

ESTANISLAO ROCA, MIQUEL MARTÍ, MELISA PESOA*

CONTEMPORARY URBANISATION IN CHINA: AN OVERVIEW AND THE PROJECT FOR SHANGHAI

WSPÓŁCZESNA URBANIZACJA W CHINACH: OMÓWIENIE TEMATU I PROJEKT DLA SZANGHAJU

Abstract

The major metropolises of the world face several problems due to their rapid growth. From among these, it is considered that Chinese cities in particular deserve special attention due to the diversity of challenges they face. Out of the 1,367,820,000 population of China in 2014, 54.77% constituted the urban population¹ – this figure takes on more relevance when we consider that only sixty-five years ago, just 10.64% of the population was urban. From the total population of the country, about 17% live in the ten most major cities and their metropolitan areas². Taking into account the relevance of the metropolis in the Chinese context, we propose a set of topics, challenges and trends in contemporary urbanization in China.

Keywords: urban design, contemporary urbanization, Asian metropolises, urban competitions

Streszczenie

Główne metropolie świata stają przed szeregiem problemów spowodowanych ich gwałtownym wzrostem. Spośród nich uważa się, że chińskie miasta zasługują na szczególną uwagę ze względu na różnorodność wyzwań, jakim muszą stawić czoła. 54,77% ogółu społeczeństwa chińskiego liczącego sobie 1 367 820 000 mieszkańców w roku 2014 stanowiło populację miejską – ta liczba nabiera szczególnego znaczenia, gdy weźmiemy pod uwagę fakt, że sześćdziesiąt pięć lat temu tylko 10,64% ludności Chin zamieszkiwało miasta. Z całej populacja kraju, ok. 17% ludności mieszka w dziesięciu największych miastach i na terenie otaczających ich obszarów metropolitarnych. Pamiętając o tym, że rozpatrywanie problemu metropolii w kontekście Chin ma swoje głębokie uzasadnienie, proponujemy omówienie zestawu tematów, wyzwań i trendów zachodzących we współczesnej urbanizacji Chin.

Słowa kluczowe: projekt urbanistyczny, urbanizacja współczesna, metropolie azjatyckie, konkursy urbanistyczne

* Prof. Arch. Ph.D. Estanislao Roca, Miquel Martí, Melisa Pesoa, Department of Urbanism and Regional Planning, Polytechnic University of Catalonia (UPC), Barcelona-TECH.

¹ National Bureau of Statistics of China: <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2015/indexeh.htm> (accesss: 28.11.2016).

² The ten major cities (including its metropolitan areas) in China are: Guangzhou, Shanghai, Chongqing, Beijing, Hangzhou, Wuhan, Chengdu, Tianjin, Xi'an and Jinan, totalling around 233 million inhabitants, which is around one third of the total European population, according to the National Census, 2010.

1. Trends in contemporary urbanisation in China

Big cities with high densities and rapid development tend to create huge mega-city regions. Three such regions are emerging – Beijing-Tianjin, the Yangtze Delta (Shanghai-Nanjing-Hangzhou) and the Pearl River (Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong). The high-speed railway network plays a major role in structuring the megacities as well as the system of main urban hubs in the interior of the country (Wuhan, Xian, Chengdu, Chongqing, Changsha).

The national urban plans for the next decade are trying to drive the rural migration towards cities in the interior of the country instead of to the coastal regions. For this reason, the government has taken the strategy of ‘townification’ in order to house the future migration of the rural population into urban environments; however, this strategy has created the phenomenon of ghost cities – entire cities or urban developments which remain empty and unfinished.

In these giant urban concentrations, environmental problems arise and reach crucial levels. The main issue is air and water pollution. Food security is also a concern for most of the urban Chinese population. Achieving sustainable mobility becomes a key challenge when attempting to reduce pollution, increase the efficiency of transportation and make possible policies to improve the quality of public space. The extension of transit systems, particularly metro networks, in the main cities is absolutely crucial. At the same time, the necessary networks of expressways raise the issue of the architectural design of infrastructure in order to integrate them with their urban surroundings. The future role of bicycles, which have been decreasing in the major cities, and motorcycles, which are present everywhere, should also be considered.

Chinese cities also set out important issues concerning urban policies and management. A big problem to tackle is that of the floating population. Because of the *hukou* system (in which authorities issue members of the population with official permission to settle in the cities), there are many urban immigrants not considered in the official accounts of population – they become urban dwellers without rights. Secondly, because of singular laws on land property (the total land is public owned), the land policies in China become a particular and complex world in themselves with regard to the purchase, expropriation, rental or development of lands. At the same time, it is very difficult (because of very rigid sectoral rules) to coordinate different landlords, who always look for separate properties that are easy to manage in autonomous ways. Therefore, this makes it difficult to implement hybrid complex urban programs. Finally, the decision making processes at the urban level lacks transparency and this favours corruption.

Identity is another great concern not only for scholars interested in China but also for many Chinese people. In the rapid current urbanisation, many urban developments look similar to each other and they are lacking in their *genius loci*. The preservation of heritage (from singular monuments to the renewal of the historic urban fabric such as *hutongs* or *lilongs*) is not always enough. In this sense, we must take into account the fact that Chinese culture has a different sense of authenticity. It is used to rebuild its architectural monuments many times over the centuries and to find in literature and other arts, a key element of continuity and tradition. Then, beside heritage, urban identity in Chinese cities can be found in other aspects such as the intense urban life, the natural landscape features, the urban structure or the artistic evocations.

A singularity of Chinese urban landscape is the fact that many developments are walled, enclosed into themselves; in such situations, the relationship between the built complexes and the public streets is not direct, but through different forms of gates and walls. It is a long urban tradition coming from the classic cities of the Tang dynasty (in the second half of the first millennium) and preserved during Maoist China, through the *danwei* system (mixed units of production and residence). At the end of 2015, a national directive encouraged cities to remove many of these urban walls. Such a process could deeply change Chinese urban landscape.

2. Infrastructural Nature: an urbanisation project in inner Shanghai

We present a project that won a second prize in an international student competition held by Shanghai International Tendering Co. Ltd. We were finalists alongside Harvard University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Tongji University, Cardiff University and the Southeast University of Nanjing. The team consisted of students and teachers from the undergraduate and postgraduate research programs of the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at the Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya.

For many years, we devoted much of our research to study and understand the urban culture of China and we also created the Observatory on Urban China to hold different academic experiences around this topic, such as courses, lectures, international workshops and exhibitions.

Like Shanghai, our city, Barcelona, has experienced one of the most significant urban transformations in the world. Both cities have a significant importance in the global trading system, sharing a certain port tradition. In this sense, a number of teachers from our Department at the University contributed to the elaboration of the plans and projects that allowed great changes in our city. For example, the transformation of the waterfront, which both opened up the city to the sea and integrated the infrastructural transport network – creating new transversal connections which previously did not exist.

The requirements of the competition consisted in the transformation of an area to the east of Shanghai Railway Station. This sector is currently occupied by railway tracks at the end of the line and represents a barrier for the urban fabric and the connections in the area. The proposal that we present, intends to actively contribute to the improvement of the urban conditions of Zhabei district, creating an important newly equipped park. The project also aims to resolve the district's major problem of connections, which would substantially improve the life of its citizens and achieve a more harmonious, sustainable and prosperous city.

Although the competition required an intervention in the Zhabei district, located north of Suzhou creek, our project starts from a metropolitan perspective, analysing and understanding the whole city. Its proximity to watercourses should be a key issue throughout the intervention process.

Framed into the 2020–2040 Master Plan, the intention is to enhance the existing green areas and intensify the green network around Shanghai, closing the unfinished green rings. The proposal is to also strengthen this metropolitan green structure with a new equipped park, connecting the new park with other urban open spaces to stimulate ecological continuity.



III. 1. The intervention area, aerial view



III. 2. The intervention area, view from the street

The completion of the green ring could potentiate the green vectors that cut through the ring, expanding them both inwards and outwards. In this sense, the Huangpu river and Suzhou creek help to connect the green corridors with the water network.

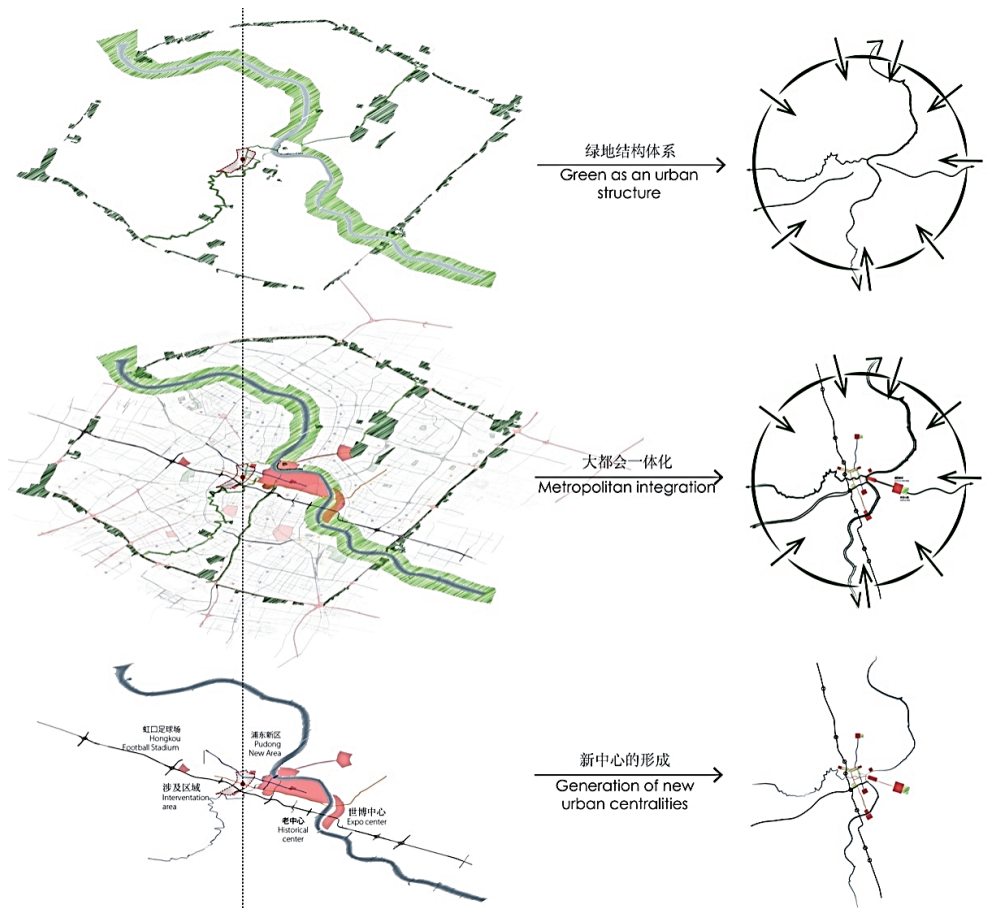
Considering this, the core idea of the project is to build an open park with amenities of around forty hectares and more than 2 km in length. This park would cover the railway tracks, which we propose to be partially underground, to create a transversal permeability that is non-existent today.

Concerning the urban structure, the North-South Elevated Road and Xizang North Road are two main urban arteries that connect and cross the intervention area. In addition, Baoshan Rd. represents an extra connection to the site. Thanks to this urban structure, our area has all the possibilities to become a new centrality and be a part of the set of Shanghai centralities.

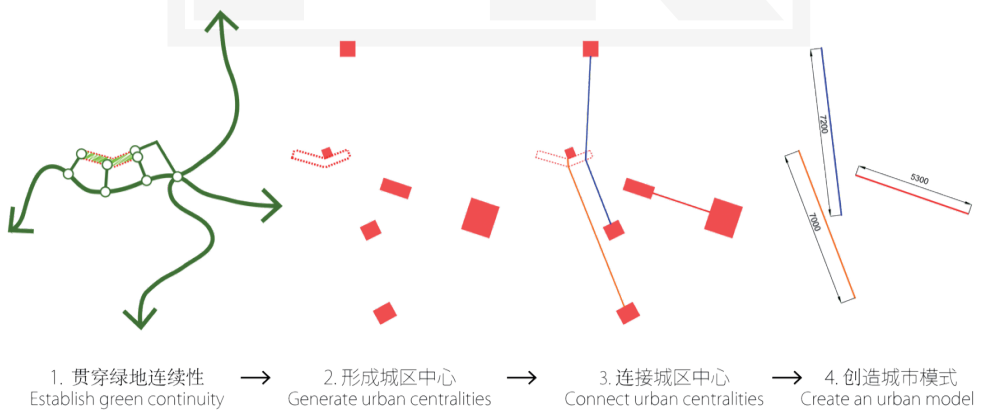
Taking into account the barrier that currently represents the railway tracks, our idea is to generate new pedestrian continuities across the park to improve the accessibility and movement in Zhabei. For this reason, we seek to ensure the crossing and permeability on the ground level. The idea is to create an urban zipper that would solve connectivity issues existing in the area.

The link between the city centre and the Shanghai Railway Station would be possible thanks to the covering of the railway tracks – this would create an area that would have intense and diverse usage.

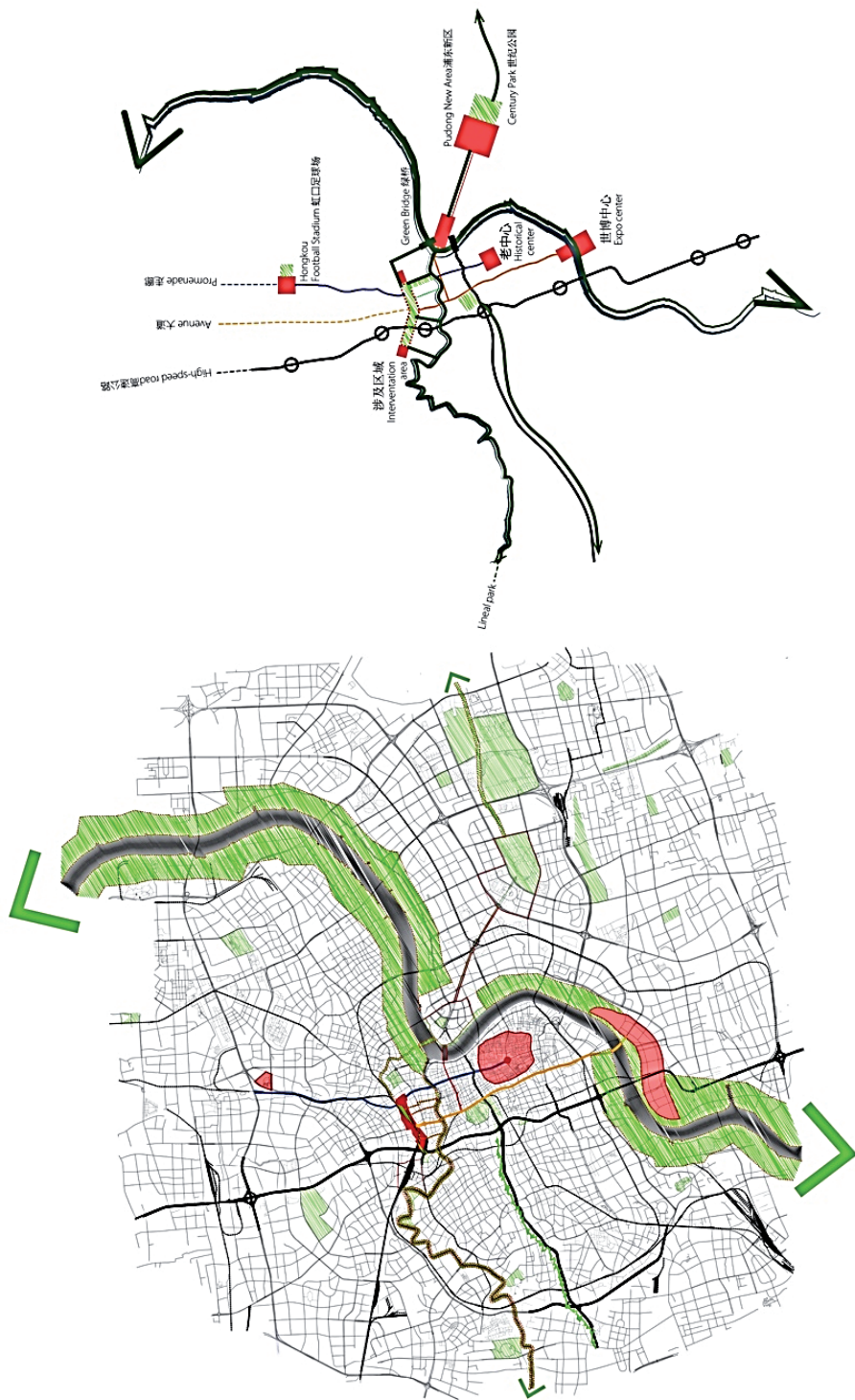
The proposal develops three urban nodes along the park. A new downtown centre is located above a slab covering the train tracks on the western side and filled with multiple mixed-use buildings and metropolitan activities. The Hub (intermodal centre) area, a place where metro lines 3, 4 and 8, connect, is the essential action of the project to relate the area with the whole city. Eventually, a third new centrality around the north of Baoshan Road, links the metro station and the existing market together with the adjoining *lilong* – a set of traditional houses.



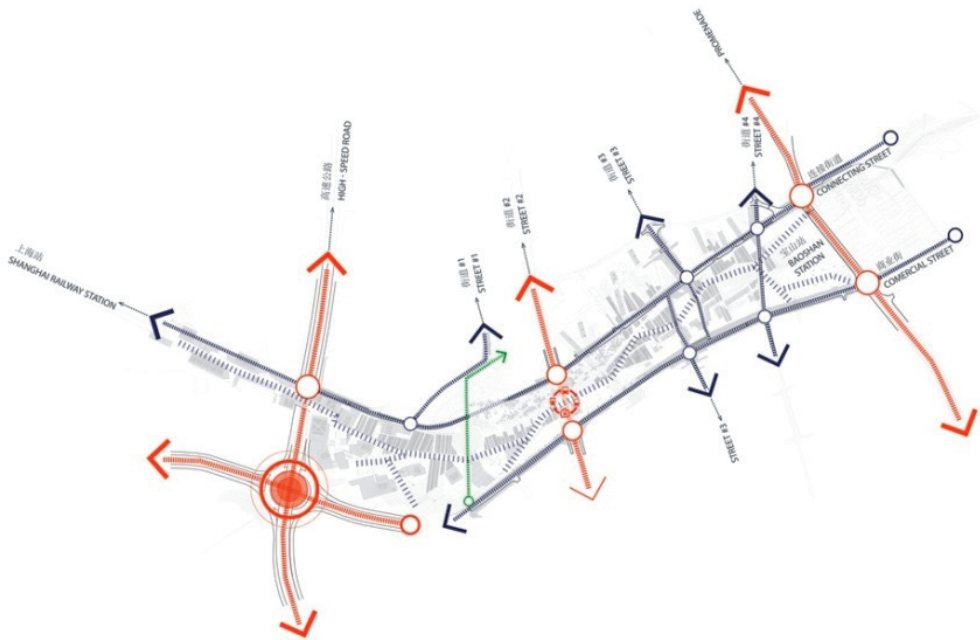
III. 3. Metropolitan strategies I



III. 4. Metropolitan strategies II



III. 5. Urban strategies



III. 6. Connectivity and transversality

Broadly speaking, we can identify seven different areas (project units) involved in the whole transformation: a market area, with a proposal for global remodelling; the demolition of degraded buildings combined with the construction of new housing stock and a technological park; the creation of an artificial hill formed by the accumulated material from digging and demolitions; a new linear park giving urban identity to the whole plan and creating a space of opportunity to host major cultural and leisure events; the completion of the housing grid in Haining Road; a commercial axis located above the train tracks, providing intense activity; eight skyscrapers, combining offices and public usage, hotels and residences, located at the intersection of the major roads. These towers, due to their associative condition, are conceived as a group, a part of a bigger unit, not as individual elements.

In the project, we combine five kinds of uses – nature, transportation, leisure and sport, culture and technology. The combination of these elements constitutes a hybrid park. The facilities for these five different uses located along the linear green space are: a natural green carpet or ‘the green corridor’; an entertainment and sports infrastructure, including a sports centre and a skate park; a culture and technology network, comprised of, for example, a convention centre and a theatre, with the intention of consolidating a cultural district; a commercial string that links the market with the *boulevard* and the shopping mall; an intensive and efficient transport network.

The lack of transversal continuity is an important point that we should take into account. There is an opportunity to increase the connectivity and mobility of the area, not only from the metropolitan perspective but also from the pedestrian point of view. From this pedestrian vision, the idea is to ensure permeability to the park and all the streets surrounding it.

