

An International Conference to explore approaches to the preservation of urban built heritage, with a focus on Melbourne

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Reconstructing Urban Heritage in Datong

This paper examines the process, politics and impact of urban heritage reconstruction in Datong, the second largest city in Shanxi Province, China. Over 2,400 years old, Datong used to be a significant political, economic and military centre of ancient North China. With a series of splendid historic relics such as the Huayan Monastery and the Yungang Grottoes inherited from its more prosperous days, Datong is listed as one of the 24 famous historical cities in China. Yet, its historical importance has been suppressed. Due to its large reserves of coal, it has mainly served as an energy base since 1949. As the large mining companies were owned by the state, local residents benefited little from the coal industry, but suffered greatly from its adverse environmental impact. Known as the “City of the Coal”, Datong remained one of the most polluted cities in China up until six years ago.

When the mayor Geng Yanbo took office in 2008, he considered cultural heritage a resource for the city to develop and identified an urgent need to diversify the city’s economy. Inspired by the master plan made by the famous architectural historian Liang Sicheng for Beijing in the 1950s, Geng proposed the idea of reconstructing cultural heritage in the old city while placing new developments in a separated new city on the east bank of the Yu River. The local government adopted an integral approach to urban regeneration to lessen the city’s dependence on coal. The old city attracts tourists, develops creative industry, and accommodates commercial spaces and other services for local residents. The new city provides ultramodern residence, health, educational and cultural facilities. A number of environmentally friendly industrial zones are located on the fringe of the city.

Within this larger context, Geng launched a series of urban heritage reconstruction projects in the inner city, including rebuilding the city’s 14th-century defensive walls.¹ The city walls of Datong were built in clay during the Northern Wei dynasty (386-534). Its layout was modified during the subsequent dynasties and became what we see today during the Ming Dynasty. The Datong municipal government started the restoration project in April 2008. Modern construction techniques and materials were used, with old clay walls being wrapped in new concrete and brick skins. By now the project is almost completed except a small portion of the West Wall. The newly restored walls have been well received. The top of the walls provide an ideal place for people to stroll and enjoy distant views of the city. The bulwarks outside the main gates also accommodate various commercial activities.

Within the inner city, massive demolition of unattractive modern buildings was carried out to make way for the restoration of the old city. The old city of Datong has diverse architectural relics from different historic periods, including Liao, Jin, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, as well as the Republican and socialist periods. The main strategies of conservation include use of the key historical buildings as the nodal points; reconstructing the ancient buildings near them to restore the traditional fabric; to re-establish the classic cross-shape street structure; and to clear the viewing corridors for key historical buildings. As a result, the famous Huayan Monastery is now surrounded by a series of newly constructed temples and courtyards, forming a significant part of the inner city fabric. The complex also connects to other historic relics in the inner city. Many traditional courtyard houses are still being restored; those completed are owned by the state and rented to interested individuals and businesses. Outside the inner city core, the ancient Small East City (*Dongxiaocheng*) has also been reconstructed in the form of a large-scale walled shopping mall.

A few factors have made this redevelopment possible. First of all, the very poor condition of the city in 2008 has made urban regeneration a most welcome project by the majority of the community. Certainly, some residents were not entirely satisfied by the compensation they received for the compulsory acquisition (and demolition) of their houses. Yet, as urban problems such as air pollution and poor garbage management were so severe, they supported the redevelopment project despite personal losses in the process. Secondly, the appreciation for cultural traditions is deeply rooted in everyday life in Shanxi Province. Thirdly, the unique Chinese system of land finance provides funding for large-scale projects. Because the costs of land expropriation are low, land income constitutes

¹ Again, the idea was inspired by Liang Sicheng, who suggested in the early 1950s that Beijing’s city walls and moats should be redeveloped into a three-dimensional park. For various reasons, however, his idea was not adopted, and Beijing’s city walls were demolished in the late 1950s. On these redevelopments, see Chapter 6 of my book, *Remaking Chinese Urban Form: Modernity, Scarcity and Space, 1949-2005* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

a crucial revenue source for local governments. In the case of Datong, the yearly land income was around 5 to 6 billion RMB between 2008 and 2012. The income used on urban regeneration and infrastructure improvement in turn opens new venues to attract private investments in urban development. Last but not the least, governance capacity at municipal level is crucial. Under Geng's leadership, the Datong municipal government successfully mobilised urban elites, entrepreneurs and ordinary residents to support and contribute to the intended projects.

Despite the positive effects on quality of life and environment, the Datong experience has been controversial. The question of authenticity has been raised by some experts, who regard Geng as too aggressive in his approach to heritage conservation. The massive temple complexes he constructed around Huanyan and Yungang have been criticised for lack of historical authenticity. Social inclusion has also become an acute issue. Many residents were forced to move away from the inner city to make way for its regeneration. Following restoration, the substantial rental increases mean that some small businesses can no longer afford to stay in the inner city, while outside investors flock to these development opportunities. As a result, the social ecology has been greatly changed. Economic viability of the large-scale urban regeneration project has been questioned. It is reported that the city now has accumulated debts of around 20 billion RMB. Income from tourism has increased 159% in Datong from 2007 to 2012, but over the same period the national average increased 233%.

Despite the ongoing hot debates on the Datong model in the media, quite a number of other Chinese cities have already followed its footsteps by rebuilding their city walls and other lost heritage buildings. I would like to conclude this paper by briefly summarising the deep motivations for the current wave of reviving the past glory in Chinese cities:

- Dissatisfaction on devastation and homogenization caused by waves of 'smashing the country's feudal past' (the May Fourth movement and the Cultural Revolution) and spatial commodification in the past three decades
- More comfortable with the nation's past as the Chinese become more confident economically and culturally
- The rise of new generation of domestic tourists
- Branding as a key to urban growth