

Designing ordinary, everyday marketplaces: An alternative regeneration approach for Wushan (Cixi, China)

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This project explores the potentiality of marketplaces as catalyst for urban regeneration in Chinese cities. It exemplifies how such settings can be achieved through land use replacement and physical optimisation.

Background

Cixi today is an important manufacturing city approximately 2 hours south of Shanghai. It possesses a vibrant private economy.

A growing number of people in Cixi are fond of collecting antiques. Main reasons for this trend are: 1) traditionally, the collection of antiques is a shared hobby among Chinese private entrepreneurs; 2) the city's reputation as one of the origins of Chinese porcelain; 3) Cixi is presently the biggest collecting and distributing centre of antique furniture.

On account of this, in 2011, the authorities of Cixi planned to regenerate Wushan, a 17 ha urban area, and turn it into a cultural mecca for collectors with a cluster of private museums. The plan foresaw investment of 1.12 billion CNY (£120million) and a substantial relocation programme for current residents and commercial users (87,000 sqm). However, the plan was shelved following a change of government in 2012. Economic recession and changed government priorities mean that a renewal of the area is now down to private and community capital.

The Project

The design proposal below offers an alternative, less costly approach which responds to the call of local communities for a less ambitious, more sustainable solution to the site's regeneration.

Conceptually, the project seeks to counteract globalization which has given rise to monoculturalism in cities by building on locally distinct cultures. Marketplaces represent a much neglected public space which provides opportunities for 'the locality' to emerge in a context where the most mundane conventions are staged as authentic traditionalism.

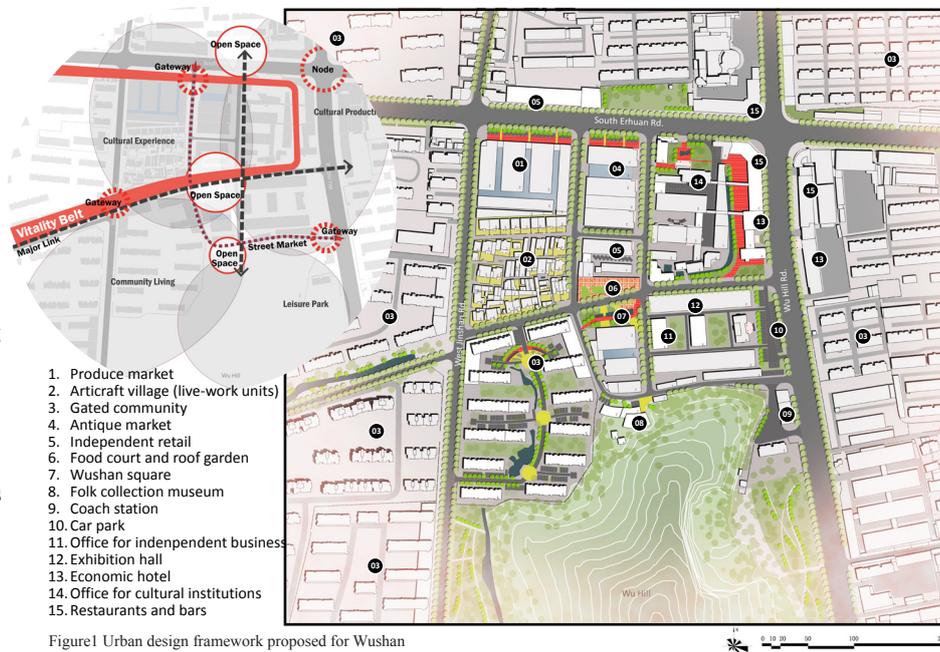


Figure1 Urban design framework proposed for Wushan

Instead of the authority planned flagship project, my proposal turns the area into a focal point for the community featuring a produce and an antique market surrounded by studios, private museums and 70,000sqm new residence. Particularly, the design seeks to balance social and economic benefits and avoid the homogeneity in cultural or retail-led regeneration practices in China.

Creating a Market Atmosphere & Minimising Interventions

Standard retail-based regeneration approaches often result in clean, spacious, ordered and upper-class aesthetics which fail to constitute authentic diversity. Watson (2009) identified five factors that contribute to the heterogeneous experience of marketplaces (Figure 2) together with the absence of a profit-oriented management and limited overarching design regulations.

Therefore, minimal intervention is considered to be the most appropriate and practical solution to this challenge.

The design and project objectives are to:

- create a sense of PLACE that celebrates local culture and diversity, and elevate its identity;

- optimize the physical ENVIRONMENT and accessibility so that all users have a interactive and inclusive experience; and
- foster vibrant ECONOMY to facilitate social cohesion and stabilisation.

The proposed interventions embrace the five factors identified in figure 2.

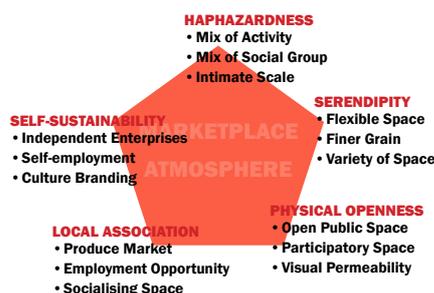
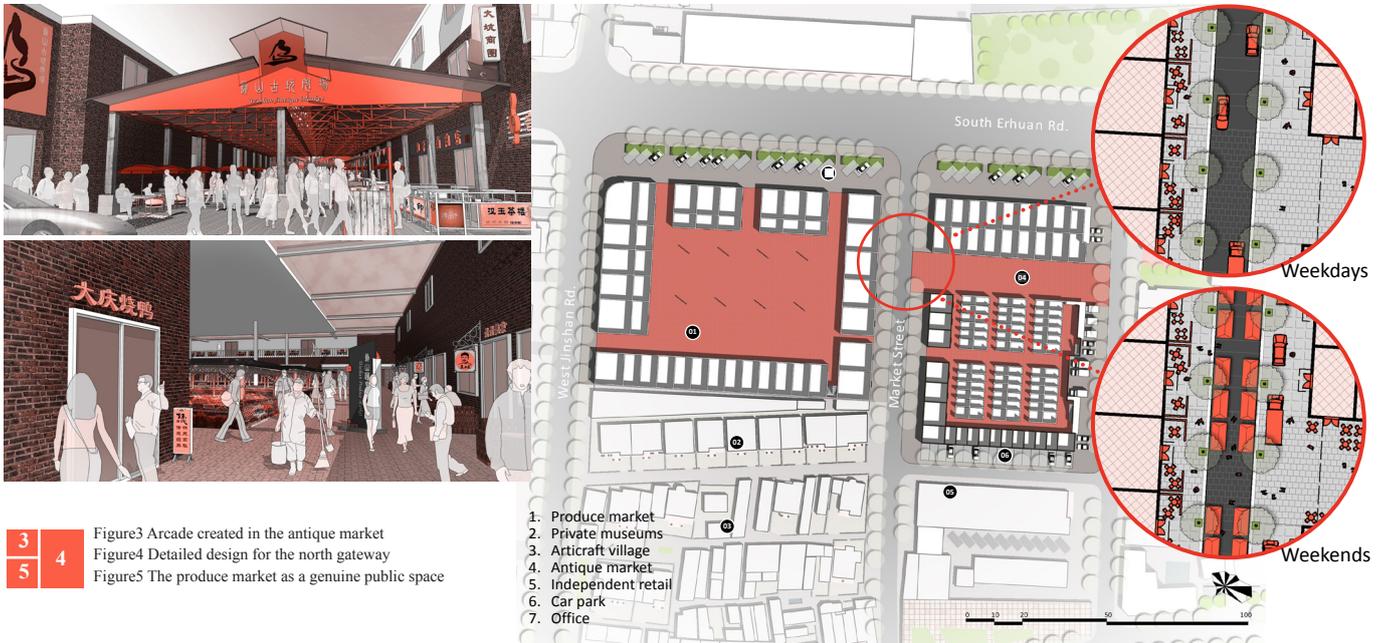


Figure 2 Urban design strategies embracing five factors for creating market atmosphere

Haphazardness

Most structures of the existing factories are preserved. The renovated warehouses accommodate activities from living, trading, manufacturing to exhibiting. Part of an urban village is transformed into live-work units catering for independent business. The mix of activities delivers



3 Figure3 Arcade created in the antique market
 4 Figure4 Detailed design for the north gateway
 5 Figure5 The produce market as a genuine public space

a 'messy vitality' that facilitates social interaction and cultural blending. The organic settings and varied building typologies contribute to the disordered aesthetics.

Serendipity

Design strategies are limited so as to minimise the control over activities. The public realm is planned for uncertainty. Diverse space-types including roof terrace, covered, semi-covered and open-air spaces help adapt the site to different weather and functions. An arcade (Figure 3) is created between buildings with a glazed roof. The blank walls and unvarnished elevations unfold numerous options for artistic expression. Front yards leave potential for individualization. Open air cafes, street furniture, trees and on street parking add to the friction and slow down movement to enhance vitality.

Physical Openness

Permeability and accessibility are improved by removing the walls between properties and creating intimate scale streets and additional pedestrian crossings. Temporal open markets including a shared space street market between two major buildings (Figure 4), and car-boot sales on parking spaces on the east side are socially more inclusive.

Local Association

The design incorporates a produce market (Figure 5) as an everyday space for local communities. It encourages locals to create meaning by occupying and using the space for themselves. The visual identity of a 'Back-hill Market' is created through embracing the hill adjacent to the site on the South and preserving a link via the view corridor from the North towards the hill top.

Self-sustainability

The scheme supports independent enterprises which contribute significantly to Cixi's economy by offering a flexible portfolio of lease types, tenants and spaces which provide opportunities for self-employment and informal economic activities ranging from street vending to creative businesses. Minimum investment is guaranteed by a 4 staged phasing strategy and a financial model, which will commence with residential development on available lands on the west side. Profits derived will support developments of retail and cultural facilities on reclaimed lands. Trading and cultural industry will contribute to the local economy. The spill over of economic benefits will eventually trigger a regeneration process in the surrounding area.

Lessons Learned

Careful spatial analysis of six cases in Beijing and London informed the design process. The research suggests that compared to other retail-led approaches, markets offer stronger connection with local communities and are less exclusive to disadvantaged groups. Compared to mega projects, they are financially modest to initiate and more durable in economic respects. Additionally, markets focus on public culture instead of high-culture which target at a wider range of classes and allow them to foster a shared meaning through their own participations.

The challenge of designing everyday spaces like markets is to find order in disorder. The tidiness of space is at the cost of behavioral control and cultural domination by overwhelming design strategies. The messiness bears freedom and vitality, however, runs the risk of crime and poverty. Although this project seeks to balance the two, the consequence is unpredictable. The five factors for a successful marketplace are necessary but not sufficient conditions. All in all, design cannot bring order. Nevertheless, it can provide ordinary, everyday spaces with moderate restriction and optional participation where users can create their own order and ritual.