

SILK PROSPERITY REMINISCENCES: A CASE STUDY IN SUZHOU'S URBAN FABRIC

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Keywords: Suzhou, Urban Analysis, Place Analysis, Place Theory.

Introduction

Cities are not made of a homogenous and continuous urban fabric. On the contrary, they are usually composed of a vast variety of buildings and spatial configurations; old and new buildings, different densities, continues facades, low rise, skyscrapers. Just by looking at these spatial configurations we can read all kinds of interactions; historical periods, functions, technological changes, cultural changes, wealth, architectural trends and urban ideologies. Some of these interactions often seem to have fundamental conflicts with each other, suggesting that they cannot possibly be part of the same system or environment. Yet, they are remarkably held together, firstly by what we call public space, and secondly by the citizens. The city of Suzhou in Jiangsu Province, like other cities in China, has undertaken urban and construction changes of unprecedented speed and magnitude, creating a city in which these urban differences have reached unforeseen scenarios and contrasts. Is the speed in which these changes are occurring actually too fast, to the point in that citizen and public spaces cannot 'hold together' a city anymore? Or can a city's main urban characteristic be dissolved, change or replaced? In this case study we explore these questions by inviting a group of architecture students to investigate specific areas of Suzhou's old town to see if they could still identify and recognize some of the city's main features and landmarks.

Background and Context

Suzhou, Located in Jiangsu province and founded in 525BC, is one of the oldest and most unique cities of China. Renowned for its network of canal systems, the city is also considered the best contemporary example of Song Dynasty's principles of city planning [1], still retaining its most essential features. Since Suzhou has been connected to the national waterway network almost since its origin it was a key and prosperous city during the Sui and Tang Dynasties. It was also a major producer and supplier of silk during the Tang and Song Dynasties. However, it was only after that the city was partially destroyed by the Chin armies in 1129AD that Suzhou was rebuilt following the layout recognizable even today, creating the remarkable network of more than 100 canals which can be seen in the famous Ping-jiang map by Lu Yen (Fig. 1). This urban development also allowed the advancement and improvement of unique building typologies, like the Suzhou's traditional courtyard houses, in which the courtyard acts as spatial coordination center for number of buildings and chambers which altogether form a housing entity with the courtyard becoming the main place of meeting and interaction among neighbors [2]. Today, only about 36km of canals remain out of Song's 82km original network. Although most of the small canals disappeared during Qing Dynasty, a significant decline occurred after 1949, when many canals filled were cup in order to get more land in order to provide dwellings and facilities for an increasing population [3].

Currently, most of the main canals still preserve their original shape, yet their interaction with the modern urban fabric could be described as complex, disjointed at times; some selected canals of undeniable historical value, like Ping Jiang Lu, have been kept, maintained and potentiated as touristic spots. But other canals and street of comparable value and beauty seem concealed within the old town. These areas are the ones to be visited during the proposed case study.

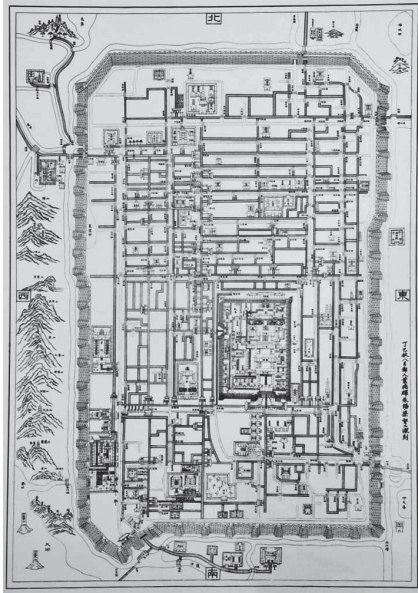


Fig. 1: Ping-jiang map by Lu Yen

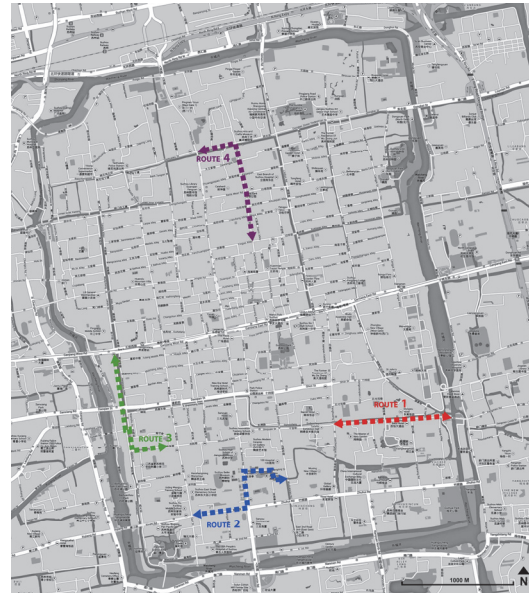


Fig. 2: Current Suzhou and proposed routes

Exercise

A cohort of 115 first year architecture students had to organize themselves into groups of 4 to 6. Then, they were presented with a map indicating four walking routes within Suzhou's old town (Fig. 2). Each route was about 1 km long. These routes were carefully selected taking into account their potential for offering a variety of urban experiences as moving along them. All four routes incorporated historical canals and buildings at some point (as explained before, a feature not so easy to find within Suzhou's urban fabric anymore). At the same time, the selected routes purposely steer away from mayor touristic streets/canals like Ping Jiang Lu or Shan Tang Jie, emphasizing the idea of discovering the normal and mundane interaction between historical and modern urban elements. Students were instructed to select one of the proposed routes and analyze it using a variety of introduced techniques and media -plans, sketches, photos, videos, etc-. They were asked to record and elaborate on their impressions of the city while exploring their selected route. The main reason why we decided to undertake the case study with students from first year was because, since they are just starting their studies, their attention and interest could be less directed and conditioned by already acquired academic knowledge, resulting in perhaps basic observations which are also more candid and genuine. Following this premise, students were not specifically told to focus their efforts in the relationship between the old and the new, although this was subtly suggested. For instance, attention was raised about the possibility of encountering 'historical landmarks', knowing that at least two of the routes purposely pass by important Unesco's world heritage sites; the Master of the Nets Garden and the Cangland

pavilion. Both built during different stages of the Song Dynasty, each one of these landmarks have different relationship with the city; Master of the Nets is somehow hidden within Suzhou's urban fabric, yet the Cangland pavilion is vastly exposed to the city and it cannot be missed when walking exploring route 2. However, the most important characteristic of the proposed routes is their offered variety of contrasts. For example, route 3 confronts the students with the newly built replicas of Xueshi St. which superficially emulate traditional Suzhou architecture, while right across the canal they can see the genuinely old and bustling living quarters of Jianjinqiao Alley. In other words, we expected the routes to be an invitation to discover these or other dynamics between old and new.

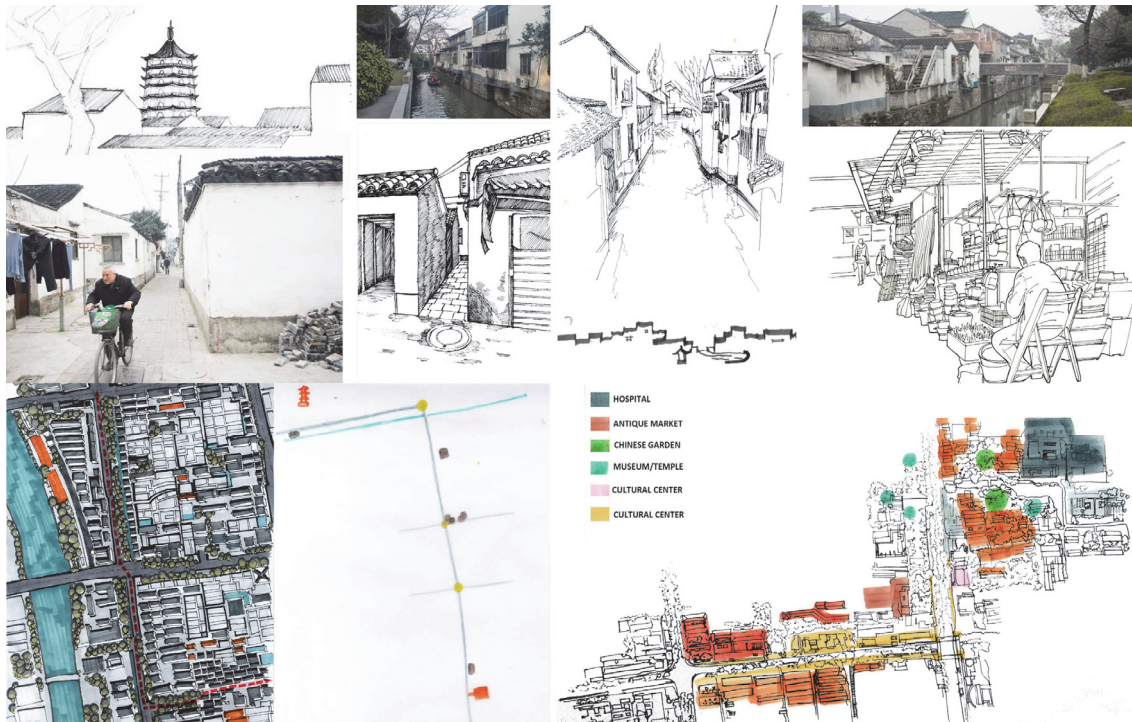


Fig. 3: Samples of the student's work produced during the route analysis.

Results and Partial Conclusions

Results of the route analysis showed mixed yet interesting insights. For instance, only about half of the students directed their attention to the canals and waterways on their route, which is less than expected (it is important to point out that 80% of the students are not from Suzhou, and they were mostly unfamiliar with the studied routes). However, the students who did focus their attention on the canals (Fig. 3) were able to elaborate very interesting observations not focused on their historical or aesthetic value, but in their abstract quality as built environments. For instance, they highlighted the quality of 'buffer space' of the canals, providing a distance which separated the residential side from the loud streets. They also pointed out the pedestrian vocation of the alleys and streets alongside the canals. More difficult to be accessed by cars due to most of the bridges being pedestrian ones, these streets allowed unique uses of streets and sidewalk by the residents. These and other observation suggests that the value of these spaces is not only rooted in their past but in their actual present as unique, contemporary environments. We expect that future steps of the case study will help to clarify these and other conclusions by incorporating students from

other years and even regular citizens so we can see how their observations compare and overlap. In the meantime, it is interesting to notice that in this first approximation, what it appeared to be subject of heritage and history for first year students were not individual buildings or streets, but an overall lifestyle; a compelling and intertwined relationship between specific types of built environments and their dwellers. This kind of relationship seems to be missing (or at least is not that clear and evident) in modern urban developments in Suzhou.

References

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