Reflection paper Jingxuan Xie 4705831

This graduation project with the title 'See you at heritage: A new urban regeneration approach based on heritage revitalization for South Luogu Lane area, Beijing' is part of the research studio which is called ‘History and Heritage Vector’ and belongs to the Urbanism department, Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, Delft University of Technology.

The relationship between research and design: Research on Historical comparison, Theory and People’s need. Design for transitional layers on multi-scale.

South Luogu Lane area is a historical district in Beijing with great heritage value, but it is suffering from the excessive commercialization, poor living quality and lack of heritage protection, for tourists, residents and heritage conservation units respectively. Under today's new context, the relationship between the three roles is very bad within this old physical environment, that is, Hutong and courtyard houses. The aim of this project is to build up a new urban regeneration approach that can adapt this old structure into new context through reconcile the relationship between these three main actors. In order to achieve this aim, research contributes to the design in the following aspects:

Firstly, comparison research on history and existing situation helps me to dig out the fundamental problem of this project. The changing social structure and booming tourism industry extend the range of ‘private to public’ in this area, but the old structure cannot meet this demand. Based on this conclusion from the research, my design concept was initially formed, that is, creating transitional layers from Hutong to courtyard house at multi-scales to respond this increasing need. In addition, research on the traditional typologies and the way people use it in the past provide historical back up for my design at further stage, it helps me to find design solution in history information.

Secondly, research on theory provides me a different point of view to look at the problem. Guiding by the design concept above and the theory research, the framework of new approach gradually formed. Three steps are set by three groups of theories that responding to the problem of the bad relationship between residents, tourists and heritage conservation units respectively.

Thirdly, research of people’s need helps to transform my design into a bridge that connects the past and the present, old structure and new context. People's need here refers to residents’ self-construction and the activities study of residents and tourists. Although we are trained designer, we still don’t have a better understanding than users of the fundamental problem, as well as what they really needs. By reading their reconstruction of the old structure, possible method for physical intervention can be directly found, by reading their behavior in existing environment, the shortcomings of the existing design are well exposed. Holding those conclusion from the research, a bottom-up design is formed which is rooted in users.

The relationship between the theme of the graduation lab and the chosen subject/case/object: History and Heritage Vector Studio and Urban regeneration approach based on heritage revitalization in South Luogu Lane area.

It can be clearly read from the studio’s name that History and Heritage have an important role in this graduation lab. South Luogu Lane, as a historical district with nearly 800 years history and 31 heritage conservation units in 83.8 hectares, has a suitable background for this studio. Moreover, two key topics that are most mentioned in this graduation lab both have direct reflections on South Luogu Lane area through the approach that local authority is using recent years.
First discussion is about the role of heritage in the story. It was widely recognized in western world that heritage is not a list of building but an entire surrounding and it can play an important role in keeping the identity of the place. However, in today’s Chinese context, local residents barely have speaking right and their interests are ignored during the urban regeneration process. Heritage conservation units’ value are ignored as well because it is not profitable under its single revitalization approach compared to the fast-return commercial industry. Guiding by the theme of studio, the ‘heritage’ was redefined in my project and it becomes the core for my urban regeneration approach.

Second discussion is about Form or Soul. To further explain, it is about how to transform a place with keeping its identity. A question was proposed here: Is it possible to get the soul back by going back to the old form? The local authority’s approach which is simply recovering the traditional landscape on the surface gives a negative answer to this question. The relationship between residents, tourists and heritage conservation are not improved by simply cleaning Hutong, brick up the open wall and adding more green pots. This theme guide me to do further research on the relationship of form and soul of Hutong and courtyard house, showing me the way of the later transformation method.

The relationship between the methodical line of the graduation lab and the chosen method: Historical analysis and Narrative.

The method of historical analysis is the most adopted methods in this project at the early phase of research by design. It helps me to know about how does Hutong and courtyard house work in the past in creating transitional space, how does it become into the way it is now because of the changing of people’s demand. Both of these research outcomes brought by this method make sure that the later designed is originated from history information and people’s need.

While, the method of narrative is more used from both spatial and policy perspective in the later stage of design by research. Participatory processes of residents are emphasized here to let people have a say in the story. They are lively heritage that contains more intangible culture than physical buildings. Local people are encouraged to meet tourists with policy support on the specific Hutong and courtyard house with accordant perception. Traditional cultural activities will also be shown by residents and tourists are welcomed to experience it.

The relationship between the graduation project and the wider social, professional and scientific framework, touching upon the transferability of the project result.

The goal of this project is to build up a development strategy that adapts the historical district to the new context in order to reconcile the conflict between residents, tourists and heritage conservation units. It aims to maximize the potential value of historical buildings, improve the livability of residents, find back the authentic identity and show it to tourists. Therefore, heritage conservation units as the physical environment carrying the main conflict was given a crucial role in this strategy.

In a wider scientific context of urban historical district’s regeneration in China, there is still no approach that can be applied in spatial dimension on multi-scales. General approaches are mainly focus on building scale, just like the single tourism redevelopment strategy that are using for heritage conservation units now. But the problem cannot be fundamentally solved only by single buildings without a comprehensive coordination on urban scale. To say the least, even among the existing paper, heritage, residents and tourists are rarely discussed at the same time. Based on those knowledge gap, this project starts from the conflict between three roles that are mentioned above. Concept of ‘transitional layers’ was adopted on urban scale, netowrk scale and building scale. Guidelines for spatial intervention on multi-scale are also provided.
The existing approach that local authority adopted is being praised because of the recovered traditional landscape on the surface. Actually this seeming harmony is built by ignoring civil group’s need. It was designed for easy management of local authority instead of for the everyday users of the urban environment. In wider social context, this project pays more attention to civil group. It was rooted in people’s need and guided by people’s daily use. Not only speaking right but also responsibility are given to residents in order to form an efficiency self-management, which recovers their place attachment and makes residents proud of their community.

This approach has very high transferability, since it’s the solution for the conflict between residents, tourists and heritage. This conflict is widespread in Chinese historical city with tourism industry because of the long-time neglect of residents’ right and heritage’s value. Booming in tourism industry extend the range between public to private of those historical districts. While the main concept of creating more transitional layers provides a solution for this changing context accordingly.

The ethical issues and dilemmas you may have encountered in doing the research.

The urban regeneration approach proposed by this graduation project is a long term scheme, which responses to part of the knowledge gap. However, there are some knowledge gap that this approach cannot solve, which forms the limitation of this project.

First limitation is the big problem of vacation. Compared to the moving out people who can live in big modern apartment at the outskirt of Beijing, rest of the residents still have to share the limited space inside courtyard house. This situation somehow caused social injustice which might prolong the vacation time. More policy should be made and courtyard house transformation method should be further researched in order to reduce this injustice in order to make the vacation more efficient.

Secondly, the design of flexible Hutong might cause a latent conflict between tourists and residents. Although some policies has already been set to reduce this over invasion of tourism. For example, the number of shops and their opening hours are controlled on this street typologies. Residents are not allowed to turn their room into shops without the permission from their neighbors. However, further research is still needed to study the subtle boundary between tourists and residents. The last one is the inevitable gentrification that urban renewal would brought. How to preserve the original social structure? How to build up an inclusive social structure that can easily absorb the new immigrants? Those question have to be answered with more research.