

MODERN ADAPTATION, URBAN CONSERVATION, AND THE BUDDHIST GENIUS LOCI: A CASE STUDY OF SINO-OCEAN TAIKOO LI CHENGDU, CHINA

TSEGAYE WUBENGDA HAILE

Student, Academic Affiliation: PhD candidate, wubengdahaile@yahoo.com

China, Sichuan Province, Chengdu City, Pixian County, Xipu, Xiaoyuanlukou, City one, Building 7 section 1, Room 3004.

Phone number: +8615198237691

SHEN ZHONGWEI

Professor, Academic Affiliation: PhD, szw@swjtu.edu.cn

TEKLEMARIAM EDEN ATSEBEHA

Student, Academic Affiliation: PhD candidate, ediats@yahoo.com

MOSISSA SAMUEL TSEGAYE

Student, PhD candidate, sankow76@yahoo.com

Received: June 2018. Acceptance: May 2019

Abstract

Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li is an urban conservation and revitalization project that seeks to preserve the ancient Buddhist town in Chengdu, Sichuan, China. Through a review of the literature on Buddhist architecture in conjunction with site observation and a survey of visitors, this article offers an in-depth analysis of the way the project adapts the characteristics of traditional Buddhist architecture to achieve a unique place identity. Its low-rise, intimate architecture is what sets it apart from the neighboring high-rise buildings. Although the project conserves six historic buildings, and the ancient Daci Temple, its historic qualities are not why it is best known. What makes the complex distinctive is its modern adaptation of traditional Sichuan architecture aesthetics. The redevelopment approach adopts a spatial design that is different from the traditional Buddhist layout. This mix of old and new gives it a singular place identity that overshadows the historic core. While the incorporation of the historic structures enrich a contemporary urban form, it also diminishes the value of the urban heritage. This article therefore argues that, in addition to retaining the historic physical features, it is appropriate for urban conservation and revitalization projects to take local culture and historic place identity into consideration.

Keywords: Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li, Urban conservation and revitalization, Traditional Buddhist architecture, Place identity, Historic genius loci

1. INTRODUCTION

Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li is a unique commercial complex in the heart of the city of Chengdu in Sichuan, China. The urban conservation and revitalization project for this historic Buddhist town is an initiative of the local government. The complex includes a Buddhist temple that dates back to the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), and the area has influenced the spatial, social, and economic development of the city (Heathcote, 2016). Unlike the mega-mall redevelopment schemes most favored in China, which have left cities crippled from the loss of their historic

urban fabrics, Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li adapts a more heritage-sensitive approach. The result has been largely well received for the way it exemplifies the weave of layers of generations, celebrating the ancient and embracing the best of modernity to create a vibrant commercial district. The dialectic it creates between the old and the new also establishes a unique sense of place. Using a review of the theoretical literature on Buddhist architecture in conjunction with site observation and a survey of visitors to the site, this article assesses the way Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li Chengdu applies the characteristics of traditional Buddhist architecture and interrogates the authenticity of the new place identity it creates. This paper argues that by violating the Buddhist spatial principle of centralized, hierarchical order, the new architecture that now surrounds the ancient structure represents a failure of urban conservation.



Figure 1, Location Map, and Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li before and after revitalization

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Urban Heritage Conservation and Revitalization

Urban development is a historically dynamic process, and the presence of culture and heritage enhances the attractiveness of cities and city centers (Veldpaus & Roders A., 2017). Urban conservation is the deliberate act of identifying and preserving both tangible and intangible cultural heritage for the benefit of coming generations (Said et al., 2013). Cultural heritage is often seen as a representation of the identity of a certain community (Nijkamp & Riganti, 2008). According to Earl (2003), the desire to conserve arises from the act of heritage appreciation. Urban heritage, heritage in the urban context, incorporates physical elements, social associations, and historic and mythical storytelling (Orbasli, 2001). It operates as an agent, connecting us with previous traditions. As Worksett (1978, 3) states, contemporary life is meaningless when disconnected from its roots in the past. Additionally, urban conservation provides room for urban individuality, which can be a solution to the growing challenges of urban sameness.

The process often includes the “restoration, reconstruction, adaptive reuse, renovation and repair” of buildings, which hold significant cultural as well as historic value (Said et al., 2013, 419). In addition to preserving the urban heritage, revitalization offers socio-economic opportunities (Orbasli, 2002). Historic cities today are becoming magnets for tourism-based economic developments. The design approach is based on the refurbishment of historic areas, by introducing supporting new modern developments. This approach is subject to multiple challenges. In Malaysia, for example, new development injections tend to slowly disrupt the spatial and spiritual qualities of historic areas (Said et al., 2013). The process contributes to the gradual elimination of the historic fabric, provoking a reassessment of the objectives of urban conservation. In worse cases, the new development sets up a new place identity, and eliminates the historic *genius loci*, this often leads to the death of the historic core (Said et al., 2013). The solution according to Sprin (1988), lays in the understanding and interpretations of the core natural, spatial, and spiritual values of the local culture.

2.2 Urban Heritage Conservation, Spirit of Place and Placelessness

According to Durrell (1969, 156), the spirit of a place is “an important determinate of any culture.” Jackson (1994) suggests that the term *genius loci* is the equivalent of the “character” of a place, but according to Norberg (1980), the Norwegian architect known for his work on the concept of *genius loci*, offers a deeper interpretation. In his celebrated book, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (1980), Norberg defines *genius loci* as the sense people have of a place. According to Hunt (2012), this is a result of the physical manifestation of events in a given culture. Hunt (2012, p. 12) mentions two types of *genius loci*: “the place itself in its natural state” and “what we ourselves do to it.” In other words, a *genius loci* is either a condition that can be consciously created by professionals or the result of unpremeditated human interactions with their environment. Norberg (1980) claims that the *genius loci* concept depends on cultural, as well as symbolic interpretations of the natural and built environment. Likewise, for Lowenthal (1979), the past which is linked with the history of group identity creates the spirit of a place. Gunila Jivén and Larkham (2003) suggest that the fusion of the two is worth looking at, that the concept of *genius loci* is relevant to discussions of conservation and revitalization. Indeed, already in 1946, Sharp (11) had argued that “a good approach to revitalization would be, to appreciate the personality in hand and

to care for it.” Yet many cities have ignored the essential past *genius loci* of a place. On the other hand, there are groups more focused on redevelopment aimed at enhancing, or creating a new character of a place. Their premise is based on the argument that places need not remain static, but should evolve with technology and time. Cromley (1987) challenges this position, arguing that change defies the rule of historic preservation, and that conservation should be true to the past it serves. Moreover, Relph (1976), who is well known for his discussion of place and placelessness, affirms that placelessness is often a result of a deliberate alteration of historic *genius loci*. He defines placelessness as “a gradual overshadowing of an authentic sense of place by an anonymous space.” Furthermore, Karimi (2002, 221, quoted in Gunila Jivén and Larkham, 2003, 74) holds that conservation is not just a matter of protecting the physical environment, but also of protecting the spirit of a place, which he referred as the “essence of the old cities.” It is clear that conservation and revitalization projects should remain sympathetic to the historic spirit of a place (Relph, 1976).

2.3 Genius loci of Chinese Buddhist Architecture

According to Park (2004), religion is one of the deeply embedded aspects of human culture capable of shaping spatial patterns. Park discusses the many ways religion affects people and places. Religion, he states, affects the way land is utilized and influences the diversity of building typologies, time management, movement, and the life cycle of town centers. In support of Park, Walker (1988) also explains the fundamental position religion holds in providing space with a sense of place and identity. In China, Buddhism has provided architecture with the most valuable cultural inheritance (Fangchao, 2014). Indeed, Buddhist architecture cannot be discussed without also discussing the Buddhist tradition of thought. Buddhist buildings and towns in China are the result of the mystical philosophies of the Buddhist tradition, providing evidence for Noberg’s claim about the concept of *genius loci*, that the spirit of architecture is defined by series of cultural phenomena (Noberg, 1980). Consequently, the discussion is relevant for better understanding the physical characteristics of Chinese Buddhist towns.

2.3.1 Aggregate, Centripetal Genius Loci

Geometric centrality is an important characteristic of traditional Buddhist architecture, as well as the core of Buddhist culture (Fangchao, 2014). The basic characteristic of Buddhist architecture lies in the aggregation of buildings around a central symbolic element (Guixiang, 2006, cited in Fangchao, 2014). In this special mode, buildings are grouped around a central space (Yanxin, 2016). The spatial organization places the most important structure in the center. Buddhist architecture also sets the central element apart from other buildings. The central element is unique and is given the most visible position in the spatial organization. This spatial pattern in Mahayana Buddhism is called *mandala*. Mandala, according to Buddhist philosophy, symbolizes “completeness, perfection, and excellence” (Fangchao, 2014). The organization can be on a vertical axis, without secondary buildings surrounding it, or horizontal with secondary elements around it. On the horizontal axis, there exists a hierarchy of spatial organization in which the center is the focal point. This is made apparent in building size differences, interior design, and decorations, height, and function (Yanxin, 2016).

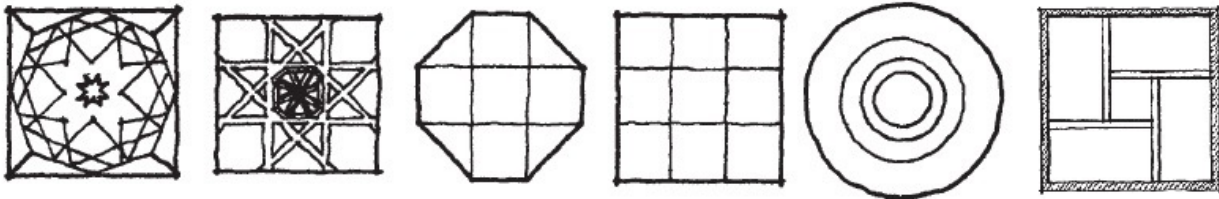


Figure 2: Examples of Mandala Geometry (Sketch by A.E. Piroozfar)

Centripetally hierarchical Buddhist spatial organization was used in the planning of ancient cities in China (Fangchao, 2014). Vernacular residential architecture is a good example of the application of this style in a different land use. In vernacular residential massing, the most important building is often the ancestral temple; it therefore claims the central position (Yanxin 2016, p. 130). Moreover, based on the concept of *li*, which means respect, the central building is made unique and other household units must not surpass it. According to Yanxin (2016, 133), the building serves as a symbol of family spirit. Yanxin shows how Buddhist spatial grouping was used to transmit cultural values, in which the content of Buddhist teachings about the nature of the universe is represented in centripetal spatial configurations. In architecture, symbols are communication tools, objects that convey visual images of a certain belief, ideology, or religion. The Buddhist ideology considers the “whole” important, and the aggregation of buildings is based on a centripetal spatial mode. This type of building assembly is an abstract symbol of the Buddhist doctrine. This review of the literature on Buddhist architecture clearly shows that the principle of *li*, which justifies the visual dominance of the central building, is key to the spirit of place in Buddhist architecture. The question now is how well the Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li design preserves this *genius loci*.

3. METHODOLOGY

This article is based on evaluation approach, in which the goal is to compare the historic characteristics of

the traditional Buddhist architecture with the current urban identity of Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li. A literature review method is used to understand the characteristics of traditional Buddhist architecture. The literature review presets the grounds on which the character of the site is evaluated. An on-site investigation is then used to identify the characteristics of the Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li urban conservation and revitalization project. To supplement on-site observation, the research also uses a questionnaire survey method to assess the project's effects on the historic identity of the place from the perspective of people visiting it. 94 participants filled out the questionnaire, the objective of which is to identify how long it takes visitors to recognize the site's historic buildings. This enables an assessment of the success of the project in safeguarding the value of the heritage. A random selection method is employed, with the questionnaire distributed on We Chat group platforms for foreigners in Chengdu. The population targeted for surveying is international student groups from multiple countries.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li Conservation and Revitalization Scheme, Chengdu, China

Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li conservation and revitalization project is a remarkable repair to the historic urban fabric. In recent years, local governments, professionals, policy makers and international organizations are conducting urban heritage conservation in scale of urban areas, as oppose to single monuments (Al-Saffar, 2018) and Chengdu is no exception. The project that celebrated its grand opening on April 2015 covers approximately 76,000 m² total site area (Heathcote, 2016). It is located in the heart of the major commercial district in the city of Chengdu. The project integrates the ancient Buddhist town into Chengdu's unique downtown commercial complex. Guangdong Hall, Bitieshi Street, Xin Lu Courtyard, Majiaxiang Ashram, Zhanghuali Courtyard, Gao House and Daci Temple, are the historic buildings on the site that have been restored (see Figure 3 and 4). The Tower of Entombed Writings is also conserved. The historic buildings have also been given new, mixed-use functions. Alongside restoration, the project introduces modern retail complexes that are also mixed-use. According to Heathcote (2016, p. 23), these modern complexes are based on the historic development of the area and re-capture the ancient unity between the "sacred and the profane." The modern adaptation of traditional Sichuan architecture aesthetics, to design the new lays of buildings provides the complex the feeling of authenticity. In addition, the low verticality and intimate characteristics of the site's buildings create a high degree of openness, which facilitates social activities outside of the buildings.

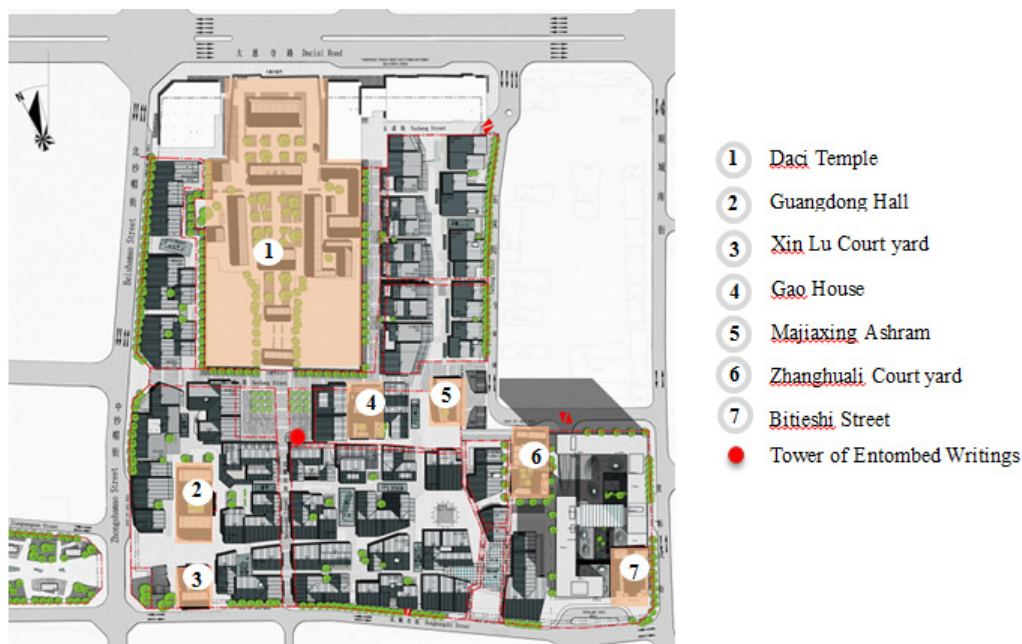
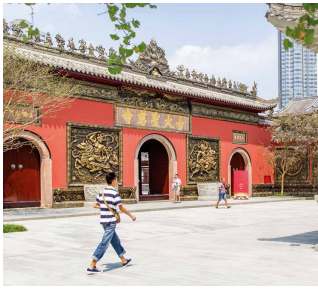


Figure 3, Available Heritage Elements in Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li



Daci Temple: Built in Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE)



Guangdong Hall: Built in the early period of the Republic of China, Function: Community center



Xin Lu Courtyard :Built in the late Qing Dynasty Function: Ground floor for business with upstairs living



Majiaxiang Ashram: Built in the late period of the Qing Dynasty Function: Home for Buddhist worshipers



Zhanghuali Courtyard: Built in the period of the Republic of China Function: Residence initially occupied by a wealthy family



No. 15 Bitieshi Street: Hundred years old historic wall and gateway of the Bitieshi Building. Bitieshi Building Function: a government building



Tower of Entombed Writings: Built during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) 7.6-meterhigh hexagonal tower

Figure 4: Details of Historic Buildings in Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li

Public art is another notable element in the complex that enriches the streets and enhances the public realm. In Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li, the intermingling between the new and the old creates a unique place identity. The analysis below evaluates the success of the project's intention of safeguarding the historic place identity of the ancient Buddhist town, and the role the urban heritage plays in creating and enhancing the town's current place identity. The analysis presents the existing characteristics of the complex, and compares it with the historic personality of the ancient Buddhist town. This allows the article to draw conclusions about the characteristics of the emerging place identity in regard to the application of the traditional Buddhist spatial mode.

Alongside restoration, the project introduces modern missed use retail complexes.



Figure 5: Pubic art and open spaces in Sino-ocean Taikoo li

4.2 Results: Analysis of the Spatial Characteristics of Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li

The historic personality of Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li is a reflection of the traditional Buddhist hierarchy of space assembly, in which the ancient Daci Temple is the most prominent element in the organization. The architecture and height of the aggregate site buildings are consciously kept secondary so as to achieve a central symbolic element. However, in the new spatial organization while the architecture of the aggregates blends well with the historic genius loci, the architecture and height and of the new buildings overpowers the temple. The concentration and assembly of the buildings causes the temple to be viewed as secondary and Daci Temple, a landmark by nature, is hidden from view when viewed from the major entry points into the complex and surrounding roads. The cross-section drawings below are used to illustrate this fact (see figure 6, 7, 8 & 9). The layout of Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li thus allows the secondary aggregate buildings to be viewed as equally or more important as the temple. As a result, the project superimposes new competitive genius loci on the historic identity of the place, a genius loci that directly conflicts with the traditional Buddhist space organization and with the concept of “li”.

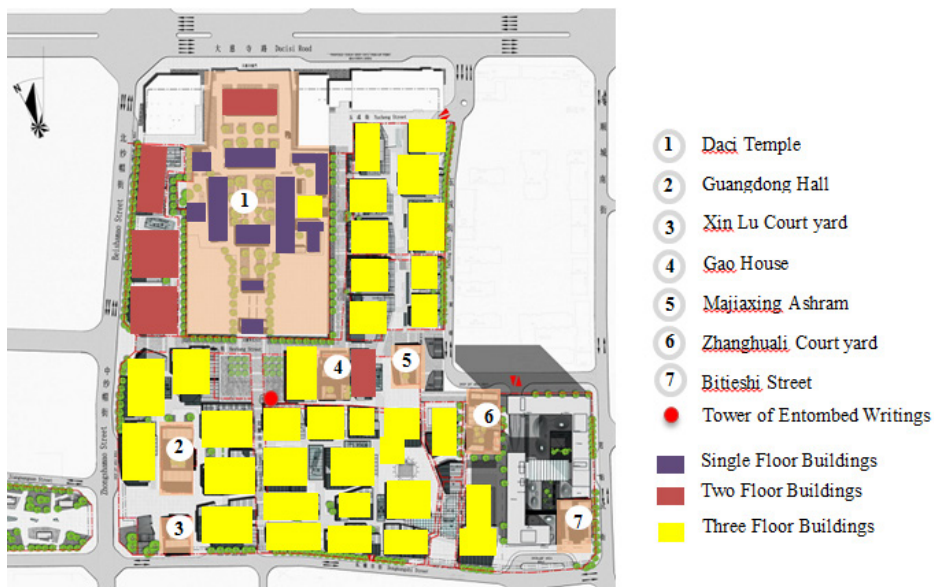


Figure 6: How Daci Temple relates to neighboring buildings in height

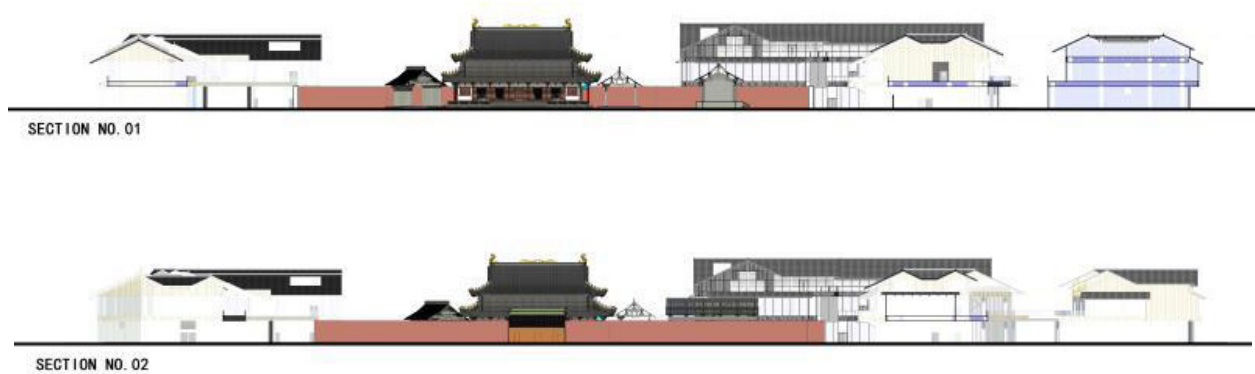


Figure 7 & 8: The relationship between Daci Temple and new buildings in height, enclosing the temple plaza in the middle

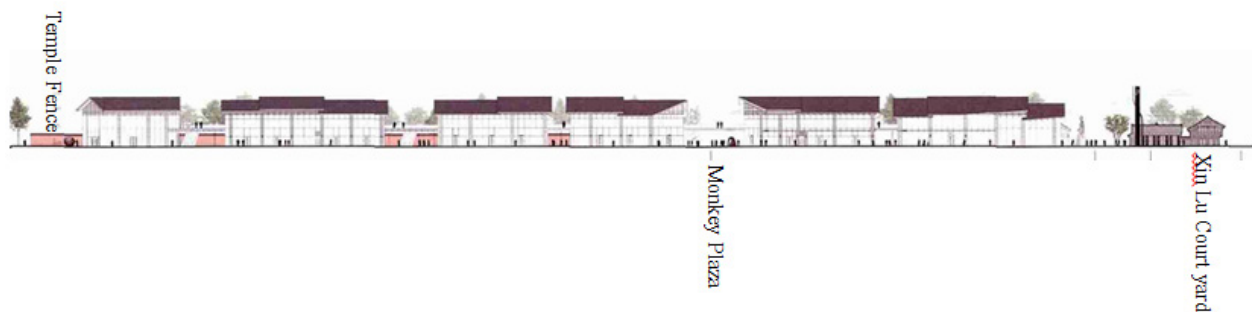


Figure 9: How the new buildings cover the view of Daci Daci Temple from a major road



Figure 10: Birdseye view of Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li

The discussion above confirms that the redevelopment approach taken in Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li conflicts with the historic genius loci of the conventional Buddhist architecture. The former spirit of place driven by the philosophy of traditional Buddhist culture in which secondary and subordinate aggregate buildings are assembled around the most important, central feature is now lost. Although the new aggregate buildings have a humble, human-scale appearance, they nonetheless exert an undeniable pressure on the historic urban fabric. Consequently, it is no longer the historic content that sets the complex apart from the neighboring urban characteristics, but the new layers of architecture and the luxury functions. This displacement threatens the survival of the urban heritage. According to Said et al. (2013), conservation and revitalization projects, stripped of cultural authenticity, leave built heritage vulnerable to an eventual eviction from the urban form.

The finding of the questionnaire survey supports the statement made above, that more than 50% of visitors who have been to the complex more than once and know about the existence of the temple were informed about it prior to their visit and they located the temple with the guidance of friends and tour guides or they came across it accidentally. In addition, more than 50% of the visitors who have been to the complex multiple times don't know about the other historic buildings and only 56% of visitors know of the existence of Daci Temple, which, according to

the architects of the project, is the jewel of Taikoo Li. The questionnaire analysis confirms that the new architecture, which adopts an elevation that competes with the height of the buildings in the temple, blocks the primary views of the temple. Furthermore, the architecture of the new buildings creates a concentration that allows the secondary aggregates to draw most of the visual focus to themselves, thus depriving visitors the opportunity to relate and to appreciate the local culture and history. This is an unfortunate challenge facing many urban conservation and regeneration schemes, and is leading to the gradual loss of the urban heritage.



Chart 1(a & b): Visitors opinion as to whether they are aware of the existence of Daci Temple and the other historic credentials in Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li, consecutively.

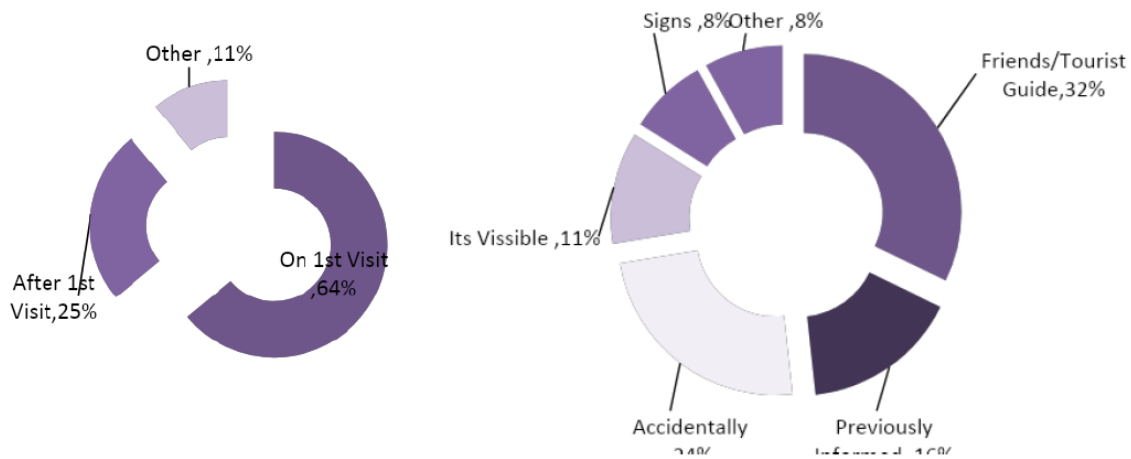


Chart 2 (a & b): Visitor opinion about 'When and How' they discovered Daci Temple, consecutively

5. CONCLUSION

Cities are constantly evolving, and historic cities maintain a sense of continuity; they also provide aesthetic delight. According to Bandarin and Oers (2012), it is virtually impossible for the historic city to retain its originality. Nor should it be expected to remain static. The urban conservation and regeneration process mediates between safeguarding the authenticity of the urban heritage, on the one hand, and the dynamic nature of cities, on the other. It facilitates a platform for the historic city to express its values. It also provides resources for social and economic development. The process recognizes the harsh reality of succession and leaves room for adaptation.

The process retains local identity, which is an antidote to the global challenge of urban sameness. Furthermore, it protects the integrity of the urban heritage. Among the center of its concerns are preserving the collective memory and the spirit of a place (Bandarin and Oers, 2012). According to Norberg (1980), spirit of place is an essential element of space and is a product of the relationship between humans and the environment. The design and management process of urban conservation needs to include inhabitants' cultural markers alongside the merely physical aspects of the structures. The spiritual quality supports the vulnerable urban heritage, helping it to withstand pressure from new urban developments. Clearly, the Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li conservation and regeneration scheme adopts a monumental conservation approach. When the complex is examined as a whole, however, we can see that its historic spatial organization has been compromised. As a result, the town's historic and cultural identity now goes unrecognized. Visitors today view Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li in relation to the new supporting developments. This new configuration is misleading because it creates the illusion of representing the old genius loci, but actually imposes a new sense of place identity. This displacement of identity does significant damage to the urban heritage, depriving the city of the opportunity to retain and pass along the identity and collective memory of a traditional Buddhist town. It is this preservation and transmittal, according to Bandarin and Oers (2012), that constitutes the objective of urban conservation. As urban conservation, Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li fails.

References

- Al-Saffar, M. (2018) Urban heritage and conservation in the historic center of Baghdad. *International journal of heritage architecture*. Vol. 2. No. , 23-36
- Bandarin, F. and Oers, R. van (2012) *The historic urban landscape: managing heritage in an urban century*. Oxford: Wiley–Blackwell.
- Cromley, E. C. (1987) *Public history and the historic preservation district*. In: J. Blatti (Ed.). Past meets present. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 30–36.
- Durrell, L. (1969) *Spirit of place: letters and essays on travel*. Edited by A. G. Thomas. London: Faber & Faber.
- Earl, J. (2003) *Building conservation philosophy*. 3rd ed. London: Donhead.
- Fangchao, L. (2014) *Come to hold the true meaning: philosophical interpretation on centripetal schema in traditional Buddhist architecture*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Tianjin University.
- Gunila Jivén, P. and Larkham, J. (2003) Sense of place, authenticity and character: a commentary. *Journal of urban design* 8 (1), 67-81. <http://larwebsites.arizona.edu/lar510/encounter/sence%20of%20place.pdf>
- Heathcote, E. (2016) Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li Chengdu: the story of an original development. Swire properties, London. Transcript. http://www.swireproperties.com/~media/Files/Swireproperties/Publications/CD_Brochure_ENG.ashx
<http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-39-7267-7>
- Jackson, J. B. (1994) *A sense of place, a sense of time*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Lowenthal, D. (1979) Environmental perception: preserving the past. *Progress in human geography*, 3 (4), 549–559.
- Nijkamp, P. and Riganti P. (2008) Assessing cultural heritage benefits for urban sustainable development. *International journal of services technology and management*. 10, 29–38.
- Norberg-Schulz, C. (1980) *Genius loci: towards a phenomenology of architecture*. New York: Rizzoli.
- Orbasli, A. (2002) *Tourists in historic towns: urban conservation and heritage management*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Park, C. (2004) Religion and geography. In: Hinnells, J. (ed.). *Routledge companion to the study of religion*. London: Routledge. <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/staff/gyaccp/geography%20and%20religion.pdf>
- Popovic Larsen, O. (2008), *Reciprocal Frame Architecture*, Architectural Press
- Relph, E. (1976) *Place and placelessness*. London: Pion.
- Said, Y. S., Aksah, H., Elma, I. D. (2013) Heritage conservation and regeneration of historic areas in Malaysia. *Procedia - social and behavioral sciences*. 105, 418 – 428.
- Sharp, T. (1946) *Exeter Phoenix: a plan for rebuilding*. 1st ed. London: Architectural Press.
- Spirn W. A. (1988) *The poetics of city and nature: towards a new aesthetic for urban design*. *Landscape journal* 7 (2), 108–126.
- Veldpau L. and Roders A. (2017) Historic urban landscape approach as a tool for sustainable urban heritage management. *University of Jyväskylä, Newcastle University eprints*. pp.61-73.
- Yanxin, C. (2016) *Chinese architecture: palaces, gardens, temples and dwellings*. Beijing: China International Press.