

Reconstruction of the Wanshougong Historical District in Nanchang City, Jiangxi Province, China

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ABSTRACT

Reconstruction of historical areas of cities remains one of the most prominent problems in China. The project of reconstruction of the Wanshougong historical district is in its final stage of implementation, and reveals main issues faced by Chinese architects nowadays. This is the only district in the city of Nanchang, which preserves its historical appearance relatively well. A detailed examination of the existing buildings was carried out at the design stage. The foundations of the destroyed Wanshougong monastery were discovered within limits of restoration area. Wanshougong monastery was restored to its original state, returning a lost landmark to the city. Old road network was preserved and cleared of dilapidated buildings. Architects sought to improve quality of urban development, solve transport and parking issues, as well as strengthen the tourist and economic attractiveness of the area.

Keywords: reconstruction, historical areas, China, traditional style, urban space

I. INTRODUCTION

In modern urban development in China, an urgent issue is the creation of new public spaces through reconstruction of historical city areas, large number of which were badly damaged in the second half of the 20th century. Half a century ago, a concept of public urban space in China was limited to large squares for meetings and commemorative activities. And access to local spaces was often restricted. As a result, only narrow street spaces remained open and accessible to public [1].

Rapid development of real estate market over the past 20 years has dramatically changed the urban landscape in China. Expensive hotels, high-rise offices, large shopping centers appeared in the cities. This thereby required a rethinking of the way and extent to which urban space is being used. It became obvious that the image of the city as a whole depends on the appearance of urban spaces. And the presence of an actively functioning public space in the territory is highly able to determine the attractiveness and quality of life of a particular urban area and ultimately the city itself [2].

During the construction boom in the late 1990s and early 2000s, practice often outpaced the understanding of ongoing processes, which often led to an irreparable loss of historical appearance and national identity of big cities. After about 10 years, this caused a reverse and also insufficiently well-thought-out reaction of the municipal authorities that began widely to recreate the lost heritage. In many regions of China quite controversial projects started to be built, such as rebuilding of the demolished city walls (Datong city) or covering the central territories of cities with uniform pseudotraditional housing. However, in the past 10 years, new approaches to solving the problem of reconstruction of historical urban areas and creating public spaces of a new type have begun to appear in China.

The present study focuses on the Wanshougong district in Nanchang city, which is located in the city center, in its historical part ("Fig. 1"). On a fairly large area of 5.46 hectares, valuable examples of wooden residential buildings have been preserved. This is one of the few urban areas that has retained its historical structure and scale. Furthermore, the most important Taoist monastery in the region, unfortunately destroyed in the 1960s was located on this site. It was decided to recreate it in its original forms.

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Fig. 1. Location of Nanchang and Wanshougong district.

The Wanshougong District reconstruction project was carried out under the guidance of architect and professor of Tsinghua University Wang Guixiang, one of the largest experts in China in the field of traditional Chinese architecture. This project required the solution of many issues, such as placement of residential, transport, commercial and tourist facilities, as well as reconstruction of preserved buildings and integration of new construction objects. Based on the state of existing buildings and the street pattern of the territory, architects set themselves the task of preserving the following elements: 1) street geometry and characteristics of street space; 2) the height and scale of structures along the streets; 3) characteristic features of street facades; 4) features of decoration details.

II. HISTORY OF THE DISTRICT

The history of the city of Nanchang has more than two thousand years. The Wanshougong monastery

located on the projected site was founded more than 1600 years ago. It was built in memory of the famous Taoist master Xu Sun and over the following centuries remained an important object of the Taoist religion, becoming one of the most famous sights of Nanchang. Buildings of the monastery were rebuilt and renovated over time, and the most recent rebuilding dates back to the beginning of the 20th century, which is the period of the Republic of China. In 1966, during the Cultural Revolution, the monastery was looted, and all the main buildings were destroyed. Until recently, the monastery site was occupied by the square in front of the high school erected in the 20th century [3], however, in recent years, archaeological excavations have been carried out on the site, revealing the location, size and column grid of the old monastery buildings ("Fig. 2").



Fig. 2. Excavation of the Wanshougong monastery (photos by Wang Guixiang studio).

The area around the monastery is also very important in the history of the city, its structure was formed gradually from the time of the Tang dynasty to the reign of the Ming dynasty. The old city wall ran along the south side of the district, one of the city wall gates, the Guangrunmen, with a gate tower was located on this site as well [4]. Behind the Guangrunmen gates

were busy shopping districts with the relevant building and street structure. In addition, a very important trading port was built on the banks of the nearby river, which further contributed to the development of trade in this territory [5].

III. PLANNING AND CHARACTERISTICS OF URBAN SPACE

Considering rather poor degree of preservation of buildings on the site, the main purpose of reconstruction of the territory for architects was to preserve the geometry of streets, as this is the only surviving example of a traditional urban space in

Nanchang. For this purpose, before starting the design, a thorough analysis of urban street spaces was carried out with the help of students from the Architectural Institute of Nanchang University ("Fig. 3") [6]. Along with the main streets, architects decided to preserve certain narrow nameless alleys, whose value was re-identified.

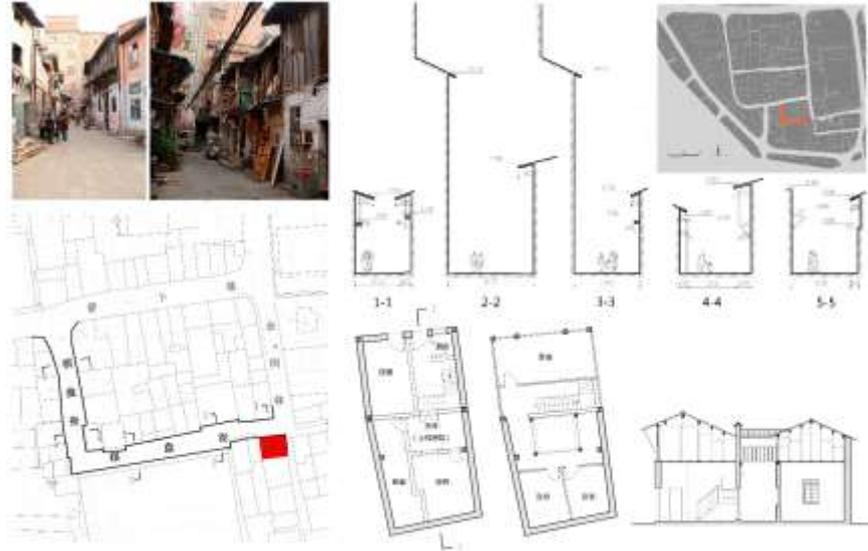


Fig. 3. Measurement of existing buildings and street geometry on the example of the Qipanjie street [7].

When reconstructing buildings located along the streets, architects sought to preserve their original height and scale whenever possible, which on average did not exceed 2 floors. Large disharmonious buildings added in modern times were demolished. In the southwestern and southern parts of the territory, small lanes were originally located, which over time were chaotically built up. Parts of structures that were later

added to the original buildings, such as additional galleries or awnings, were removed. Parts of buildings that were rebuilt during use were restored to the extent possible in their original form. This made it possible to clear the space of streets from chaotic and dilapidated buildings and to obtain additional internal public spaces ("Fig. 4").



Fig. 4. Structure of urban space: 1 – before reconstruction, 2 – after reconstruction (drawing by Wang Guixiang studio).

Main object of this district is the Wanshougong monastery, and the scale of its space determines the scale of the rest of the territory. All street spaces should not exceed the size of the main courtyard of the monastery and the space of the square in front of it.

Following this principle, it is possible to correspond to logic of evolution of local urban space.

Width of the largest streets in the territory is 4–6 meters, which makes it possible to use them for the passage of fire engines in emergency cases. The

narrower streets are 3–5 meters wide, and the small lanes are 2–4 meters wide. According to the project, all the streets inside the territory were made pedestrian, and traffic flows were brought to the perimeter of the site.

After the reconstruction, the trading function here will remain dominant, thus an additional underground space was required for parking and goods delivery. On the north side of the site there is a subway exit, therefore, it was decided to combine the exit space from the subway and the first underground level. Three underground levels were built in total. In the first underground level are shopping areas and the entrance to the subway. In the second and third levels are parking lots and the necessary technical rooms. To connect the underground and ground spaces, a system of elevators, escalators and related structures was organized, which forms also correspond to other buildings.

Formed intra-quarter areas and open spaces below ground level, if possible, are filled with landscaping. This made it possible to provide the underground space with natural light and to increase the area of greening. The entire space was divided into private and public areas, both closed (galleries, malls, etc.), and open. On the one hand, public-private spaces should become peculiar regulators of the behavior of citizens. On the other hand, their introduction into the urban structure should increase the commercialization of urban spaces through increased trade [8].

IV. THE DIVERSITY OF CULTURAL CONTENT OF THE DISTRICT

To restore the historical appearance of the Wanshougong district, it was also necessary to reveal, investigate and preserve the entire typology of

structures that previously stood on this site. By the beginning project of work on the site were located a mosque, an old partially preserved textile trading company courtyard, traditional trading buildings, as well as ordinary residential buildings. Moreover, during archaeological research, the foundations of the lost Taoist monastery Wanshougong were also uncovered. In addition, according to historical texts [9, 10], within the territory there were also the Guangrunmen city gates, and the temples Guangongci and Xianliangsi. But over time, these buildings were demolished or rebuilt beyond recognition.

The task was to fully preserve and restore these various architectural objects, which would allow to continue the successive development of this territory and enrich its cultural content. It was necessary to bring to the fore the cultural and historical value of the area, at the same time making it attractive for business and investment. The emergence of new forms of sociocultural life in society in this case necessitated a certain transformation of public urban space [11].

As mentioned above, the most significant building on the site was the Wanshougong monastery, whose buildings were restored in their original form. The basis for the reconstruction were records in texts, old photographs and archeology data. By the time of the reign of Emperor Daoguang (1782–1850), this monastery became one of the largest architectural groups in the Nanchang city [12]. As for the single buildings of the monastery, in the surviving photographs of the times of the Republic of China, one can see the main temple Fuzhudian and the Lingxiaobaodian temple located behind it, therefore, the appearance of the temple buildings was restored according to the period of the beginning of the 20th century ("Fig. 5").

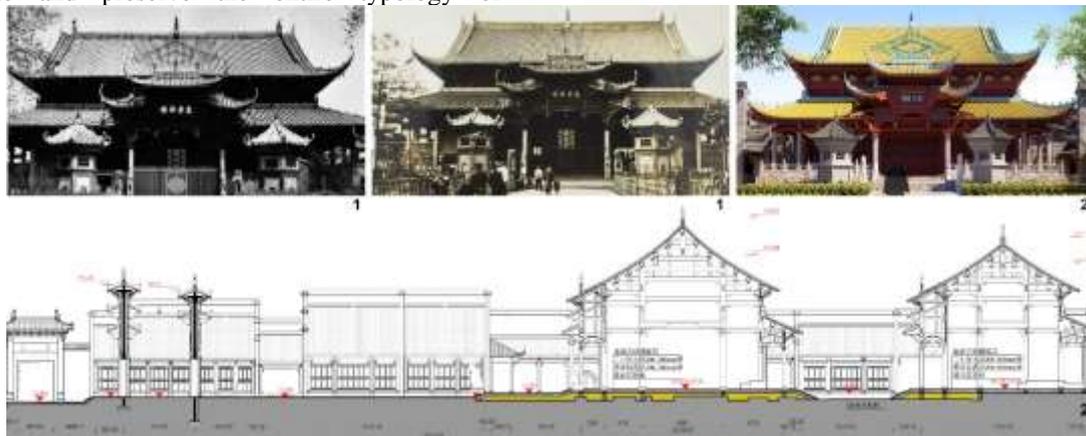


Fig. 5. Wanshougong monastery before (1) and after (2) reconstruction (drawing by Wang Guixiang studio).

The minor temples of the monastery, such as Furendian and Sanyuandian, have survived to this day; they have been included in the group of buildings of the

Wanshougong monastery after its restoration. In addition to the reconstruction of the monastery itself, it was also necessary to arrange a spacious square in front

of it in order to meet the requirements of distribution of human flows and evacuation.

V. RECONSTRUCTION OF LOCAL HOUSING

As for ordinary residential and commercial buildings, at the beginning of the reconstruction many buildings were still in use, but have become unsafe and needed to be replaced. No architectural objects included in the list of protection of monuments were found on the territory, however, there are some historically significant traditional wooden structures that form residential complexes with courtyards. It was decided to completely preserve and restore all residential buildings with historical value in their original form, including structures, interior space, shapes and decoration, and thereby develop the potential of the district itself.

The traditional residential buildings that have been preserved on the territory since the beginning of the

20th century include complexes with several courtyards and wooden buildings located in the central part of the district. Apart from that, several separate buildings have also been preserved. Traditional trading buildings along the streets were combined with residential buildings. In such structures, the store was either built in front, and the back was occupied by housing, or on the first tier, while the second was occupied by living rooms.

The wooden structures of the surviving buildings of the end of the Qing Dynasty — beginning of the Republic of China were in poor condition. With the exception of some buildings that required reinforcing their structures, the rest of the buildings required disassembly and rebuilding ("Fig. 6"). Before dismantling that buildings, all these structures were carefully measured, and their drawings were made. When dismantling, each element was numbered, which ensured the process of reassembling structural elements after restoration work.



Fig. 6. Regular buildings of the Wanshougong district before and during the reconstruction (photos by Wang Guixiang studio).

Apart from reconstruction of historical buildings, along the northern side of the district, due to the lack of old valuable buildings there, it was planned to build 2–6 storey residential, commercial and office buildings using elements of traditional style, such as transverse walls protruding above the roof slopes. This would partially offset the costs of the project, which was mainly funded by the municipality.

VI. CONCLUSION

The project described in this article set itself the goal of creating a new comfortable environment for the historic part of the city. A modern public urban space is supposed to have the qualities of accessibility, security, multifunctionality and the possibility of self-presentation [2], and given project fully demonstrates these features. When an architect is to restore lost or dilapidated building, that may not be an object of cultural heritage, the architect must choose what he is ready to preserve and reconstruct, and what can be demolished.

This project is characterized primarily by the fact that it is focused on preserving the geometry and

characteristic features of urban space, in other words, it is the urban space itself that was considered as an independent object of conservation and reconstruction. A significant amount of time during the implementation of the project was given to an analysis and study of local urban space. According to the authors of the project the preservation of the original road network, the scale and rhythm of buildings would allow to preserve a unique character of this place in the best way possible, even with the partial loss and redesign of some structures.

Moreover, there is still no single answer to many controversial issues that are highlighted in this project. For example, question of whether an architect should be restoring lost architectural monument, or if it is worth to reconstruct dilapidated structures of historical residential buildings, that are not under the municipal protection. In this case, the author of the project, Wang Guixiang gives positive answer to all these questions. In his opinion, history of Wanshougong district is very important for the Nanchang city and the most complete restoration of it would allow its residents to deeply

experience historical continuity and culture identity of the city.

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