

“The majestic axis of Guangzhou and the political reinvention of urban form”

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1. Introduction

Over the last three decades, the adequacy of ordinary planning tools started to be questioned in the wake of uncertainty. Indeed, cities around the globe have to face contradictory trends, unrepeated opportunities, and spatial effects of broader economic downturns, among other challenges. In such contexts, zoning and land use regulations cannot work as if urban dynamics were predictable. The strategic aspect that this article attempts to emphasize is the intertwined succession of open-end narratives and formalized (bureaucratic) models of action that produce effects in the urban sphere. Such angle builds on the assumptions that urban transformations result from a process of incremental definition of both effects and formalized contracts, more than from the optimistic willingness of anticipating the end state of places—a possibility that quite likely is an instrumental myth.

Focussing on European cases, ALBRECHTS & BALDUCCI have suggested that the fragmentation of the public sphere affects to such an extent the notion of the city as unitary phenomenon that it 'precludes the use of known tools and solutions' (2013: 16). Such technical and epistemological uncertainty further extends when it is considered that a global discourse of 'success' has been conceived to flatten urban contexts and local diversity (ROBINSON, 2006). Grand projects in Asian cities – places where collective interests are not conventionally represented according to the European frame of thinking and where mega-projects are easily implemented – are sometimes regarded as the only ones still enabled in the 21st century to (re)make cities by means of self-fulfilling prophecies. Asian cities, and Chinese ones among them, exemplify the pros and cons of special, muscular, top-down interventions notwithstanding undefined investments, economy, demographics, consensus, and the like in this view. Places and cases where conventional regulation tools designed to manage existing and certain resources do not apply.

Yet, we argue here that such extreme situations provide the ground for testing an understanding of the urban processes as longitudinal successions (i.e. diachronic process) of simultaneous correlations (i.e. synchronous process). Indeed, the nature at the same time symbolic and bureaucratic of the formalization of the acts that compose

urban processes is the implicit premise of projecting a designed alternative into the future. Notwithstanding their self-fulfilling attitude and whatever the context that is considered, not all designed alternatives are designated to take effect in their original form: when observed in details, a number of incremental adjustments and deviations intervene between the phases of inception and finalization of urban processes even in a Chinese city, which is a striking outcome of the de-construction of urban processes in terms of effectiveness.

In the paper these assumptions are tested to de-construct the reinvention of Guangzhou's urban core which exposes the complex articulation of political decisions, their redundant formalization into spatial layouts, technical constraints and coexisting prospects of the future that do not perfectly overlap. Despite the representation of the axis as a unitary object offered by key decision makers, as the one provided by the deputy mayor of Guangzhou from 1996 to 2006 (LIN, 2012), the making of the axis was operationally far from monolithic and practically combined visions-decisions-modifications to such an extent that even alleged alternatives were *de facto* incorporated in the process. On the one hand, such observation illustrates the operational dimension of grand urban projects. On the other hand, the perspective of incremental approximations can be abstracted and generalized from the parochialism of case-specific decision-making to highlight methodological considerations for an explicit comparative work. To that extent, the paradigm of end state visions needs to be substituted with a comprehensive paradigm of approximation that account for fictional constructs and objectified transactions that incorporate both the unpredictable and the inevitable dimensions of public action.

2. The Chinese city and the political reinvention of urban form

The paper approaches the selected case first, empirically deriving crucial nodes, and will attempt to generalize the findings in the final part. Before embarking on the case analysis, a few clarifications are necessary which regard three broad themes that Chinese scholars highlight in the conceptualization of the city and urban decisions. More than in other cultural and social contexts, the Chinese city results from a process

of quantitative juxtaposition into space of an overwhelming abundance of implicit semantic contents that outweigh the explicit rules of urban forms (LI, 2014: XV–XVII). In relation to that, the paper assumes the coexistence of spaces of decision nested into others as a challenging inter-scalar display of dynamic ethos and visions that are simply not uniform across time and space, instead of emphasizing China's opacity of the public action.

It is, to some extent, a programmatic *managerial localism* (AMIN, 2004) that characterizes the Chinese urban realm: a control of narrow targets exercised on a confined sphere that regards self-regulated sectors. Such independent and sometimes redundant systems have to be integrated into space at certain points. The making of the city thus results from a chain of predictable effects and unpredictable deviations from a hypothetical path that gets real only as long as a wider urban system is kept 'moving' (FRASSOLDATI, 2014). Three conceptual nodes structure the paper; they are clarified in the specific case of Guangzhou's axis, but correspond to a methodology to approach processes of urban transformation that will be further elucidated in our final remarks.

Open-end compromises and the notion of 'becoming'

On looking at Guangzhou's new urban core and the way it is organized around the concept of 'urban axis' we are confronted with the combination of 'grand' and 'small narratives'. As an urban addition that extends or reshapes the city's scheme, the form of the new axis is an alien urban element in the Chinese city, which has been imported from other conceptualizations of the urban space. However, ancient distributive schemes in China elaborated the notion of axial spreads (LI, 2014), in which the axial connectivity frame locates homologous areas into space without any necessary interrelation of physical proximity (ZHU, 2009: 181). Practically, Guangzhou's hybrid axis to parade the 'grand narrative' within which city-space is independently developed, but at the same time the axis is rather inconsistent as a remarkable form in terms of design (in fact, it is not a straight line, but more precisely a succession of slightly shifted segments). It is so because of the way it was made real, but most of all

it is so because it has never been imagined in a different way. The axis offers a functional meaning in correspondence with a form around which other elements established their own rules of existence. The real space of the axis is at the same time the result of a number of compromises and endless redefinitions justified only in 'small narrative' terms that made of the axis a real space as a result of its 'becoming' something else.

The notion of 'becoming' through incremental approximations describes how a process materializes narrative into acts. The hypothesis is that every act of modification of a future stage must turn into a contractual frame by becoming an institutional object and providing for a set of deontic powers (SEARLE, 1995). The complex network of exchanges that pushes forward the action of development is made of many different social objects (i.e. drawings, petitions, debates on newspapers, fictional proposals) which turn progressively into a more rigid and inertial set of institutional objects (i.e. approved projects, building permits, certificates, building contracts, etc.). Such institutional framework represents the formalization of 'what has to be done' according to norms and laws, and that will be finally a compulsory mandate to action. The transformative process makes *institutionally real* actions that initially were only proposals or intentions driven by drawings, visions, or any kind of projection into the future. In this phase, the process intertwines a large number of different exchanges, both symbolic (the narratives) and bureaucratic (the contracts). Indeed every action has to be *bureaucratically* registered, signed, or archived, in order for it to be effective. On the other hand, every action contains a semantic meaning which works as a *symbol* that needs to be interpreted and shared through decisions. In Guangzhou, the grand narrative of the axis worked mostly symbolically in the beginning, but became later fixed into bureaucratic structures that were instrumental to following phases, each of them to be formalized into contractual and normative specifications. However, the executive phases did not avoid a continuous adjustment through a number of adaptations, interruptions and eventually uncertain recommencements on different bases, as illustrated below in the two different cases of the transformation of pre-existing neighbouring settlements.

The notion of relational collective agents

The previous point illustrated a characteristic irreducibility of the 'parts' into a 'whole'. Such demarcation of 'partial' urban spaces in the Chinese city can be in many cases approximated to an introverted collective social entity that cares for the inside part (*neibu*) and differentiates from the outside parts (*waibu*). We try to separate this notion from that of ownership: for the purpose of the paper, it is more significant to clarify the extent of urban specialization in an intensively manicured specialized city that prompts 'the public' consensus (LI, 2014: 100–01). Their overlapping of logics illustrate in fact a constitutive principle of Chinese governmentality in an unrepresentative political framework. The notion of the city as an imperfect overlapping of collective agents can also be described as a dynamic network of entities that could be mapped in infinite ways. Such kind of cosmogram (TRESCH, 2013; YANEVA, 2012) includes the 'actors', intended here as subjects with intentions and powers, and the 'actants' (LATOUR, 1999), which are entities that produce any effects on the process – including urban networks, information, and documents that in the name of their institutional reality define limits, obligations, rules and requisites for any other intentional subjective action (Ferraris, 2009). To that end, the simultaneous existence of built matters in the Chinese city as 'form and image, meaning and thing' (LI, 2014: 144) implies a different consideration of the category of the collective agents and, consequently, of their effects that are as powerfully as demonstrations of rightness.

The succession of effects in a longitudinal study

When city-making is conceptualized as a continuous flow of transformations, the task to isolate acts and effects implicates the artifice of introducing a number of 'befores' and 'afters' (CHIA, 2002: 865) that disassemble a process into longitudinal successions and deviations (diachronic) of simultaneous correlations (synchronic). Such operation of rewriting the continuous 'becoming' into sequences intersects one of the most impenetrable cultural nodes of Chinese public action. According to JULIEN (1995), the Chinese narrative of figuration that provides meaning to facts and forms eludes cause-effect relations. Therefore, diverse representations of reality can potentially coexist

(HUANG, 2008) in a scheme that avoids linear decision-effect vectors. In such simplified model, the symbolic exchanges driven by the projection towards alternative futures will refer to the political, decisional, and negotiation's spheres, including both top-down and bottom-up dynamics, and the bureaucratic exchange will refer to the technical spheres, including every kind of 'objective' measurement and certifications, approvals, economic transactions etc. The movements can be divergent – when a wider range of interests, subjects, actants are incorporated – or convergent – when a contract or any material action 'wrap up' multiple lines. Divergence and convergence appear also in controlled 'outreaching', 'listening', and 'negotiation' sessions precede any formalization: imagining an inception phase as a symbolical exchange that is necessary to formulate the collective intentions consensus, it will be mainly divergent. Alternatively, the convergence of the process appears in most cases of bureaucratic exchange that will push the process forward, thanks to the odd power of the institutional reality of bureaucracy and techno-scientific disciplines (certificates, measures, agreements, contracts).

As the nodes discussed above clarify, the Chinese cities exemplify a natural coexistence of actual facts (technically and bureaucratically effectiveness) and alleged realities (symbolically relevant) that do not perfectly overlap, yet they are both connected with the effective making of decisions and incorporated in practice. Such extreme condition suggest us to narrow down our interest to a performance-based evaluation: transformations will be intended in terms of performance in conditions of possibility (MASTOP & FALUDI, 1997: 820). To some extent, conformance (i.e. the correspondence of the strategic statements to the outcomes) requires some interpreting subjects, such as decision-makers or recipients. Performance (i.e. the effectiveness on reality) distinguishes instead for 'objective' measures, such as the effects that plans and the projects are required to produce. In this respect, effectiveness becomes a crucial criteria: effects are intended as modifications of the institutional reality (laws, norms, obligations) and the material world as well. Deviating paths that may appear without affecting the general discourse will set the ground for some effect's finalization and

will find in it their legitimation to (re)making the space. Such premise allows us to frame the procedure of city-making in China as the materialization of a political target and an overproduction of design proposals (design competitions, consultation, land use planning promoted by local Urban Planning Bureau) that make the political target feasible with limited concerns about its actual functionality and its relations with the pre-existing city. To some extent, these are 'fictional projects' that are instrumental to reach the phase in which projects and functions – that indeed materialize – become reality and things get done.

3. Guangzhou's majestic axis

Guangzhou's 'urban axis' that was selected to exemplify a narrative of urban transformations based on practical spatial effects is no exception. The conceptualization of the urban axis was incrementally made explicit in the last 30 years, and accelerated in the early 2000s. Political intention, design of space, and actual spatial modifications have intertwined along an initial proto-transformation that started in the mid 1980s and intensified in the last 15 years. The Northern section of the axis is now almost complete, and the Southern section, which lengthens by another 5 kilometres, exists in the form of a rough land use plan approved by the Municipality of Guangzhou, a number of designated designers for major public buildings – selected via international design competition – and tentative negotiations with pre-existing collective interests. The inclusion of new instances has always alternated with a progressive filtering of potential transformations of space. Four essential stages are illustrated below.

1. A new urban landscape of 'emptiness'

Guangzhou was the first city in China to apply three critical innovations in city-making: 1) Although the first land-use right auction took place in Shenzhen in 1987, Guangzhou has been the first 'established' city to make land leasing a common practice, with relevant effects on the establishment of a 'market' for both land and real estate. 2) Accordingly, in the 1980s Guangzhou started a powerful policy of urban growth

directed by planning regulation, which resulted in the notion of 'development cluster'.

3) In the late 1980s, Guangzhou pursued the integration of planning and design regulation tools, according to: district planning; site planning applied to areas between 1 to 3 km²; specific regulatory plan for key development zone. The zone where sport facilities for the 1987 6th National Games were settled – what today is known as Tianhe District in Guangzhou, is in fact the first national application of regulatory planning. That plan structured the earliest Eastward expansion of the city and constitutes the northern end of the 'axis'. The former Mayor of Guangzhou, Mr Shusen Lin, highlighted three key moments in the formalization of the axis (LIN, 2012: 39–40). The 14th draft of the Master Plan of Guangzhou approved in 1978, which prescribed industrial growth in the East and a greenbelt along the axis-to-be to separate the industries from the city. In a different national framework (after the approval of the City Planning Law of PRC, in 1990), the 15th Master Plan of Guangzhou 1991-2010 was designed in 1991-93 by the Urban Planning Bureau of Guangzhou Municipality to develop the city towards the North and the East. However, the plan was rejected by the State Council and substituted by the 16th Master Plan of Guangzhou 1996-2010, whose approval has been procrastinated due to the incremental land reforms at the national level. From there, Guangzhou urban development was for a decade or so more directed by specialized planing (i.e. infrastructure) and real estate.

Yet, a design concept competition for international designers launched in 1992 – with the rhetoric that local designers at the time were in need of learning from others' experiences – consolidated the central axis as a real park, via the design offered by Thomas Planning Services (Boston, MA), thus hybridizing the Chinese concept of axis with alien notions of place. The axis 'of meanings' became an axis of parks and green squares that were instrumental to increase the land value appreciation in the neighbouring areas, imagined as the highest concentration in the city of services and cultural facilities. It is thus the value of landscaped green and parallel infrastructure development that is adopted as the first mover of new urban growth and future negotiations, an intent that is quite evident in the future extension towards the South¹,

1 The issue was explored in the first PhD Winter School organized by South China University of Technology and Politecnico di Torino in December 2014.

but also a strategy that does not offer an overall control of the urban dynamics. As local planners and politicians confirm, the urban structure that was put in place is definitely not the best one, but it is something that worked at the right time² (LIN, 2012: 40).

2. A grid of independent tiles: or the privatizing mechanism of city-making

While awaiting the approval of the 16th Master Plan draft, in 1996, 79 zoning plans were completed, each for an area of about 10 km². Road design and public facilities allocation worked as catalysts of urban growth, such as the new racecourse that transformed part of the former industrial sites in west Guangzhou in a new residential compound. What later became Zhujiang New Town, in fact the geometric centre of the city, was the designated farmland (a productive greenbelt) encapsulated between Tianhe Sport Centre in the north, residential compounds in the west and the racecourse eastward. The overlapping of one design competition, regulatory planning, and after the 1997 Asian financial crisis affected the developing but still weak 'market' of land use rights in Guangzhou, the transformation of that green patch became rather attractive. Testing what later became common sense, revenues derived from land leasing served as infrastructure project funding.

Allotment privileged relatively small parcels of 5,000 m² or 7,000 m² that could be easily sold on the market. Following such principle, a grid divided the almost 6 km² of the future Zhujiang New Town in a set of 9 squares, further subdivided into parcels to guarantee a combination of 4 to 6 parcels per square, each of which provided 2 to 4 lots with a central shared space which could eventually be sold to one developer (sufficient to fit 1 to 3 towers)³. Although the general idea of the axis had to become real by means of fragmentation, there was in the regulatory plan a concept of degrading height of the towers towards the river and a more conventional distribution of commercial and residential spaces, combined with more cultural uses in the south.

2 Professor Liming Tang, chief urban planner at the Guangzhou Urban Planning Bureau from 1992 to 1997, expressed exactly the same opinion of the former Mayor Lin about the work that involved him directly. Younger professionals have rather similar judgements.

3 The density corresponds to 7 (FAR), which can reach 8 or 9 in the smallest lot units of developed land. Residential areas proved rightly associated with such density, as prices there are the highest in the city and indeed in China, whereas office spaces faces a market stagnation.

In the process for the axis to become a solid 'thing', circulation was reorganized to keep the central park as a pedestrian area, political decisions allocated the highest towers beside the relatively low-rise cultural facilities, and more ambitious high-end office-towers added were at the centre.

In the vacancy generated by the delayed approval of the Master Plan, in December 2000 the Guangzhou Urban Planning Bureau approved the Guideline for Conceptual Planning of Urban Construction Strategy of Guangzhou, as a result of a national competition (5 concepts proposed by invited domestic design institutes) and successive rearrangement internal to the Urban Planning Bureau to consolidate a strategic scenario (WU, 2007; LI & PENG, 2008). Such tool completely reoriented the city southward, as the result and the legitimation of the process of annexation of Panyu and Nansha districts (FRASSOLDATI & QI, 2015). With the zoning and control plan elaborated in 2001⁴, Zhujiang New Town had finally one overall drawing to coordinate multiple pieces, some of them already built. Indeed, users of the central park will hardly recognize the 'bottle-shaped' form (LIN, 2012) that appears in the drawings (there is no bonding relationship between the symbolic form and the real, in Li's words; LI, 2014). The centre is in fact a hole, and it is this hole that effectively reproduces in the southward extension of the axis as a cumulative juxtaposition of 'pieces'.

The notion of the axis as functional distributor without a proper spatiality thus spread into representing an outgrown space, indeed rather pleasant and significant in itself particularly as a value added to the residential areas nearby, but rather distant from being a catalyst of high commercial values and density. The descriptions associated with the axis have changed many times, small scale components rearranged the original edges or contents, and technical specifications added further constraints that made up the axis that we know today; but all that did not question the general 'meaning' of the axis.

4 In 1999 the Municipal Government invited the Guangzhou Urban Planning and Design Research Institute, Shanghai Tongji Urban Planning and Design Institute, and the School of Architecture of the South China University of Technology to provide proposals for the urban design of the new central axis, which were later re-elaborated by the School of Architecture of SCUT. This proposal introduced the idea of the tower at the end of the axis, along the southern bank of the Pearl River.

3. The intersection of infrastructure design and urban form

The role of infrastructures in the formation of the new central axis deserves specific attentions. There are illustrious precedents, as SUN YAT-SEN himself (1929) imagined harbours, railway, and motorway as the means to reorganize the dense old city of Guangzhou, a programme eventually adopted by his pragmatic son, Sun Fo, appointed as the first mayor of Guangzhou Municipality in 1921 in an energetic attempt of city modernization. Guangzhou's new axis exists as a space mostly because of the capacity of infrastructures to bond and norm independent fragments under a common understanding of the technical necessities of subway lines, car circulation, etc.

In the initial scheme of the axis made in 1993, urban planners retained the capacity to consolidate the spatial layout with functional and infrastructural development following the principle of minimizing 'the dependence on automobiles' (LIN, 2008: 41). In fact, the commercialization of city-making and the separation of infrastructure from planning generated rather different outcomes. First, as a result of a specific 'bidding' for road design launched in 2005, it was selected a scheme that privileged ring circulation and underground tunnels underneath the central pedestrian green. As a consequence, functional distribution and reachability of places are totally separated. Second, due to technical constraints that derived from pre-existing lines, instead of one subway line right in the middle it was necessary to double two parallel lines at the western and eastern edges (at the moment there is only one line functioning, generating an incomprehensible unbalanced distribution: the central part is about 300m far from the subway line, a distance that can be covered in part walking into an underground shopping centre, although directions are not so obvious). Third, an underground APM line facilitates movements along the 1.5km of the central pedestrian park, but it is disconnected from all other relevant points in the area.

4. Getting big ideas right into reality (deviations included)

The making of the axis is a mechanism that metabolizes a grand narrative into small pieces tightened together notwithstanding timing, deviations, distortions, further

elaborations of what had been done already and rushes to meet relevant deadlines⁵. The new central axis redistributed real estate values and reshaped common imaginaries about the city. The article published by the former Mayor Lin in 2012, cited various times in the paper, is a rather unique personal evaluation of a political urban adventure. If it is true that in Lin's narrative all pieces match together, he does not hide some disappointments about changes or modifications that he was forced to accept given the real constraints. It is not mentioned in that article, but a further proof of the possible coexistence of opposite stories is the north-east sector of the 9 squares grid. Some 400x450m are yet to be redeveloped there. They are occupied by one of the former rural settlements, one of the three villages interested by the redesign of the greenbelt as an urban axis. In the very centre of Zhujiang New Town, one of those urban villages is still there for reasons that are at the same time complicated and obvious.

Contrary to similar cases where land requisition and transformation were performed in a frame of agreement between pre-existing rural authority and city authority, in the case of Xiancun things were not simple and after an initial agreement the process was dismissed by the local inhabitants, their chief run away (with money) and the redevelopment was stopped. Now two contrasting visions coexist, both eager to transform the place into a better place. The village and the city seek better opportunity for the area, and the prolonged impasse was the necessary time to acknowledge new elements for negotiations in a role play that included angry demonstrations and chances for people who were already on the way of relocation to extend their permanence in the area notwithstanding partial demolitions. As the agreement with the in-charged developer was also terminated by the government upon accusations of fraud, it is not yet clear what will happen. There are continuous movements of people, and demolitions have recently restarted. There is no truth for which it is necessary to make place, the presence of Zhujiang New Town already overwhelms the diverging reality of Xiancun.

5 . The acceleration in the construction of the axis, for example, benefited from the need to meet the Opening Ceremony of the Asian Games in November 2010. since the early 2000, all bidding and approvals related to the central axis gained high priority in the local administration.

The striking difference of Xiancun amidst the new central axis is not necessarily a contradiction, but to some extent a display of the distance between the procedural reality and the symbolic dimension of projects and policies that is not silenced throughout implementation. The Xiancun case would suggest to consider the resistance of automatic procedures to any kind of collective intentions or subjective power. There are two possible consequences: firstly, the need to recognise both the fictional/symbolic dynamic and the bureaucratic/procedural autonomy of collective exchange (of information, statements, money, documents, contracts, etc.) in the urban processes. Secondly, the possibility of driving such a double nature of the exchange through a different approach to urban plans and projects.

A theoretical implication

We have described the city-making processes as a flow of nested exchanges of fictional narratives with a symbolic role, and of formalized procedures with a technical-bureaucratic function. Despite the different frames of reference that we would like to apply to city-making, this is the condition in which the projects for the city are produced. If we accept such a description, we can propose a correspondent methodology for design strategies. The implementation phase (i.e. what is put into place and how places are inhabited) can make the pioneering representations of city-making as an exclusively politics' act less alien in respect to the pre-existing context. This means to form on purpose a cluster of proposals and visions that make pressure through other kinds of expression (technical expressions or images that are not technically verified) and include those that seem undesirable, rather than finalizing design towards the best solution since the beginning. Such 'fiction', at a certain level of description, has to be recorded and verified by taking measure of it in a number of predictable conditions, both objective (land fragmentation, procedures, rules, money, logistics) and subjective (evaluations, claims, votes or records of consensus) that happen throughout time. Furthermore, such model fits the existing political and technical context in which the phases of inclusion and filtering repeat a number of times: each 'opening' generates new controversies and incorporates requests for

engaging into issues and values that were not considered before. What has been described for the Guangzhou's Central Axis can be generalized to extract some fundamental lines of research on 'design and measure' of the grand urban project.

- a. *Design*. The design tools enable to fix any kind of claims and expectations into a form: there is a powerful autonomy implied into any initial drawings, even if they are later modified or even rejected. In any case, the 'second drawing' is legitimated only by deviating the one firstly done.
- b. *Measurement*. When recipients and/or decision makers want to modify or reject a proposal in a public process, formalized procedures are usually necessary: adopted measures may derive from economic criteria, environmental assessments, or others. The formalization of decision making through objective measures should grant for the transparency and equity of the process, but it also increases bureaucratic complexity of the procedure together with the number of actors involved.
- c. *Deviations and inclusion*. Deviation is the main device to negotiate consensus. Each change to include some new requests or to neutralize a new objection – either symbolic exchange in the form of discussion and critique or bureaucratic exchange as approval/reject – makes the proposal stronger in terms of effectiveness and can be described in terms of 'design and measure'.
- d. *Symbolic Exchange*. In different contexts, symbols connected with space reflect the existing habits and powers, although incremental definitions, progressive inclusion of actors, interests, claims, and opinions is more common than frequently thought of.
- e. *Bureaucratic Exchange*. The push towards the final effect is never safeguarded from unpredicted actant's intrusions which may bring back the whole process to a mostly symbolic exchange.

The procedure of city-making thus goes through the materialization of a symbolic political target (i.e. creating a business district whether or not there is an actual demand) and an overproduction of design proposals (design competitions,

consultation, land use planning promoted by local districts and municipal Urban Planning Bureau) that make the target feasible and regulated with limited concerns about actual functionality and relations with the city. Every large frame of symbolical exchange has to be renegotiated many times, up to its specific formulation into contracts and actions. Such a multiplication of perspectives and procedures has to be connected with an indefinite number of autonomous implications, but also re-told to different contexts of recipients: to this extent, the project becomes a tool for coordinating top-down and bottom-up dynamics.

For the same reason, it can be said that the deconstruction of the process is a constructive operation. In general, every listening phase opens new controversies and incorporates requests for engaging into issues and values that were not considered before. The design and measure phase tries instead to filter the controversy towards an utter level of verification. Practically, the combination of divergence and convergence are instrumental to legitimize (i.e. expand the ground for decision) and to refine (i.e. make decision more competent) the set of alternatives.

Final remarks

Our approach aims at an incremental formalization of the processes of urban transformation which includes both symbolic narratives and bureaucratic procedures. We try to codify an extraordinary process into a set of predetermined occurrences where undesirable options and best solutions are taken into consideration. This is the premise for a phase of finalization in which alternatives seek the coexistence of the best pragmatic options. Such 'strategic knowledge' about the future context in which the project will be able to produce effects implies an investigation on a vast number of conditions: formal rules, bureaucratic procedures, symbolic implications, deadlines, economic interdependencies, etc. which can be depicted on a synchronic level – i.e. for each instant of the sequence. Thus, we define a double perspective of synchronic frames connected diachronically. The drawing of the future is openly a fiction and a narrative which tries to control many different kinds of implications – both symbolic and bureaucratic.

Nonetheless, we need to define “effectiveness” referring both to Chinese and Western conditions of urban transformation, if we want to attempt any sort of generalizing statement. In the case of Guangzhou's Central Axis the capacity of producing powerful effects in terms of material transformation is more than evident. At the same time, this material effectiveness contrasts with the weak control of the deviations – even those that could have been (to some extent) predictable. Contrary to that, many European cases of urban transformation have different problems of lack of the conditions for effectiveness, especially after the 2009-10 real estate crisis.

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