the largest in North Eastern China, with an urbanized population of about 6 million and an overall population, including outlying districts, of just over 8 million. Its history as an urban settlement stretches back to the Warring States Period (c.300 BCE), and the present Square City follows the boundary established in Ming times. Nu’erhachi established it as his capital before his invasion of China and the creation of the Qing dynasty, and it remained an important seat for the Qing Emperors during the centuries that followed. Alternatively known as Mukden, from the latter part of the 19th century, it began to develop into an important industrial and political centre of southern Manchuria. Both the Russians and the Japanese perceived its potential, and their armies clashed there memorably in 1905 during the Russo-Japanese War. The victorious Japanese went on to create their own concession to the west of the original Square City, close to the station on the Manchurian Railway, built by them as the principal artery through which they sought to exploit the resources of the country. The so-called Mukden Incident of 1931 provided them with an excuse to proceed with the occupation of Manchuria. Both during the Japanese occupation and in the years of Chinese rule that followed the end of the Second World War, Shenyang expanded into a major heavy-industrial city, until the smoke-stack industries went into decline during the 1980s and 90s following China’s decision to globalize its economy. As new businesses have become
established, Shenyang has recovered its prosperity and its expansion continues.

With the development of plans for Shenyang city in recent years, Government is always focusing on protecting historical buildings and monuments in the buffer zone of Shenyang Imperial Palace, Cultural World Heritage, not historical city environments and context to achieve the sustainable development of cities and improve the quality of life of their residents and visitors. Especially, inside buffer zone, plenty of alleys (Hutongs in Chinese) were demolished by building new departments and residential complex and a wide road was built by demolished residential complex to symbol Shenyang Imperial Palace. According to Venice Charter, the concept of a historic monument embraces not only the single architectural work, but also the urban or rural setting in which is found the evidence of a particular civilization, a significant development or a historic event. This applies not only to great works of art but also to more modest works of the past, which have acquired cultural significance with the passing of time. (Venice Charter, 1964) On the other hand, nearby the buffer zone, some high-rise buildings built or being built spoil the beauty of Shenyang Imperial Palace. Furthermore, in the built-up area, there are also high-buildings around the historical modern low buildings. But due to the limitations of the buffer zone, this problem cannot be resolved. Consequently, the definition of “the Historic Urban Landscape” published in November 2011(UNESCO) has been the most important of this type of solution proposal because the HUL provides a philosophic and integrated of the world’s historic and cultural sites.

2. Objectives:

The present study aims to focus on Shenyang’s original urban area, the Square City, now designated as Buffer Zone to the palace, firstly, on the basic of better understanding the transformation within the Square City and its Hutongs (Chapter 3, 4), analyze the process of the destruction of Square City of Shenyang's Historic Environment (Chapter 5). Secondly, to resolve the problems on outside and inside of the B.Z of Shenyang’s I. P, Outline its development as successive layers of historic culture each with their own attributes and constituent elements, in accordance with the concept of Historic Urban Landscape (Chapter 6), whilst also setting this urban core within the wider context of the city as a whole. At last, Out of this analysis of the layer of city’s past, we propose HUL can overcome the limitations of the B.Z and put forward an approach to future planning in the area and a rehabilitation strategy for the Buffer Zone of Shenyang’s Imperial Palace.

3. Research Methodology:

The notion of considering an urban landscape in terms of successive layers and summarizing what
is known about them is a fundamental method of analysis adopted by proponents of the concept of Historic Urban Landscape (HUL).

Historic Urban Landscape is a multi-faceted concept, but with regard to layering, each layer may be said to represent a map of the area under consideration at a given point in time. In this paper we undertake this kind of layered analysis in the case of Shenyang. The information to create each map is derived from analysis of old documents, map, historic studies of the townscape and historic urban fabric protection regulations. In addition, I have conducted interviews with key individuals within living memory involved in the development of the Square City in Shenyang.

4. Previous studies on Shenyang's Square city:

Scholarly studies of the Shenyang Palace and the design on development and early history of the city have been undertaken by some scholars, but an understanding of that process is still necessary to help define an appropriate conservation policy for the future. By contrast, the problems regarding the buffer zone and the story of the loss of the Square City have not been formally outlined and discussed hitherto, and it seems a subject worthy of discussion both to convey the situation as it is today, and as a case study in how a historic site can lose its historic character as a result of modern economic and social pressures.

5. The present research is divided in 7 chapters:

Chapter 1. Introduction: The present chapter, where the reasons and backgrounds of the investigation, objectives and methodology are explained.

Chapter 2. Buffer Zone and HUL (Historic Urban Landscape): The second chapter is basically a documentary research for further explaining Chapter 1. It includes the review of the international debates based on the publicized documents of the UNESCO during 2001-2011, the book, and academic paper. The examples of two important International Expert Meetings are also obtained from the publicized document on web site. The discussion on how to apply the notion of HUL (Historic Urban Landscape) to Shenyang historic context (Chapter 4) is built upon the review of this section.

Chapter 3. Shenyang's Square City and its historical context: In the chapter 3, the significant historical information related to the research is discussed, This section is based on the historical documents, photographs, maps, etc. and used as basis information in the dissertation.
Chapter 4. The transformation of Alleys (Hutongs) in the Square City: the transformation of Hutongs until the early 20th Century is explained, moreover, the transformation of the Hutongs from the early 20th Century to the present as the important spatial composition’s factor of Shenyang's Square City is also included. This chapter focuses on the process whereby "Hutongs"(urban alleys) have been destroyed in the Buffer Zone of Shenyang Imperial Place.(World Heritage Site), based on analysis of old maps. It emerges that over half of these old alleys were swept away in the course of rapid urban redevelopment, to make way for commercial buildings and apartment houses. The paper concludes that the remaining Hutongs and their values could be important in furthering historical conservation and future planning in this area. For the creation of this chapter, literary survey and field investigations as well as analysis of old and present city maps were performed. Especially, it is necessary to know why over half of Hutongs (alleys) were destroyed by the development of Shenyang's Square city.

Chapter 5. Process of the destruction of Square City of Shenyang's Historic Environment: in fourth chapter, this Buffer Zone called the Square City was the oldest center in Shenyang and now retains very little historic fabric but substantial parts of it survived into the 1980s, and the principal aim of this section is to elucidate how the old built fabric of this area came to be lost from 1980 to the present through analysis of maps and old documents, historic studies of the townscape, historic urban fabric protection regulations and interviews. This occurred despite early recognition of the importance of the palace and growing recognition of the importance of urban conservation worldwide. Scholarly studies of the Shenyang Palace and early history of the city have been taken by others, but the story of the loss of the Square city has not been told hitherto, and it is a subject worthy of discussion which is the answer to the over half of Hutongs' disappearance after 1980s.

Chapter 6. Shenyang as an HUL (Historic Urban Landscape): a layer-by-layer analysis: Cultural World Heritage Sites in urban areas may face a range of problems, such as inappropriate development in the buffer zone and the erection of high-rise buildings close to the buffer zone, often with results detrimental to the quality of life of residents and visitors. Buffer zone legislation alone seems insufficient to prevent this, though it is not without value. This chapter considers such problems specifically in the context of Shenyang in China, where the Imperial Palace is a Cultural World Heritage Site at the heart of a major urban centre, the context of which is threatened in various ways. Here, the Buffer Zone consists of the original urban zone surrounding the palace, known as the Square City, which had already been largely redeveloped when the World Heritage designation was made, although the original layout of alleys (Hutongs) partially survives. In considering the problems faced by the urban context of Shenyang’s Imperial Palace, this chapter
explores the possibilities inherent in the concept of Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) of a
layer-by-layer analysis first fully proposed at UNESCO meetings in 2011, and concludes that it can
offer important supplementary support to Buffer Zone legislation both in the case of Shenyang and
more generally.

Chapter 7. Conclusions: the last chapter, which includes the conclusions of the previous chapters,
how the research positions within a wider international frame as well as recommendations for the
future improvement of the area.

My intention in this research is twofold:

Firstly, I hope that by describing and analyzing the process by which the traditional fabric of
Shenyang’s Square City was destroyed, I may help furnish an example of what to avoid when trying
to conserve a historic settlement.

Secondly, I have tried to show that part of the problem was the conceptual inadequacy of the
buffer zone, and to suggest that the layer-by-layer analysis implied in the concept of Historic Urban
Landscape can furnish a more holistic tool for urban conservation.

In addition, specifically with respect to Shenyang, we may say that the present Shenyang city
master plan focuses only on the conservation of selected monuments. It does not address the problem
of urban conservation as a whole, considered layer by layer, as we have described it above. It should
be revised and based on the HUL concept. Especially, new redevelopments should relate to and
respect the ambiance of traditional buildings.

Bearing this in mind, I have the following recommendations to make regarding the future
conservation of Shenyang.

a. In the short term: In view of the high level of destruction that has taken place, it would be all to
easy to write off the past of Shenyang’s Square City altogether. I think this would be a mistake. I
think steps should be taken to record as much as possible of the detail of the fabric that has been lost
(and the little that remains), and to make people aware of it. There are ways in which this could be
achieved at little expense. Maps showing the earlier layout, and plaques recording the former names
and positions of lost hutongs could be set up all over the Square City, and old photographs and a
reconstruction model of the area could be exhibited in one of the city’s designated buildings, or in
the Chang Tso-lin Museum. In Japan, plaques of the sort here proposed have been set up in
Yokohama to help visitors identify and experience the lost townscape of Kanagawa Juku, and in
Nara Shiyakusho, a reconstruction model of the whole of Heijo Kyo is set up in the entrance hall.
Such models, photographs and plaques would raise people’s awareness of what Shenyang was like
and what has been lost.

b. In the long term: In a few decades, the apartment blocks and department stores which now
stand in the Square City will have aged and be ripe for redevelopment. It is unlikely that there will be much pressure for their retention. Urban areas like the old square city will be much rarer by then. If we educate people through the measures I have just proposed, there may be a consensus to recreate the world that has recently been lost, based on the evidence we have been able to preserve. In that way it is perhaps not inconceivable that the old square city might rise again, at least in part, in the middle decades of the 21st century, to offer an appropriate and culturally enriching setting for the magnificent palace of the early Qing Emperors.