The multiple dimension of water in the designing and governance of public spaces. The case of Shanghai West Bund Project compared to other Western Waterfront renovations

Abstract

In 2010, the municipality of Shanghai started the “Huangpu River Comprehensive Development Plan”, a large regeneration initiative including the Expo site, targeted to revitalize the river banks and generally the urban environment, making Xuhui waterfront one of the six key construction areas of the 12th Five-Year Plan in Shanghai. Formerly one of the largest industrial districts, the so-called West Bund area has experienced a process of substantial transformation, currently still ongoing. Particular attention has been paid to the rehabilitation of the riverside, as a source of landscape enhancement, providing a system of open spaces and public facilities able to meet the dweller’s demands and to attract touristic fluxes. For this reason, the West Bund Project represents one of the most relevant regeneration initiative currently taking place in Shanghai. This paper aims to investigate, starting from this specific case-study, the role of water in the definition of cultural and natural elements, revealing new perspectives for the revitalization of the urban environment.

Keywords: Shanghai, West Bund, waterfront, urban regeneration

1. Water and architecture. An unstable relationship

The architecture of waterfronts’ areas generally is tightly connected with the notion of landscape. This paper assumes the concept of landscape not as a state of idyllic and pure nature, but as a dynamic system mutually influenced by human activity. Hence, the necessity of associating the landscape with the idea of environment organized and modified by human being. In other words, we address the landscape as the result of human activity on its own territory, considering it a sort of artifact, a product permeated by man’s culture and tradition (Corboz, 1985; Turri, 1998; Venturi Ferrioli, 2002). While in Western thinking nature is a tangible value including living beings, vegetation, landscape, and other elements in contrast with art and human creations, in the Eastern philosophy nature is integrated with the artificial space. Evidence of this approach can be found in the idea of shan-shui, (mountain-water, or landscape) as a poetic style intended to evoke: «that state of idyllic and pure nature, as an expression of harmony between humans and nature (tianrenheyi) within processes of urban renovations, as well as landscape and cultural institutions, such as Long Museum (West Bund), Yuz Museum, West Bund Art Center, West Bund Culture and Art Pilot Zone, West Bund Bonded, Artwork Warehouse, West Bund Museum, Oil Tank Art Park, Star Museum, Waterfront Theatre, and so on. Last, the commercial expansion is supposed to encourage a comprehensive development for West Bund and surrounding areas. Hence the decision to exploit the presence of Huangpu river bank becomes the occasion to enhance the urban environment and provide it with public facilities able to start spontaneous regeneration phenomena. The development involves both projects for new buildings and renovation of old ones, as well as landscape design of open spaces, such as, for instance, the Runway Park West Bund, a 2-kilometer linear park located between the Bund and surrounding areas. Hence the decision to exploit the presence of Huangpu river bank becomes the occasion to enhance the urban environment and provide it with public facilities able to start spontaneous regeneration phenomena. The development involves both projects for new buildings and renovation of old ones, as well as landscape design of open spaces, such as, for instance, the Runway Park West Bund, a 2-kilometer linear park located between the Bund and surrounding areas.

2. West Bund. Brief history of the conversion of an industrial district

Placed in the southwest of Shanghai’s Xuhui District, Shanghai West Bund area covers a total area of 9.4 square kilometers, and extends on the river banks for 11.4 kilometers. Located in proximity of the Longhua Historic Conservation Area, West Bund faces the 2010 Shanghai World Expo Site (ill. 01). West Bund was a former center of transportation and commercial production in China for over one hundred years. The area is characterized by vast open spaces and numerous water channels that have allowed such industrial centers and national enterprises as the Longhua Airport, Shanghai Nanpu Railway Station, Beipiao Coal Wharf, and Shanghai Cement Factory, just to name a few, to flourish (Feng Sheng Shui Qi), as well as landscape design of open spaces, such as, for instance, the Runway Park West Bund, a 2-kilometer linear park located between the Bund and surrounding areas.

Three main actions, to suggest a critic understanding of ongoing transformation processes, aiming to highlight the role of water in the definition of new perspective for waterfront’s design. West Bund Project has been officially used since it becomes the principal piece of urban branding and development project that aims to build a Culture Corridor able to brand and promote the integration of citizens, spaces and uses. In the nearby area one can find many exhibition halls and cultural institutions, such as Long Museum (West Bund), Yuz Museum, West Bund Art Center, West Bund Culture and Art Pilot Zone, West Bund Bonded, Artwork Warehouse, West Bund Museum, Oil Tank Art Park, Star Museum, Waterfront Theatre, and so on. Last, the commercial expansion is supposed to encourage a comprehensive development for West Bund and surrounding areas. Hence the decision to exploit the presence of Huangpu river bank becomes the occasion to enhance the urban environment and provide it with public facilities able to start spontaneous regeneration phenomena. The development involves both projects for new buildings and renovation of old ones, as well as landscape design of open spaces, such as, for instance, the Runway Park West Bund, a 2-kilometer linear park located between the Bund and surrounding areas.

3. Shanghai West Bund has been officially used as the new name for the Xuhui waterfront area. The designers of the Xuhui waterfront drew inspiration from the Port of Hamburg and Canary Wharf in London (London Dockland) to create the so-called Corniche Shanghai. The preservation of historical relics, considered important witnesses of the industrial past, was one of the leading principle in the design process, and still the sustainable ways. The development, started in 2008, has been guided by three main actions. First, the necessity to connect Xujiahui central business district, key model areas, with Xuhui’s midtown and minor centers. Second, the idea of introducing a Culture Corridor able to brand and promote the integration of citizens, spaces and uses. In the nearby area one can find many exhibition halls and cultural institutions, such as Long Museum (West Bund), Yuz Museum, West Bund Art Center, West Bund Culture and Art Pilot Zone, West Bund Bonded, Artwork Warehouse, West Bund Museum, Oil Tank Art Park, Star Museum, Waterfront Theatre, and so on. Last, the commercial expansion is supposed to encourage a comprehensive development for West Bund and surrounding areas. Hence the decision to exploit the presence of Huangpu river bank becomes the occasion to enhance the urban environment and provide it with public facilities able to start spontaneous regeneration phenomena. The development involves both projects for new buildings and renovation of old ones, as well as landscape design of open spaces, such as, for instance, the Runway Park West Bund, a 2-kilometer linear park located between the Bund and surrounding areas.

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3. Designing with water. Waterfront’s architecture in recent experiences, New York, Hamburg, and Copenhagen

Over the last decades, cities’ harbors have been experiencing radical changes, based on industrial and commercial development, functional conversion, urban growth, environmental re-purposes, landscape beautification, and so on. Introducing the case-study of Hamburg harbor’s regeneration, the recent paper by Lepore, Sgobbo and Vingelli describes the implication of a strategic approach to the development, able to influence positively the surrounding beyond the limits of the site construction. «The processes of globalization of supply and demand and, consequently, the transformations, in terms of location, of production centers, transport and distribution logistics, have generated sudden-setting changes that, in consolidated urban centers, have resulted in overproduction of brownfields/disused areas as well as regeneration projects. The phenomenon has involved some European cities, traditionally large commercial ports, that have rapidly seen their attractiveness decreasing. This has led to the need to rethink the use of vast urbanized areas that, although highly accessible and intensely infrastructured, have turned as brownfields: degraded, undeveloped but also radically compromised in environmental aspects enough to make unsustainable even policies of simple renaturalization. In cases of minor extension, the regeneration strategy was limited to the progressive incorporation into the surrounding urban pattern. Sometimes it has provided for the complete abandonment of the industrial nature of the place in favor of functions, above all tertiary and residential, that have made them luxurious and modern islands; however, functionally and socially separated from neighboring districts along a virtual but tangible border, often coinciding with the border of the project by which they originated. In other cases, however, the transformation has generated effects clearly extended to a much broader and more complex sphere, beyond the material, although jagged, frontiers which also limit the area of physical change» (Lepore et al. 2017).

We could mention numerous examples of beautiful waterfront architectures, however, Shanghai West Bund suggests to reduce our critical comparison to the two cases of Hamburg and New York, both for the role of water in the design and for their urban environment, showing important similarities with the Chinese metropolis. The plan for Hamburg regulates the growth for 40% of the city, within the urban perimeter, converting former harbor’s infrastructures and rail yards. Planners defined the development over a temporal span of 25 years, implementing areas for suburbia in order to prevent the uncontrolled construction (Schubert, 2014). The masterplan shows an adaptive character to better fit with the demands arising from society. For instance, the plan has been reviewed after the financial crisis of 2008, making the last version of the plan to be realized as a last-generation project. Spectacular architecture, such as the Elbphilharmonie by Herzog & de Meuron, built reusing the former warehouse as basement and hosting a mix of different functions including a public plaza at 40 meters of high (ill. 07-08), becomes part of this strategic vision. This long-term plan is made by permanent design-solution and temporary events, such for instance the so-called Hafengeburtstag (port’s birthday), an all-day parade for boats and cruise ships,
periences of waterfront design» (Sessarego, 2017), marking the main difference from the metabolic process happened in Germany. It seems reasonable to explain this difference considering the different attractive power of the two cities in terms of investments from both private and public realms. Referring to the intention by West Bund Group to implement the so-called Culture Corridor and to mix into articulated functional program, it seems appropriate to consider also the case of Copenhagen, where culture and recreation melt together along the channels (ill. 11). In Copenhagen Harbor Bath (BIG + JDS), water becomes a place to be, where people enjoy the space previously relegated to boats. Swimming and related activities/facilities demonstrated to be a successful strategy, not only for entertainment, but also for hygienic reasons, urban development, and flooding mitigation (Jensen et al., 2015). The same phenomenon took place also in Berlin, in Kreuzberg (see Badeschiff by Stadtkunstprojekte – City Art Project Society - 2004) and in other neighborhoods, where the conversion became opportunity for urban enhancement. At the same time, the facilities dedicated to culture (the Opera House by Henning Larsen and the Royal Danish Playhouse by Lundgaard & Tranberg) populates the waterfront defining an endless landscape connecting the famous Nyhavn, featured by spectacular architecture facing each other (ill. 12). Nevertheless, all mentioned cases exhaustively presented in the cited articles, represents some of the best practices whose positive effects can be measured in terms of urban renovation, economic prosperity, touristic attraction, and can be related to West Bund development.

4. Conclusions
The waterfront cities have a special task: designing areas facing water is an opportunity to make landscape sustainable, improving safety and quality of life, helping people to rebuild its sense of identity. The waterfront is the place where all the landscape dynamic strengths converge in the urban ones such as in the ecological scale, by the potentiality to define its identity, by the extraordinary capability to enforce linking and welding processes with other city’s areas, allowing the creation of new centralities, by innovative shapes of place’s uses (Sessarego, 2017). Assuming Sessarego’s perspective, we can look at waterfront areas, either river-sides or sea-sides, as new potential centralities, as we tried to understand in the previous paragraphs. The projects’ description highlights some important issues related to water-related design, both for urban and landscape architecture. Hamburg’s regeneration strategies exploit water as a source for economic and touristic development. The relationship between the river and buildings tied to the cruise ship industry generated a unique urban waterfront, featured by high-quality spaces adaptable to different uses, according to the city’s agenda. New York’s parks express an extraordinary example of resilient landscape architecture, incorporating strategies that allow the landscape to adapt and regenerate itself (Sessarego, 2017), in which the notion of unstable landscape finds a perfect application. Copenhagen’s focus on the direct use of water by citizens suggests that even in former industrial area is possible to imagine creative uses of water, or, at least, to set new relationships between water, open, and built-up spaces. As architects and planners, we also look at the landscape, including waterfront areas, studying its shape, searching for hints of historical modification, marking turning-points and discontinuities, discerning fast and traumatic mutations among the slow natural evolution (Sempere et al., 2017). Cartographic materials are available as well as pictures and paintings are object of investigations to define a critic approach and give value to design choices. Within this ever-changing process, architects and planners are asked to challenge the role of water in waterfront areas according to present demands or suggesting new ones, always considering the contextual relationships.

ENDNOTES

REFERENCES