A NARRATIVE OF URBAN RECYCLE

WATERSHEDS

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Four Italian and Chinese universities, with rare previous collaborations and fields of research only barely related, came together in 2013 and decided to co-curate an exhibition for the 2013 Bi-city Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (Shenzhen), scheduled to take place in December. A year later, the same South China University of Technology (SCUT, Guangzhou) and Politecnico di Torino (Polito, in Turin), which had already worked together in team for the Biennale with the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) and Università IUAV di Venezia, agreed to take a further step. The book that the reader is now holding takes contents born during a specific context, the Watersheds’ exhibition that is illustrated in the 4th chapter, towards structured and methodologically verified considerations. This might seem a forced attempt or simply an ex-post search for the truth. Still, making this attempt and without yet being able to assess the result, we realised how an elaboration of this kind has had a specific meaning in a research performed between the West and China: it has contributed to the construction of a repeatable modus operandi and has built certain competencies that are spendable in this context of exchange.
This consideration seems to make sense for at least four reasons, that came together during preparation but which still seemed to be clearly recognisable upon closure of this publication.

1. A process of sharing knowledge like that narrated here led to the incremental construction of a work team, a laboratory capable of adapting gradually to discoveries, of contents and topics, which appeared during the collaboration. At the centre, a necessarily dialogical operational model based on trial and error, corrections being made by that, among the four teams, which had the necessary experience to correct. A model based on the need to make know-how flow from one country to the other, from one university to another, and to reorganise the team every time, according to a principle of communicating vessels (a principle that is often missing, both in China and in Europe).

2. Step by step, it was always necessary to understand what the next move would be (both from the viewpoint of research organisation, and knowledge of the places). This led to a strong emphasis on the process and made it clear that, in the long term, the collaboration would not be aimed at formalising solutions, but would be effective on a prior level: starting processes, accompanying them, targeting new ways to operate in a context such as that of China, in which many things relating to urban regeneration are happening for the first time (with regard to dimensions and characteristics). To these ends, the two operations implemented most effectively were of a narrative nature – narrating exemplary stories (storytelling) – and of an organisational nature – putting together the energies available (ensembling).

3. The research, being initially aimed at the preparation of an exhibition, did not start from a strictly scientific basis. It was born, as we intended, to interest an audience. When the time came to increase the weight of the contents and verify them methodologically, their origin represented an important resource: perhaps the research ought to have been more structured but it might have fallen apart due to the problem to approach the sources in China, due to the language barriers and due to very different working traditions. A method which was intended to be scientific became rather effectively investigative, midway between inquiry and scientific reconstruction.

4. Lastly, using an event like the Bi-city Biennale, born to attract ideas and experiences to one of the regions with some of the newest and biggest urban problems at global level (the Pearl River Delta), allowed a reflection on the ‘direction’ of the knowledge. Usually international schools approach Chinese issues and the partnerships with Chinese universities with unverified certainties about a mono-directional exchange. Western knowledge towards China. The structure of our team allowed us to change this direction on numerous occasions. But, above all, starting from a communicative level like that of an exhibition permitted us to focus considerable effort on ‘understanding each other’, in both directions.
It is in consideration of these points that the passages which have led us to where we are now, over a period of two years, should be read: a background and 9 acts. As for the urban processes that we have analyzed, the attempt is here to reduce the role of individuals and focus on ‘events’ and ‘effects’. It is for the convenience of the readers that all events are led back to the various institutional partners. Indeed, in most cases individual actions have preceded subsequent institutional acknowledgements. All in all, it is however the construction of an institutional partnership based on shared interests that really matters.

Background: Italy-China, 2012. Eleven Italian departments of architecture came together to propose a compact application to a Project of Considerable National Interest (Progetto di Rilevante Interesse Nazionale – PRIN) launched by the Ministry of University and Research, of the duration of three years and dedicated to the ‘new life cycles of architecture and landscape’, under the keyword Recycle. They included the main seats of architectural education and research in Italy: this arrangement, while stemming from previous research lines, left a considerable degree of flexibility and proposal to every seat. For the first time, the PRIN provided the possibility to associate foreign universities as official partners of the research. The team from Politecnico di Torino invited the Schools of Architecture of SCUT and CUHK to take part. During this phase, the opportunity to strengthen the application was paired with curiosity in a potential collaboration, already strong between SCUT and CUHK, but reduced to just a few exchanges between Polito and the two Chinese partners. The national application won and was financed by the Ministry at the end of 2012.

1. Hong Kong-Guangzhou, spring 2013. At the end of March, the kick-off meeting between Polito, SCUT and CUHK was held at the campus of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. There were just a few things on the table: a couple of graduation projects to be co-tutored and a paper under preparation around the topics of the large scale and ‘bottom-up’ projects in territorial regeneration, which was to become part of the books for the launch of the Recycle PRIN research. The idea was to meet again in June in Guangzhou this time: the academic experiences acted as a binder and really broke the ice. Students’ projects for the redevelopment of Pantang Village, the last phase of the daylighting of Lizhiwan Canal, which was to become one of the case studies of the Watersheds exhibition, were discussed: a shared interest in matters of urban fabric as opposed to urban form, of ‘wise cities’ as opposed to ‘smart cities’ was discovered. During a visit to Zhaoqing, a place which four years earlier offered to Polito a first research experience in Guangdong Province, the possibility of featuring an event at the following Bi-city Biennale was discussed on the bus back to Guangzhou several keywords, such as ‘regeneration processes’ and ‘storytelling’ related to recycling, emerged. Back at SCUT, a discussion ensued on how to structure a more long-term research partnership, in order to rank two speeds: one ‘instant’ for the preparation of the Biennale, and one of greater academic breadth. The Sino-European Sustainable Engineering Doctoral School (SESE), announcing projects for a joint doctorate over a period of four years, seemed to be an interesting opportunity.

2. Turin, summer-autumn 2013. The discussion resumed in July and some topics began to intersect with one another: for example, the role of water in urban and territorial regeneration processes, to which the four research teams had been devoting their efforts for some time with very different approaches: from the link between technical know-how and social expectations around the Kai Tak Canal in Kowloon, to the connection between fluvial and infrastructural corridors throughout the whole Piedmontese territory. We looked together at how water in cities has always been cause for dispute, between those who use it as a resource and those who use it as waste, between those who use it to survive and those who use it for leisure. Sometimes it joins two shores, but more often it sets them apart. This ever controversial nature leads to discussion, encourages the definition of clear positions and the taking of a sharp stance with regard to the
future of cities (that is where the title Watersheds came from). We didn’t focus on the physical results of transformations: we considered them to define the field for a different confrontation between decisional contexts. Obviously we were conscious that this shared interest contains a simplification, which we hoped will turn out to be profitable later on. We are well aware of the dialogical habit in the best European urban regeneration processes. So we asked ourselves whether places where there is water stimulate different situations from the plain top-down with which we are used to imagining decisional processes in Chinese cities. Thinking of these matters, some keywords emerged (which would be lost if we were to look at the physical form only): negotiation, participation, even democracy. Sophisticated to the point of ambiguity in the West – even though they have lost some of their appeal – in the East they still seem to sound open, sometimes promising. We looked at the places themselves. In the Pearl River Delta, watercourses have a considerable influence on the identity and collective imagination; in a similar way, in Northern Italy, rivers have fed the social identity and economic structure of the communities. However, the waterborne spaces often have been underestimated in the physical transformation process that took place over the past fifty years. Recently, in Italy as well as China, we have observed a progressive rediscovery of those values, of a role of water as a potential public space and not as a barrier. These considerations pushed towards other disciplinary contributions: essential, for instance, that of urban geography, which brings to the table instruments – like River Contracts – created to specifically manage the process-based character of these places.

On such bases, August in Italy was intensively dedicated to preparing the application for the Bi-city Biennale, an event devoted to the topic of ‘urban borders’ that year. Several ideas were put forward for the exhibition and four case studies were identified for comparison. During the urban beautification of the city before the 2010 Asian Games, the focus was on the idea of discovering a ‘traditional Guangzhou’. In the Liwan district, the canals played an essential role, re-emerging under the roads or being artificially rebuilt. The reinvention
of Lizhiwan Canal (a process of rebranding for «Lychee Bay neighbourhood»), now incorporated into the urban fabric, led the renewal: the district became a terrain for confrontation among administrators seeking to re-launch the economy, local people involved in the development of real estate, and professionals drawn into the preservation of the heritage. In Turin, the Sangone River is an old ‘urban border’, swallowed by the recent growth of the city. For some time it has represented the administrative boundary between the city and one of its suburbs, Nichelino: in the second half of last century, unbridled growth led to the formation of a single urban settlement, but the condition of the river as administrative boundary made it a backdrop for both Turin and Nichelino. In recent years, the scenario has changed dramatically, restoring a barycentric role to the river and its natural environment. Similar stories, between disputes and agreements around the water spaces, emerged in Kowloon and on the Piave River, places chosen by CUHK and IUAV Luca Casonato immediately went to work, carrying out photographic research in the four places. How could we tell stories of urban recycling making them comparable, in different places and on opposite sides of the world? We want to compare the specific aspects of different stories using a common language. That was the main attempt of the application dossier, the first big effort of cooperating among the four universities. Our admission to the Bi-city Biennale was announced at the end of the summer: just in time for a new discussion in Turin, during the Chinese Golden Week at the end of September. A formula of open verification of the application dossier was chosen, before launching the production of the actual exhibition. New subjects were invited to comment on it and these included the Po Park Authority (Ippolito Ostellino), the Municipality of Turin Public Parks Division (Paolo Miglietta) and the Province of Turin, which commissioned the River Contract for the Sangone. At the same time, in Guangzhou the District of Liwan was involved in the research.

2. Karlsruhe, autumn 2013. On the 12th of September, during the annual meeting of the Sino-European Engineering Education Platform, which unites the 12 European universities of the CLUSTER consortium and 18 Chinese technical universities, the SCUT-Politecnico di Torino proposal obtained one of the four SESE programs. We ought to mention that the application was born in a somewhat daring manner, before there were effective processes of collaboration: they worked well for agile situations (like the exhibition), but were still fragile for actions with greater perspective. The weaknesses included the underlying ambiguity between different ways of interpreting sustainability: on one hand, the quantitative and performing notion contained in the application and, on the other, an interpretation extended to the sustainability of the process and to its aspects of social ‘durability’. But, all of a sudden, there was a prospect of four years stretching out ahead, attributing new perspectives to the work that had been concentrated on the exhibition up until then.

3. Shenzhen/Guangzhou, late autumn 2013. On the 7th of December, at the 水岸画廊 of OCT Loft in Shenzhen, the exhibition Watersheds. The narrative of the recycle process in a waterborne urban space opened. This was the first opportunity to declare shared interests, and to verify them in front of an audience. The exhibition worked on case studies through three sections, ‘places’, ‘projects’ and ‘processes’. They were a selection of photographs by Casonato: nine three-dimensional sections representing the transformations made, in progress or imagined, all on the same scale to make them ‘measurable’ to the human dimension (regardless of the differences in extension of the areas); four comparative diagrams of the processes that were to represent the main development of the research in the following months, also with operational influences. Each of the narrations, through these three phases, was presented as a storyboard of a place undergoing transformation, moved by numerous collective actions. In the following chapters, the exhibition device will be commented extensively.

School of Architecture, South China University of Technology, Guangzhou. Design Review, June 2014 (middle right).

Yellow House, South China University of Technology, Guangzhou. Polito/SCUT seminar, June 2014 (above right).

有方 | Position Gallery at OCT Loft in Shenzhen. Watersheds opening speech, December 2013 (above).
The meeting at SCUT just after the opening was the opportunity to connect Watersheds and SESE, tracing the first idea for a Winter School to be opened one year after the exhibition, involving PhD students from the two schools and analysing the theoretical scaffolding developed so far. It was also the moment of submitting an operational proposal within the strategic track dedicated to 'Urbanisation', launched by the Italy-China Governmental Committee. We met Ambassador Alberto Bradanini at SCUT, and the proposal is archived at the Italian Consulate in Guangzhou.

5. Shenzhen, winter 2014 On the 23rd of January, just before the Chinese New Year, the conclusive seminar of Watersheds was held in Shenzhen. Besides the research team, guests included Wenhui Jiang, the technical director of the Liwan District, who supervised the various projects on the Liwan canals from 2009, and Winnie Ho, Deputy Head of Energizing Kowloon East, the Hong Kong government agency which coordinates urban transformation operations in the district of the old Hong Kong airport. The effect of a confrontation on the issue «you think only about engagement, but China is different», which seemed to develop at the beginning of the presentations, was overcome during the round table. In the meantime, a national page dedicated to Watersheds by the daily newspaper La Stampa at the beginning of January 2014, accelerated a convergence of efforts: we began talking about a competence centre at SCUT dedicated to urban regeneration, which would act as a presidium of Politecnico di Torino in the Province of Guangdong.

6. Guangzhou, spring 2014 We looked at models of other Sino-European competence centres, including that which TU Delft is structuring at SCUT. The perspective of a centre was strengthened by the idea of directing SCUT towards the eGovernment Center, already launched in Shenzhen in 2012, revitalising it with the contribution of skills for urban regeneration. The eGov Center was born under the impulse of the Italy-China intergovernmental agreement signed in 2010: the Italy-China Research Cooperation Agreement encouraged directly by the Chinese Ministry of Science and Technology. The eGov witnessed the joint participation of the Shenzhen Institute of advanced Technology (SIAT) and of Politecnico di Torino, designated as Chinese and Italian headquarters. However, this Center is attempting to further expand its scope, and the synergy with the idea of a new Center was envisioned with a contribution about governance which clearly seconds out our attention to decisional processes. The decision was made to focus on the Watersheds Winter School as a general trial of academic cooperation with effects on applied research. This scenario led to a reflection on a necessarily barycentric and comprehensive role of urban regeneration practices: not authorial actions, which would be unlikely to include different disciplines, but collective processes, between negotiation and diplomacy.
before introducing form and spaces. On this site, the transition from the realm of academic research to the realm of institutions and real urban transformations will be tested. This transition is thought of as continuous and indefinite, with a constant intertwining between the two dimensions, so that one always informs the other and vice versa.

9. Guangzhou, late autumn 2014. At the beginning of October, the Polito’s Board of Governors approved the foundation of the Centre at SCUT and funded it for two years, in line with the aims of the Strategic Plan Horizon 2020 according to which Politecnico di Torino intends to launch, in countries seen as strategic, operations to preside over the territory and to cultivate a direct relationship with the research institutes, clients and local government authorities. The launch of the Centre is based on three conceptual principles: urban regeneration – the starting point of the Centre – as an inclusive process, capable of attracting different disciplines and putting them into a system (an aspect that is mainly lacking in China, where a rigid breakdown of the design process is in use); design as a negotiation, capable of leading to an agreement around the forms (with the possibility of influencing the innovation of processes and governance); competence in assessing values which are unusual in China (and testing them in the real world).

On the 7th of December, the Watersheds Winter School opened in Guangzhou, hand in hand with the presentation of this book which plays the role of methodological and theoretical basis for the field-work to be carried out in the next two weeks and in the next two years. The triple transition from the divulgation/communicative work of the exhibition to that of academic analysis documented in this volume and to a potential application on the territory through the Centre introduces a key question. The answers to it are the main objective of the experience ahead: once shared, how is it possible (if it is, at all, possible) for a critical knowledge to become performative and stimulate effects on a real context?

7. Xi’an, summer 2014. On the 20th of September, one year after Karlsruhe, during the same meeting the Winter School was launched among all the partners of the SEEEP. We insisted on the method: a group of 6-8 PhD students of Polito and SCUT were to work for two weeks on a real project of urban regeneration, organised like a design studio which engages consultants, in this case tutors, who impersonate the crucial contribution of certain disciplines: urban design, history of architecture, strategic assessment, applied ecology. It was a matter of measuring what added values for an urban project in China a mixed Polito-SCUT team could supply, with its skills and interactions.

8. Turin, early autumn 2014. At the end of September, again during the Chinese Golden Week, the Watersheds exhibition opened at the Promotrice delle Belle Arti in Turin, within the framing of the Oriental Design Week. At the public debate which opened the exhibition, SCUT proposed a project area for the Winter School. The TIT Creative Industry Zone, a former industrial textiles area south of the Pearl River, sits exactly on the extension of the north–south axis along which contemporary Guangzhou is structured, east of the original settlement. A recently approved masterplan determined the extension of the axis south of the river and of the television tower: with the TIT right in the middle of it, a delicate situation to be considered: this offered local administrators a test bench to develop experimental projects with international consultants (the masterplan has involved Thomas Herzog since the very beginning). It is a matter of sharing and of understanding an uncommon theme, with respect to the more frequent events that take place in big Chinese urban transformations: the decision not to demolish an area with a strong memory, considering it to have such value as to deserve conservation, despite the position in the middle of an axis which runs free for kilometres as a broad public space and a traffic route. We did not receive a brief, but we understood that we have to take part in its construction, suggest a process even
"I hate you, Gavrila Ardalionovitch, solely (this may seem curious to you, but I repeat)—solely because you are the type, and incarnation, and head, and crown of the most impudent, the most self-satisfied, the most vulgar and detestable form of commonplaceness. You are ordinary of the ordinary."

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, The Idiot.

Poor Gavrila, the subject of the abuse of the beautiful Hippolite, is guilty of an absence of initiative: the accusation ends with "you have no chance of ever fathering the pettiest idea of your own". We can understand Hippolite if she’s talking about a man, and particularly a groom-to-be, but the accusation of mediocrity that has rung though the air since 1867, year in which The Idiot was written, seems to have been extended to the whole world, where, in order to survive (or to marry) original ideas are constantly required. Contemporary Architecture – the name we use, with a capital letter ‘A’, for that combination of authorial works conventionally considered as such in books and magazines – has fully wed this original conception of survival, basing its fortunes on it.

Thanks to the production of an original idea, Architecture succeeds – or tries to succeed – in avoiding the substantial questions that the design of the physical form of city and territory is required to answer. Such questions are often complex: territorial transformations often include and involve, in a variety of ways, a multitude of players, regulations, standards, social expectations, as well as real and symbolic restrictions. A blurred combination at best, but one whose governance belongs to the political sphere, and one which architectural design should find answers to. It should, but hardly does. It is difficult to use design to question, to converse, to make people agree.

It is better – in complicated cases – to resort to Architecture. When the dispute seems to be insoluble, when it seems impossible to find, through design, an answer that can maintain the balance within the
multiplicity of variables... then it is time for Architecture. Architecture reaches out and seduces – when things work out – with the persuasiveness of its forms. It shifts the problem of decision-making from the sphere of the negotiation table to that of the tribunal of form. A tribunal which has little to do with the public, and which answers to rather abstract and never clearly defined organisations. Architecture is convincing, regardless of what is up for discussion: it offers its own solution, demolishing the expectations implicit in the question. And it is phenomenologically irreducible to the sum of the instances that produced it in the first place, because they are separated by a suspension of judgement. Architecture unveils. It unveils what others (non-architects) were unable to see. The superpowers of Architecture make this world safer from conflicts, and allow people to sleep safe and sound, free at last from the burden of public self-representation.

The leap from finite processes of project negotiation to those (unspeakable) of formal representations of Architecture is, first and foremost, a political leap. It requires a change of the ways in which the multiplicity of stakeholders involved relates to the transformation. On the negotiation table, the demands of the project become operative: first and foremost, demands of consideration, but also demands concerning the hierarchy of values that a project creates. In the tribunal of Architecture, on the other hand, seduction is the main operative force: the form is a given, as is the interpretation (often clumsy: variety is the spice of life, so the building is twisted) and the only possible relationship is recognition. Power relations change: democratic in the first case, individual authoritative in the second. To become effective, the project needs to include, to convince (argumentatively), to reveal the community involved; Architecture needs a unique decision maker, preferably a friend: a Prince.

In this case, Architecture plays a supplementary role to make up for the deficit of politics and design. When decision-making processes become too tangled, it’s probably best to cut through them with a sword. And to find the solution on another level rather than that of conflicts of interests. Architecture moves wonderfully on this other level.

From Renzo Piano’s Tower in Turin, to Zaha Hadid’s Opera House in Guangzhou, Architecture plays this supplementary role. In all cases in which the collective involved in the transformation expands to take on a mediatic dimension (as in the case of the headquarters of a multinational company, which has to be recognisable to a global audience, or of a city which is about to host an international sport event, where it is taken for granted that the television eye will prevail over the human eye), the dimension of local instances loses meaning in favour of a process that is, programmatically, expected to make itself recognisable and acquire an authorial nature. It is a fact that, if Gehry had not been called to Bilbao, the city would be much poorer today. And it is a fact that our own experience is in continuous exchange with processes of globalisation and mediatisation of reality, which require symbolic devices like those supplied by Architecture. It is a fact but it cannot be a given.

The transformation of city and territory is the result of numerous other factors, which the cone of light of architectural thinking seems to shy away from. While in some parts of the world unspeakable Architectures will continue to legitimately crop up, in many other parts of the world – as in the cases looked at by Watersheds – design could perform that difficult job of social construction, starting from identifiable, tangible and situated matters.

The task of design in this case is to attempt to configure positive answers for deadlock situations created by conflicts between involved stakeholders and their different intents, or to lend visibility to design-related matters – starting with emerging problems and marginal places – which are not yet explicit and formalised.
From this point of view, the way in which matters of space and design are conceptualised is not indifferent. In the case of cities and territories that are increasingly configured as disputed spaces, perhaps it is a matter of reformulating the nature of design, focusing on its possible role of cultural mediation, management and communicative negotiation of conflicts, as opposed to that of merely offering a formal or technical response with a presumably neutral and objective value.

A re-compositional nature and, at the same time, one that prompts a construction of scenarios, around which an attempt at reconstructing a social legitimacy of design and new skill systems is possible. A role which can become even more important when the need arises to couple a traditional aesthetic-cultural interpretation of Architecture and Landscape with a necessary and complementary tangibility on the economic, social and productive front, capable of putting space – long treated as a variable depending on urban development – back at the centre of value enhancement processes. Only by recognizing their nature of constructive facts can these matters escape the simplistic outcomes of a neo-functionalism of procedures and validations, and the idea of quality as a mere act of conformity to a system of values that are all within the system itself.

In all this, the morphological dimension can take on a decisive value when seen not as the purpose but as a means to an end. The spatialization of different intentionalities (economic interests, public objectives, conflicts between stakeholders, etc.) is a device which can allow the revelation of the different points of view around a common table, making systems of values, hierarchies and choices legible, simultaneously looking at ecological matters and economic costs of transformations, life cycles and the function of space, urban quality and a responsible need for limits.

This interpretation looks at the project primarily as a sort of 'arena', 'negotiation table' and, especially, as a 'canvas' through which to assess hypotheses for transformation with multiple and collective values. It is a design prefiguration that allows through the construction of a common language among the stakeholders – the different positions to 'condense', becoming enunciable, modifiable and convergent. It is a way to make relationships of strength explicit, though anything but pacified, and to push them towards solutions of a higher order. In particular, it is a way to endorse the inclusion and participation of the different stakeholders with a purpose other than the mere efficiency of the process itself, and in which the value of design has to be measured in its ability to integrate and maximise the different points of view in uses, morphologies and mixité.

This understanding of design sees the construction of urban and territorial morphologies as the preparation of patterns, frames, armours, plots and structures. In order to do this, it employs individual materials found in and on the ground, not necessarily with the aim of imposing additional forms on space, but of drawing out figures that generate sense starting with existing processes and data. It is a way of conceiving design where recognition, recomposition and representation are central, even more so than construction. Underlining and 'mapping' unexpected and misleading convergences, contiguities, chains, sequences and superimpositions, while highlighting the non-indifferent role of the physical substrate and pre-existing materials, means opening up the possibility to build new uses, new economic activities and new opportunities for development. Practicing an attitude towards a change in meaning and interweaving that represents the conceptual root of any contemporary design action towards transformation or recycling.
drafting a common DIAGRAM
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What do four different-sized riverine territories which are part of different geographic and political systems, subject to apparently incomparable transformations have in common? We have hazarded to offer this answer: in all cases there are decisions, negotiations, projects and effects of modification that accumulate over time. First of all, the Watersheds’ diagrams were all generated by this answer, which is also a taxonomic choice, a code which represented the initial agreement between the participants in the research project. In the field of urban design, it is not so obvious that it is possible to work at such a distance, sharing the same approach. Therefore it is the construction of the shared paradigm that formed the basis of the subsequent work.
A. Diagrams as a translation tool: four common definitions.

We implemented a diagram describing the processes that could be verified and discussed in Turin and Venice, and in Guangzhou and Hong Kong. The initial assumption was that, in none of these places, regardless of the different consistency and structure of the policies, we would find urban transformation processes that proceeded exclusively according to a top-down authoritative. Likewise, we wanted to understand whether, adopting a shared code and the same observation time of 50 years, we would have seen macroscopic differences in the processes in the various cases.

From the methodological point of view, we had to start defining a shared vocabulary which enabled us to articulate the strategic reduction to portray in the diagram. The result was a sort of lexicon, on which the logical layout of the design and its key were based. The definitions proposed represent the extension of the hypotheses which were proposed with the elaboration of the four diagrams and discussed in Shenzhen in January 2014 in a public seminar with scholars, professionals and public administrators, at the end of the Watersheds’ exhibition. The keywords form an initial conventional basis for a comparative investigation into the function of urban designs in public operations.
1. Process. An urban transformation subject to regulations and socially articulated by means of documents. The unity of the overall process is given by the urban form in the territorial framework that has been chosen, referring to the actions and events that occurred up to fifty years earlier. Every global process contains an indefinite number of single authoritative actions which are observed as they take place or in sequence, from the decision to the final effect.

Given this unit of time and place, we try to identify the main sequences of action that generated the physical transformation: every change is, basically, linked to a decision, to a project and to an execution of the aforesaid project. For example, in the Italian case of the Sangone River in Turin, national law 167 of 1962 generated a resolution by the City Council for the construction of a new complex of social housing. On the basis of this resolution, the assignment for the design and subsequently a public tender for construction took place. The final and more or less linear effect of this sequence of actions was the construction of the social housing in Via Artom between 1964 and 1966. In actual fact, however, this quite simple process, when looked at closer, underwent deviations and changes compared to the initial aims of its promoters: when, in 1966, an attempt was made to transfer the occupants of the new housing, there was resistance, and only after several disputes were the lists for final assignment of the new apartments established.

If all the decisions had produced linear effects, the diagrams would have had the structure of a comb, made up of lots of broken lines which pass from the decision to the execution, through to the actual construction. The inclination of each segment would have only defined the speed of the process and we would not have needed to add the column of conflicts and negotiations. Generally speaking, a perfectly authoritative process would proceed from left to right and would gradually convert all the decisions and agreements made by our politicians, onto projects and agreements developed with technical authorities and then implemented in construction sites. The authoritative force, which we could define as being of the top-down type, can depend on numerous factors: availability of economic resources to invest in transformation, possibilities of isolating an area of intervention from the interferences of the rest of the city, degree of concentration of the decision-making and bureaucratic procedures in an efficient closed system which allows the production of very strong and effective planning documents.

The processes that we are going to look at are the sum of numerous sequences of publicly-promoted actions which take effect through a chain of cogent institutional objects. In all four cases described and regardless of the political layouts of each one, public power had to implement its own decision through formal deeds—standards, authorisations and agreement obliging others parties to act. This force is also known as deontic power (Garie, 1995) and it lies at the basis of all the social systems regulated by standards. Architectural projects are also part of these formalised systems through which public action proceeds and, along with many other social objects, they form the network of documental acts that was used to build the nodes of our diagrams.

2. Sequences of actions. Activities registered and always referable to a document, divided into four fundamental categories: decisions, conflicts and negotiations, project documents and material effects. The actions are traced in the documents and cannot necessarily be traced back to individual parties: this is why the diagrams do not represent the players but the objective effects of the action. The process is described as a sequence of institutional actions so that every element can be traced back to an objective reference. In general, the objective base is always a combination of documents (projects, contracts, resolutions, petitions and authorisations) that have recorded the action. In this sense, the documents are registered acts, which can stand alone, generating effects regardless of the subjective agents that produced them (Ferraris, 2009).
To describe the processes, we have decided to identify four essential phases of the action, which do not necessarily occur in sequence: political decisions, conflicts and negotiations which resist the process, projects and the combination of documents which implement the decision towards its execution, the material effects that the process has on the physical space. In order to be represented, every category of action has to be able to be referred to a documental trace: a newspaper article, a resolution deed, an authorisation, a drawing, a contract, etc.

Decisions condense the combination of resolution deeds (laws, orders, decrees) which are issued by the government departments. We could obviously consider that these decisional deeds have nothing ‘original’ and are simply the effect of other processes. However, we have posed a limit on the chain of deferrals, always starting with the local decisional level, in which the desire to perform a physical transformation was explained. Only in special cases was a national law or a sphere of particularly important political issues indicated, to explain the reason behind a specific local decision on a broader scale.
Conflicts and negotiations are an anomalous category which, in a completely linear representation of the processes, would never even have appeared. This combination includes actions which cast doubt on the objectives resolved during the decision-making phases, and other capable of blocking the execution of projects and sites. Conflicts and negotiations group together a heterogeneous combination of actions, like the moments of discussion of a project with residents, protests against an unpopular decision, or resistance to enforced clearance. They can, however, also include other forms of institutional conflict, where one Authority blocks the action of another. Actions that are so different share the ability to produce a deviation of the effects envisaged and planned. The collection of documents that trace conflicts is more complex than others because in the event that the resisting action does not end with a registered agreement, it might not be possible to trace a direct document of the conflict. It will, therefore, be necessary to resort to a more extensive combination of references, possibly indirect, such as newspaper articles, mass-media recordings, web pages, etc. The theme of conflicts and their articulation around urban transformation is the subject of specific study within the scope of the so-called cartography of controversies (Yaneva, 2012).

Project documents. All the documents that relate directly to the architectural designs have been grouped into the same category. This type of aggregation requires that, in a formalised process, in which all the decisions pass via contracts before being implemented, the sphere of architectural projects forms a series of interconnected documents that are exchanged with other spheres: the sphere of political decisions, the bureaucratic structure of technical offices, public debates of citizens and spontaneous committees, building production systems, the network of economic and financial operators, etc. In this sense, the same process could be described by focusing the representation on another, equally ‘subjective’ point of view, possibly adequate to the observation of other documentary spheres which are different from those of the architectural project. In our perspective, project documents comprise the combination of objects produced directly by the architects (drawings, reports, surveys, models) as well as the objects they are connected to: tenders and competitions, building permits, programme agreements, professional appointments, etc. The material effects are what we can see in the physical places considered, as we see them today. We have tried to indicate with the numbers of the maps the position of the main transformation, so that the tangible relationship between the processes and the actions transferred onto the ground was clear. The material effects are not however a mere photograph of the physical body of the city, because they often contain the effects of institutional actions that have still to be performed, but which already condition the space. For example, the areas of the River Sangone were expropriated by the City of Turin in 1975, to be transformed into a park. However, the park project did not go ahead and the ground in question was left abandoned for twenty years, generating the abusive occupation of the whole area by unauthorised allotments, dumps and sheds. In this case, the institutional actions (the park project and the deed of expropriation) had no direct effect, but indirectly caused other unauthorised temporary changes. In other cases, a project can be approved without going ahead, blocking every morphological transformation of a place, along with its conditions of accessibility and fruition. This means that, in a context subject to standards, institutional objects have numerous effects on the tangible layouts of space, even before conversion into building sites. The rules of formation and the power of these objects in affecting the material arrangement of the urban space can vary considerably, but we can generally say that they are always closely linked to urban projects – while comprising many other types of documents and acts. The tangible effects, considered as the real point of arrival of institutional actions, have obviously no need to be recorded by documents, because they are traced directly in the physical space of the city.
One of the essential requisites for the construction of diagrams was the consideration of the system of actions performed and their effects (actor-network theory), instead of analysing the network of players with subjective interactions (stakeholder analysis). The shift from a description of subjective players to a network of impersonal actions determines a considerable gap: in representations based on players we have to assume that the actions are, first and foremost, retraceable to the intentions of the parties. This assumption can, in some cases, generate the opacity of the descriptions, because the explanation of a determined action can reside within an element-subject, the desire of which can be neither questioned nor portrayed. Consequently, a process described via the representation of subjective players can be presented as a sort of black box in which each player exercises its power, interacting with the others.

These descriptions are useful where it is necessary to focus on actions of involvement to push forward the processes underway, but they do not typically have the ambition to build a general narrative which anticipates the trend in future effects. A diagram of players, if used as a diagram of the process, risks becoming more like a chart of the roles and static positions of the powers, rather than a model of the movement in time of a decision, its transactions and deviations, through to the effects of modifications of physical space. In the abstract case in which a process runs smoothly from the decision to the material execution, the differences between a diagram of players and one of actions are nil, because every subject exercises the action envisaged by its role, the form of the process usually coincides with the hierarchy and the geography of the players, and the reasons for every action are recorded in the stable power held by each player. But when the process undergoes interruptions, deviations and rethinks, its articulation becomes more complicated: new, unexpected players are added, the roles can be questioned and they can change and, at the end of the day, the reasons for the deviations can no longer be traced back to relationships between the subjects and their position. In many cases, the players are 'forced' to act in accordance with unexpected circumstances, the nature of which is impersonal or widespread. In an urban transformation process, decision makers are usually bound to objective conditions, despite the power that they are able to exercise: the network of these restrictions is registered in a system of documents that act independently of the desire of the players and which form the overall social and institutional reality.
3. Relations of (cause)-effect. Sequences of actions and events in time, considered as relations recorded from one document to another, through to the final effect consisting in physical transformation. The diagrams were traced with the intention of portraying a sequence of events, not a succession of causes. As we have already seen, highlighting the difference between players and actions, the cause of an action consequential to a decision is implicitly traced back to an individual or collective intentionality, although it is always very hard to portray these causes, the original and authentic form of which is hidden in the subjects and the strategy they use to portray themselves towards the outside. This said, the project-related desires of the players are translated in the documents, which are actually already registered acts and effects. From a merely pragmatic point of view, and within the perspective of the project, the causes that orient a public urban transformation process are mostly negligible: what matters is always the manifest effect that can be measured in the documents and, eventually, on the ground. It is easier to state that a given object (or subject) has been the cause of something when a process is over, because, at that point, all the deviations have been manifested and we can reconstruct the events along a line. But this is an illusion, because during the action (or during moments of the construction of projects) the events were not in fact aligned and every action could generate lots of different, unforeseeable effects. In our diagrams, despite the fact that the descriptions were retrospective, we tried to maintain an effectual
representation rather than a causal one, endeavouring to highlight the conflicting and uncontrollable nature of the deviations. There are sudden conflicts that nullify, from a design-related point of view, the confusion of a series of divergent effects with a succession of determinant intentions.

The problem of causes and effects creates a crucial watershed between the forms of knowledge of a design-related nature and other types of knowledge. To act and produce effects, urban projects need to show the future in the form of causal successions, in which it is possible to determine a future status, starting from a present configuration: design is the cause, physical transformation is the effect. In visions, the process is squashed into a single causal movement, which tends to relate the decision-making phase very closely to its design translation, but also to its claimed (often fictitious) tangible exhibition. If the process were able to literally transform the vision into reality, we would be facing the perfect top-down diagram, linearly created with the political intention to physically build it. Unlike other knowledge of an eminently retrospective and descriptive nature, like historiography, anthropology and geography, which are more or less related to what has already been given and tackle matters of an interpretative nature, the design-related disciplines have to undertake what still has to come (Cacciari, 1981; Vattimo, 1982).

They cannot recognise and describe the causes of a given effect but are obviously obliged to present a cause as given, hoping to derive a controlled effect (Jullien, 2004). The processes that we have observed prove that projects almost always produce effects that differ from those envisaged by their extensors and commissioners. Therefore, between the decision and the construction of a transformation it would be necessary to consider a sequence of intermediate effects, with their deviations, which could become part of the project. A rethinking of urban designs, starting with those of a public nature, would implicate an in-depth reform of the totalising portrayal instruments and their diachronic deployment.

4. Feedback. Interruptions of a formally envisaged procedure by an action external to the procedure, causing a change in the projects or decisions, with the consequent deviation of the final outcome of the transformation compared to that initially prefigured.

We can define as ‘deviation’ every unforeseen effect that is consequential to a planned action. The extent of a deviation presumes a difference between the real effect and that which was causally determined in a previous action. In our diagrams, the deviations are actions which break into the process and which we have marked with ‘X’: a black X represents actions of consultation or verification, already planned within the procedure, which interrupts the process and requires its re-examination. It represents those moments of ‘bottom-up’ formal consultation which should increase the legitimacy of those who govern a process but which, in some cases, can also make it difficult or block it altogether. A white X, on the other hand, represents an unforeseen action which opposes the continuation of the process in the direction that had been envisaged. The column containing deviant actions has been placed on the left of those of the design documents, in order to make the interruption of the process and its consequent return to a previous development phase more legible. This ‘return’ movement which we have portrayed also explains the reason why we have defined the deviations of processes as feedback effects.

The main function of feedback is to test the process, including factors (human and non-human) that were not considered from the start. From this point of view, we can see that every feedback expands the consequences of an action, implicating a larger number of entities. Consequently, the deviation of projects must not be considered so much as an ‘imperfection’ of the initial programme and of the ability to make forecasts, as the necessary condition of passage from a system of conventions (the documents) to a material transformation of the city. The partial nature of the projects and decisions can be put to the test by feedback along a sequence of progressive falsifications which increase the adhesion of projects to the social reality in which we are operating.
B. Possible directions for future work, looking at the diagrams.

The definition of the lexicon allowed the construction of a common agreement between the work teams, so that the key elements of the descriptions would respond to the same basic meanings for everyone or would at least reflect the same type of questions. After defining the elements of the diagrams, each team carried out a 'genealogical survey' on the spatial transformation moving backward along the sequence of effects. Trying to work back along the sequence of effects in a completely circumstantial way, documentary traces that allowed the registration of actions and events dating back in time were gradually collected. With considerable flexibility in terms of the type of documentation, the institutional sequences of the processes were examined, imagining the possibility to potentially refer to the tests of the actions listed through the archives of each case (initially, the idea was to include, in the exhibition, a copy of the documents that has fed each survey). The results of the surveys were transposed into the four diagrams, leading to some general considerations.

First of all, two observations of a qualitative nature:

1. None of the processes recorded took place in a linear way. Even observing only the local subsystems of the long processes, in all four contexts the actions undertaken following a political decision had produced sequences of effects that had been deviated before materialising in a territorial modification.

As already mentioned with regard to retroaction (or feedback), we can consider deviation as a structural manifestation of the processes. The concept of deviation stems from a definition by Bruno Latour who, to illustrate technical innovations, proposes a «sociotechnical diagram», according to which objects undergo
successive transformations during their development, tending to progressively include in their configuration an ever-increasing number of implications. The bicycle for example, considered as an evolving technical object, “progresses” in time, via modifications of form and materials, connecting to an increasing multitude of patents, designs and users (Latour, 2012). Every deviation usually corresponds to an expansion of the connections with the world. Let’s try considering the design of architecture as a technical macro-object, made up of a network of documents. Again in this case, as for the bicycle, we can look at the retroaction mechanisms as a device of inclusion and “progress”. If considered as a constructive factor right from the start, the deviations of the project would become the space of inclusion and augmentation of the final effectiveness, instead of an obstacle to be avoided.

2. There are different densities of feedback in the various contexts and different densities of effects that can be traced back to a single project. Despite the varying availability of documents in the four cases, having definitely limited the comparability of the results, there are some macroscopic differences in the overall configuration of the diagrams that we refer, at least hypothetically, to effectively different conditions of the single processes. We propose two differential reading criteria, the number of deviations endured along the decision-negotiation-project-physical transformation line and the number of effects of transformation deriving from a single design action. A sequence of actions that undergoes numerous deviations can be considered as much the result of weak governance as the result of an openness towards incremental inclusion, along the process. Observing the macroscopic configuration of our diagrams, we can see some big differences in the operation of the feedback. The case of the Sangone River in Turin seems to show an in-depth transformation of the form of processes between the 1960s and the 1990s. The first settlement of a social housing estate and the subsequent provision of public facilities in the 1970s took place with the installation of new objects on the land, only occasionally did the actions of residents and consultations have the chance to influence these actions. While from the 1990s, the transformations were always the product of many feedback effects, in which local committees and residents exercised a considerable influence over the final effects, sometimes even interrupting the process. In Hong Kong, the general appearance of the diagram suggests a different distribution of feedback over time, because the Kai Tak area has always undergone countless interventions, possibly too dense and complex to exclude continuous adjustments. Initially due to the restoration of legal conditions within the Walled City, and then due to the need to negotiate with the residents of the area, which was demolished, and, lastly, as a consequence of the transferal of the airport at the end of the 1990s, all the transformation processes manifested a very intense network of negotiations and adjustments, at least from the 1980s onwards. Today the transformations of Kai Tak River take into consideration the inclusive phases, which have been envisaged right from the start in the governance of more recent interventions. The case of the Piave between Treviso and Venice, on a vaster regional scale characterised by a mainly suburban context, was configured in a different way again. The transformation actions took place very recently and were aimed at the creation of the fluvial park. The process, which is still underway, seems to retrace its steps constantly, particularly with regard to the need to share the projects between numerous different institutional subjects. Lastly, the case of the Lizhiwan Canal in Guangzhou where, in recent years, urban transformation projects have increasingly taken into consideration aspects linked to the historical identity of the places, opening up to forms of negotiation with existing residents and businesses, along with an in-depth work of cataloguing and acknowledgement of the urban heritage. The considerable effects of these transformations also derive from the construction of processes that have been deviated and reformulated locally.
Secondly, there are two considerations that could open up the way to further analyses:

1. If the nature of the documents were uniform among the four cases, it would be possible to build up comparative analyses, by identifying in each case the actions and events (resolutions, authorisations, contracts, tenders, petitions, etc.) and particularly the type of projects. The diagrams are reductions which represent the formalised aspects of transformation policies: they cannot be used to define any order of totality with respect to history, society or politics. However, respecting the narrow perspective from which they look at reality, it is possible to imagine using them to build diagrams of differences and invariants which link the procedure to the design procedures. It would be very interesting to understand whether and when the configurations of the various projects were used to associate the instances, settle controversies and conclude an action. There could also be processes in which the design of the physical form was completely secondary: in those cases it would be necessary to seriously rethink the effectiveness of the tools used.

2. The relationship between the density of effects and the density of deviations could measure the effectual capacity of a project. The specific object of the diagram is the design of the physical transformation: therefore, assuming that we have standardised the tracking of documents in the various cases, it is possible to imagine a shared measuring criterion, in which the single projects are observed on the basis of the irruptions and the effects generated. Introducing an underlying question: how do we assess, in terms of performance, a project which generates numerous irruptions? Is this a positive or a negative feature? Looking at the different diagrams, it seems undeniable that there is a marked difference in the effectuality of the projects, even before the comparative analysis. In Turin, the large number of operations on the Sangone River between 2000 and 2010 was also the result of densely deviated and renegotiated processes, without which the goals would not have been achieved: in Venice, the amount of feedback seems to excessively exceed the tangible results obtained. In Hong Kong, inclusive actions are frequent and feedback regards the sphere of these actions more than the single projects that characterise the process: in Guangzhou, more than in all the other cases, there seems to be an immense capacity to produce tangible effects, drawing up a very small number of projects.
The possible developments of the Watersheds’ diagrams are endless. The field of process cartography is very extensive and in recent years it has involved social scientists on numerous fronts, anthropologists but also architectural theorists (Yaneva, 2012). Compared to the formulations derived from the Actor-Network Theory (Callon et al. 2001; Latour, 2007), which continue to be an essential methodological reference, our work has a much more restrictive descriptive aim, from the point of view of the classes of phenomena that can be observed. Particularly the researches that explore the complexity of the processes within an urban context, such as the project entitled Mapping Controversies on Science for Politics (MACOSPOL), focus on the possibility to describe everything. Unlike social scientists, our aim is not descriptive, but strategic. This means, first of all, that we do not see a model that intends to consider all implications and points of view as being helpful. we would prefer to try investigating at least the perspective of designers, trying to understand whether a diachronic model similar to that used for the four case studies can be articulated in future projects. The density of the procedural, economic and political implications that shape a process can be anticipated in part but they do not usually form part of the construction of the projects. Forecasting deviations and including them in the design of future transformation could be the horizon for innovating the tools available to urban designers.

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About MACOSPOL project: http://www.mappingcontroversies.net/Home/MacospolManchester.
Watersheds is a research basically aimed to retrace and to make comparable some complex urban transformation processes – in very different cultural and social contexts, like Italy and China – by representing them through a shared graphic formalism, trying to investigate not only the mere results of these transformations, but most of all the multiple relations among their physical effects and the whole of material and immaterial conditions preceding them, such as political decisions, public debates, technical documents etc.

The underlying research question of this work is quite simple: is there – within the ordinary practices – any system of implicit correlations and interdependences eluding the canonical narratives, but which could foster – if they were made explicit – a better understanding of the transformations themselves? And if yes, how could it be represented and used in order to improve a better awareness of the design process?

As it has been said, the four cases share programmatically a common condition, which is a substantial lack of any overall architectural vision, leading the transformation. The redevelopments of Lizhiwan, Kai Tak, Sangone and Piave rivers, namely, are neither the outcomes of any linear top-down processes, nor the fulfillment of any ideal design concepts, but they are rather the complex – and somehow unpredictable – results of a superposition of a large number of self-ruling events, documents, circumscribed rationales and partial material effects, sometimes opposite and spread over long-term periods.

Trying to retrace such a geography is a challenging task, most of all because it needs to combine in a unique interpretation a number of variables in some way incommensurable, like – for instance – intangible events (discussions, regulations, deeds etc.) and their concrete effects (evacuations, land reclamations, new buildings etc.) whose placement in space and time, furthermore, is sometimes exactly defined but often blurred and vague. The diagrams of Watersheds, in other words, aim to gather physical space, people, policies and procedures in a synoptic visualization, in order to spatialize the political dimension of the design processes within an unconventional narrative of the urban transformations: a work having a precise cultural background.
Mapping history. Some milestones of visual representation in the scientific culture

Data maps, which means the graphical representation of storylines and abstract information, are basically a product of modernity. As Edward Tufte explained in his studies, though cartography has deep roots in antiquity, it is only during the 17th century that the skills of geographers and historians (and — thereinafter — physicists, naturalists, physicians etc.) began to converge in some brand new forms of representation (Tufte, 2001), matching the concrete dimension of the physical world with the immateriality of chronicles and statistics, and giving history and natural sciences a new intuitive guise.

Some early attempts had actually already been made during the late Renaissance period — like, for instance, Mercator’s Chronologia (Mercator, 1569) — but those first examples were still nothing more than simple table charts, trying to harmonize the different measures of time and history, coming from the traditional sources (Brotton, 2012).

The real meeting point among scientific storytelling and visual representations could be actually found between mid-18th and mid-19th century, when two different approaches — a more abstract one and a more physical one — were developed independently.

A forerunner of the first type is the early work of Joseph Priestley, whose Chart of Biography (1765) and New Chart of History (1769) became an essential epoch-making reference. ‘Priestley-style’ (Rosenberg, Grafton, 2010) diagrams, conceived within the framework of the Empiricist theory, had a wide influence in the following visual culture, creating a new branch of works: some of which more pictorial — like F Strass’ Strom der Zeiten (1804) — or even naïf, like the impressive S. C. Adams’ Synchronological Chart (1880):
Unlike Priestley’s charts, the famous historical maps by the 19th century French engineer C. J. Minard developed instead an approach more fitting to the physical dimension of the events. In Napoleon’s Russian campaign and Hannibal’s Italian expedition maps (1869), the numeric amounts of human losses are expressively materialized by the thickness of the lines retraacing the troops’ itineraries, and – in the first one – they are also related to the temperature trend of the Russian winter. These pictures, giving military history an unprecedented dramatic aspect, are probably the first examples of what we call nowadays ‘infographic’, and they were strongly influenced by the innovations in the scientific representation introduced some decades before by W. Playfair (Playfair, 1801).

Even though their graphic style is rather different, the most part of the examples belonging to both these two families of visualization share a common hermeneutic approach, that is to say that their aim is often merely interpretative or, at least, educational; but seldom data mapping – either physical or abstract – has been used also with an anticipatory and non-neutral purpose, to prove a theory, to induce some changes in peoples’ behaviors, or to steer policies and decision-making. Which is much more interesting for our research.

That is the case of the medical mapping, appeared in the middle of the 19th century. The pioneering study of John Snow about the 1854 cholera epidemics of Broad Street in London introduced for the first time the disease cartography to circumscribe and identify the source of infection in the same period – in the aftermath of the Crimean war – the famous nurse Florence Nightingale used abstract and eye-catching visualizations to persuade the members of Parliament to improve the sanitary conditions of the troops, by showing that – in the Army engaged in the East – the mortality for preventable diseases was much higher than the one for wounds (Mortality of the British Army, 1858).

But one of the most interesting uses of visual representation as an instrument to foster and steer a political debate is represented by the work on conspiracies representation made by the American conceptual artist Mark Lombardi whose Narrative Structures (1990s) – strongly influenced by the critique of Capitalism by H. Marcuse (Burke, Tierney, 2007) – analyzed the complex geographies of some international scandals of the late 20th century, retracing – with a node and link graphic style – the untold rapport among politics, companies, banks, wars etc.

Lombardi’s graphs represent definitely – from a methodological point of view – one of the nearest approaches to Watersheds’ visualizations, not only because the graphic formalism is quite similar, but most of all because both of them share the same attempt of reducing different streams of events and groups of actors into a unique interpretative structure, whose aim is to influence the process itself.
What do Watersheds’ diagrams show?

The four charts presented in the research prove, first of all, the non-linear nature of the urban transformation processes, revealing the real margins of negotiation – sometimes very narrow – of the supposed decision-makers, and measuring the effectiveness of the project strategies.

Like the former storyline charts, they have an overall synoptic nature, allowing to understand at a glance the whole extension of complex facts, helping to take a critic distance from the objects of study.

Like Lombardi’s charts, however, they are based on a nested structure. Every node of the chart could hold potentially entire subsystems of events and subjects, which could be expanded as needed, to deepen the study and to investigate single facts or chains of events.

For this reason the charts are not a static and neutral representation of reality, but they are a dynamic and slanted one, allowing to make selections among facts and interpretations, to explore possible correlations and to create a critical interpretation of the events.

Finally this kind of approach allows to find and highlight some unexpected recurring events – or, specularly, some unpredictable differences in apparently similar situations – which could be studied not only to better understand the past transformation processes, but also to steer and improve the future ones. This is likely one of the most promising outcomes of the research.

REFERENCE LIST


a comparative
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A. Contingent and common practice

A basic assumption of the Watersheds' experience is that only an explicit, comparative framework, one that is concerned with the multiple ways through which spatial modifications take place and that indeed avoids 'ranking', paves the way for an understanding of the relation between places and the acts that transform them into very different kinds of cities. This is a three-tiered assumption.

Diversity is the first strand. The diversity of the Watersheds' cases is evident: two are in Italy, one in China, one in Hong Kong. Their material conditions, as well as their regulative contexts, are different: and transformations in the more densely built places differ from those in the less urbanized cases. To make sense of the many ways of being urban that are inherent in the transformation of inhabited spaces is challenging. Whatever practices are considered, the condition of being diverse will be constantly found.

Diversity is ordinary in the urban realm.

The Watersheds' cases are not special, which constitutes the second strand: none of the four cases serve as a model for evaluating the others. The research presented here differentiates Watersheds from the many available collections of international best-practices in urban transformation that are at hand for project designers. In such works very little is known about the process that led to the success of those cases. In most cases, 'best-practices' imply a specific idea of the city, on the basis of which other places are examined. As a sort of tautology, they are good because they reached an objective. Implicit comparison is particularly tricky when the urban experiences in mature societies are examined together with emerging
Watersheds' processes deal with the material and semantic transformation of the public realm. Transformations of urban space are inclusive processes when de-constructed. Such processes are inclusive in the way they are explored, because there is no 'other matter' to the multidimensional transformations that are expressed in terms of the design of an expected solution, the political and collective acts used to operate it, and its practical making. Processes are inclusive in the way that they are visualized: a narrative that regards spatial transformations at the most comprehensive range unfolds each single process as an impersonal matter. It is the story of the place and its space, without 'us' and 'them'.

Although the public realm is, by definition, the sphere in which ideas, behaviours, and preferences have to encounter, confront, and mediate with one another in more or less symbolic ways, each process has, in the foreground, been substantially deprived of any subjective point of view. The dissociation from the subjective will – of politicians, technicians, professionals, etc. – is an unusual experience of displacement. However, it should accompany real practice, as it encourages listening without prejudice. Although we may feel sympathetic, and we certainly become part of the collective action of city-making, we cannot think too narrowly about only strictly disciplinary concerns (Forester, 2009). For technicalities other than spatial design, for instance, this latter concern is the very other, sometimes unreasoning, companion. Once the process of spatial transformation is deprived of protagonists, any act that concerns space moves the process ahead, as either a material or instrumental occurrence in the public discourse.

Yet the process of spatial transformation is partially abstracted from its context. Cultural and political structures are indeed reduced to the production of documents or material effects. The extent to which the contexts and macro-systems of urban policy are understood in research as the premise of urban transformation is thus reduced. Messy successions of events regarding one place become an intelligible flow of substantial operational matters. This is a possible neutral room to debate throughout one process or dialogue between contexts, notwithstanding real differences.

It will always be true, for example, that the authorisation for construction is supervised by different departments in Hong Kong and Turin. However, when the visualized process is regarded through subjective scrutiny, the general observation will not sound like: ‘This kind of public work is supervised by office AB in Turin, while in Hong Kong it has to go through office CBA’. Observations can go deeper when in front of the process’s visualization: ‘There is a planning document here, which is firstly negotiated and then subdivided into projects and contracted. Here instead there is no room for negotiation until the final project approval; the general plan is guaranteed, but that it is a procedure that leads to conflicts during implementation in most cases’. Those who hold these subjective thoughts are ideally reflexive agents: visualizing a situation that they are not in may affect the way they act when they recognize similar conditions (Giddens, 1984). The experience of being the ‘other’ is, in the evocative words of Iain Chambers (1994), a journey of ‘relentless interrogation’ in which some fundamental terms of reference can be last or rediscovered.
Urban regeneration: a common topic in different contexts

In education, practice, and decision making, the reference to ‘models’ is continuous. Through models, research inquiry and the references of spatial transformations can easily transfer across cultures. Mainstream paradigms are established that shape general concerns. For example, powerful framing concepts, such as ‘sustainability’ and ‘quality’, which were singled out as especially relevant issues, are everywhere. The more general issues are established worldwide, the more the universal answers become vague. Some time has passed since Peter Hall (2002) first assessed that, after the early 1970s, the canon survey-analysis-plan (led by physical design) was overcome by a new paradigm of the flow of goal setting, continuous information, and uninterrupted cycle of projection-simulation for alternatives-evaluation-implementation-continuous monitoring. This new paradigm centres on the locale as it is. The expected end state of places seems to be too unrealistic a target to be designed in detail in a general plan. In its absence, special actions tailored to specific place-base characteristics become substitutes. Watersheds is based on these real, typical cases, not on ideal models.

To summarize: when urban space is not developed from scratches and instead results from the transformation of pre-existing urban fabrics, spatial planning and the project design of space proceed by incremental approximation and, in most cases, through a fragmented process. None of the Watersheds’ processes are encompassed by just one ordinary planning document that organizes phases and subordinated projects.

Regeneration processes embody a common topic in our time. As a consequence of the unpredictable changes in the urban realm, uneven spatial effects are now increasingly visible in our cities. Uneven benefits, resources, and opportunities all demand tailored interventions. The re-making of urban spaces

Reflexive agents visualize urban process within their operational space, and may modify actions accordingly.
renews the legitimacy of city-making. "Urban regeneration", therefore, is a common frame of reference, whether the planning tradition is state-centred or based on subsidiary governmental levels. Urban regeneration is not only about re-imagining more functional forms; it means overcoming previous documents (plans and projects) in order to coordinate different sectors' interests and general urban values. Urban regeneration is an umbrella concept encompassing transversal issues that do not have general solutions, but only spatially located assessments in light of their urban complexity (Healey, 2007). Making and designing spatial projects may be considered more as a means of supporting ongoing decision-making in a regeneration process than as the configuration of an end-state result. The processes of urban regeneration combine continuity and change. Regional or international conjunctures may change the expected course of events: local facts may improve or constrain public actions even when they are not directly related to the urban process. These disturbing actions are highlighted in Watersheds' diagrams. As all of the analysed cases deal with the generation and reproduction of public spaces, it can be stated that this concept is also a frame of reference, and that it is subjected to modification from time to time and, eventually, in different contexts (Giddens, 1984). This is true, and it is part of Watersheds' diagrams display and, indeed, of the exhibition. Any modification of space, either materialized into the real space or fixed at intermediate configuration, is meaningful in connection with people's use and not as an absolute value. On the other hand, time can affect the way in which space is regarded. Watersheds' processes are not visualized as endless fields. The processes are examined over 50-year time spans, and the selection of nodes on the basis of their capacity to produce effects on space constitutes a critical filter. Watersheds' diagrams do not obey an unmanned procedure.

2. An important selection

With ordinary urban aspects in mind, the resulting narrative of transformation is necessarily partial. For example, Watersheds does not regard the urban core of the three major cities we have considered – Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and Turin, each of which could have had a rather different illustration in terms of urban processes connected to world-city paradigms – and in the fourth case, concerning the scattered villages between the provinces of Treviso and Venice, the urban core is allegedly absent. Nor does Watersheds explore the details of decision-making mechanisms from the national to the local dimensions, which are reduced to the transmission of directions and approvals, as explained in the previous chapter. Implicitly, several 'systems of meaning' (Giddens, 1984) are lurking in the background of transformative practice. All in all, the four cases summarize the same process, in which the initial conditions of each place were inherited from pre-urban contexts, and faced a critical period due to urban-industrialization. The new framework catalysed technical norms for regulating spatial uses and complementary policies that were fragmented in actions led by different sectors, until a more recent time in which the general rethinking of the urban role of these places in a transforming city occurred.

Lizhiwan Canal drained the area between the west side of Guangzhou and the major branch of the Pearl River: the city's expansion forced the implementation of underground culverts and the redistribution of the newly available space between roads and precarious commercial street fronts. This solution was later questioned under a different expectation of urban
Two relevant nodes in Watersheds cases: Plan by the Liwan District in Guangzhou (above) and Programme by the Drainage Service Department in Hong Kong (below).
quality, prompting a general rethinking of environmental aspects in the city, some technical plans, and a number of punctual projects, some of which were smoothly implemented while others resulted in long negotiations. The Kai Tak Nullah drained the eastern Kowloon district, a rather remote place that also accommodated Hong Kong’s historic Chinese settlement and later its airport. The whole district mixed technical impositions regarding environmental safety and major infrastructure development with informal community arrangements, until the relocation of the airport and subsidiary services to another site opened entirely new prospects for urban redevelopment, which in turn prompted a number of plans and projects that were incessantly modified by both top-level directives and grassroots mobilization. The scattered settlements beside the Sangone River rapidly transformed from rural landscapes at the city’s edge to a problematic industrial periphery characterized by social housing, industrial plants, infrastructures, and the like, all directed by independent sector plans: when the region faced social and environmental emergencies, separate measures were enacted by different institutions, but a season of incremental and adaptive spatial design was also initiated. The Piave River, between the provinces of Treviso and Venice, has been the object of environmental and technical interventions that lacked any consideration for the historic, and increasingly urban, uses attached to the river-scape and centred on nearby villages and towns. Scattered warehouses and industrial shelters developed and, although these were unlikely ‘urban projects’, the mobilization of urbanites and anniversary of World War 1 converged to lead to intense project-making that reconstructed the functionality, as well as the imagery, of the alluvial land.

B. The decisive nodes: four cases of the material transformation of space

With a similar general plot, process analysis focuses on ways to produce effects in urban space. Objective documents and effective transformations are instrumentally used to include those unpredictable distortions that make the urban space a collective production in the narrative of urban regeneration. Single threads can be highlighted within the whole process (i.e. a single object’s line of action). Yet another way to use the diagram comparatively is to extract single ‘situations’ from the complexity of the urban transformation process. These nodes contain an overlay of ‘documents of will’ regarding the transformation of physical space. The more extensive the documentation is for a process, the more inclusive the definition of project results. Conjecture about possible projects, proactive design without formalized clients, and preliminary ideas sometimes requested through open competitions and sometimes developed as more or less explicit consultant work all contribute to the process’s advancement. The projects document the ordinary construction of urban space, either as a step in the direction of immediate implementation or as a turning point. Officials from technical departments may find here that their anonymous work is acknowledged together with that of independent professionals: both are part of unique, although ordinary, urban work.

The diagrams display the way in which spaces do change. The cases of Lizhiwan Canal in Guangzhou and Kai Tak River in Hong Kong, which are displayed in the picture, illustrate two alternative directions. The latest transformations around Lizhiwan Canal aggregate around Liwan District’s plan to implement both a complex daylighting for the underground canal system and a general amelioration of the public space. The plan – the black circle at the centre of the
portion of the diagram reproduced here – is a comprehensive document that includes historic research, technical reports, detailed hypothetical designs for public works, and a four-phase division of work. To plan itself is indeed a sub-thread of the general process in a magnified scheme, as its approval required multiple sessions of technical and public discussion with invited parties. Different projects originated from this structure, which were discussed and approved separately and then developed or implemented in parallel: some regard technical aspects of water management, while others develop projects for specific buildings that need to be approved by competent offices (Cultural Heritage, Commercial Activity, etc.) or further negotiated with owners and tenants (these are the small circles in the diagram). Most of these projects are based on drawings, as general functions and uses have been settled and generally agreed on in the form proposed by the general plan by all parties. The drawings are made public, and copies are pasted in the vicinity of construction sites. When disputes arise, it is only the latter part that is practically contested, and arrangements are based on punctual negotiations. Some phases were completed according to the original schedule (found in the urban-works framework for preparing the city for the Asian Games, an international event that catalysed public resources). Other phases continued at slow pace, with a few reopening the terms for negotiation after national directions reduced the scope of local public spending. Lizhiwan Canal is a well-known cultural attraction in the city, and the space is terrifically different when compared to its pre-2009 conditions. The district and the city can, with no doubts, affirm that traditional spaces have been straightened out, and most inhabitants will agree that the space’s quality is better than before. However, some projects are still ongoing with alternate fortunes, and quite likely, some of these projects will never become reality.

The comprehensive scheme for urban transformation is more loosely declared for the Kai Tak River. The area is simultaneously part of the broader redevelopment programme for the East Kowloon District and the specific responsibility of the Drainage Service Department. The Outline Zoning Plan for the redevelopment of the aforementioned airport started a public discussion via forums (one circle and a black X in the diagram), and when the independent technical line of action regarding the Kai Tak River consequently encountered unwanted public confrontations, it was, in due course, modified accordingly. After this public phase, the local zoning plan was amended to introduce some of the grassroots coalitions’ ideas on civic space, while the independent implementation of different sections proceeded through open bidding for detailed execution plans. In the diagram, there is a direct passage from the contract to the final transformation. Public decisions and the production of public documents, such as the plan and the programme examined in detail above, result from the occurrences and constraints drafted by laws, agencies, bureaucratic systems, opportunities, etc. that frame the operational space of the urban regeneration process. Within the frame of this operational space, documents and effects materialize as illustrated in the Watersheds’ diagram for each case. In some cases, relations between events are not so obvious or deliberately concealed in general urban practice. Indeed, the urban realm is conceptualized and narrated as being made of independent end-state stages in most cases, rather than as a process rooted in the space in which it takes place. Our material urban space is, in other words, a process-based production in which pre-existing material is incorporated and/or eliminated through the specific toolkit of project design.
Making projects within a process

Concerns about transforming space seldom revolve only around forms. They implicitly include ways to achieve transformative effects in practice. The concept of ‘urban process’, on the other hand, dignifies all sorts of projects. This should not sound like a defeat for project design, but there are certainly implications for it in the role of project making. Urban regeneration processes need projects in order to fix or consolidate a richer narrative. First, within the process, the project expresses the possibility and will to deal with space, either by performing its effects into that space or not. Thus, the very origin of projects is the urban process. Second, whether the project becomes real, its implementation, approvals, rejections, and the modifications it receives before or after completion determine a subsection of the process (i.e. a specific thread). Projects are a means for the process and, in their capacity to prefigure possible urban futures, they may raise the bar higher than the immediately achievable result. The process may incorporate some of those instances, although the experience of being asked to provide continuous modifications is wearying to project makers. Project design is not engaged in a solo dance; it is nested within a process that developed earlier and will likely continue after project-making. On the other hand, the project may, as with any other document with the capacity to modify space, produce effects beyond what is intended by the meaning of technical language. It can cause unexpected agreements or release quiescent disputes.

When urban regeneration is visualized as a process, as in the Watersheds’ diagrams, it is self-evident that the public practices regarding urban space frequently proceed by ‘small decisions’, such as public works with limited scope that, only when assembled and organized, reveal their transformative impact. Although possibly not perfect, real and tangible spatial effects are the engine for further modifications. The choice to deal with complex issues while adopting neither comprehensive nor simplistic solutions, but rather partial ones, is frequently both a pragmatic and unavoidable choice. Between effect and process, there is a recursive relationship: effect and process are linked by their mutual production, although rarely is this a necessary causation (see section A.3 ‘relations of (cause)-effect’ in the previous chapter). Most of the public authorities involved in urban regeneration processes are rather unlikely to sign precise schemes concerning the future. Urban changes materialize through fragments. Through times and ‘reality checks’, modifications become necessary for fitting the project within transformed cultural and social paradigms of space, and not just because of functional and material obsolescence. It is hard to pass a straight judgement when places that were stigmatized as dangerous, dirty, and unattractive are, after a ten-year span, found to be more pretty, with more people walking around, more able to attract investments and spending, and eventually capable of improving the image of the whole city. If these changes materialized through fragmented actions, so what?

More than a specific reference to the any ideal urban form, it is the idea of some continuity in city-making that structures the conceptualization of the visualization of urban processes. Even in cases of drastic intervention, the urban space retains, re-establishes, or reinvents relations in the public realm. Watersheds’ cases have no other physical element in common but a body of water. Watercourses were instrumental to establishing the first common ground in each of the four places. In all cases, water has undergone, exactly as is the case with a single place, a modification in terms of its form and meaning (morphological and semantic changes). Watercourses have been the cradle of life and sorrow for local settlements, requiring a careful management for safety reasons as well as for their provision of vital resources, mechanical power, and convenient communications. With industrialization, the role of urban watercourses shifted from being the lifeline of many rural villages to being the functional supply for industrial production. Single actions made sewers out of watercourses, which then collected into their flow all kind of discharges from urban activities. Under the justification of urban hygiene and
public health. Watercourses were technically regarded as sewers, and an efficient approach to spatial organization prompted their diversion into underground culverts or the engineering of protective banks. In recent decades, this trend receded to such an extent that daylighting into above-ground channels and re-naturalization are now well-established directions in urban design practice. Technical concerns of both the urban capacity to react to extreme precipitation events and general public consensus has established that restoring more natural environments will improve the safety of urban streams and provide amenities, possibly benefiting established properties as well. The narrative of urban watercourses – indeed, the narrative that replicates the general plot, summarized above, of urban regeneration – is a paradigm shift from the technical control of nature in the city toward their mutual coexistence. It is documented by a number of laws, initiatives, comprehensive schemes, special measures, and material transformation of spaces, with related projects. Collective interests aggregate around different key concepts, addressing the demand for projects. Thus, through time the urban process incorporates different judgement on right and wrong conduct, and eventually contradictory projects – such as covering the canals and then reopening them – that had however solid foundations in the corresponding frame of reference.

From the visualization of these processes, a more informed dialogue could start concerning the different regulations and parameters for safety that have been defined in different times and contexts, or one concerning the means of integrating technical requirements and spatial design within each of them. Both require full access to the original documents. Yet another option is to confront the meanings of space, particularly the meanings of public space and its frame of reference, that exist beyond their project design. The Watersheds exhibition pursued this course. There is a common basis in the framing of concepts concerning the production of ordinary public space that makes the process consistent in each place, but we found this also makes processes understandable among different contexts, notwithstanding procedures that do not overlap.

C. A compendium of recurrent meanings

The visualization of processes is not meant to be a deterministic mechanism that can predict the next effect (a possibility that is quite unlikely, given all the processes regarding human decisions, which always contain the chance to ‘act otherwise’; Giddens, 1984; Mero, 1998). Nor does it identify a finalized ‘conclusion’ except for the spatial effects. Indeed, processes are visualized without subjectivity, but the documents and effects are produced by people. Choice, in other words, and decisions about future effects are possible. Processes are not unpooled flows in reality. Processes are peopled, and the objective reality of effects on space only arise insofar as space is experienced by individuals, institutions, and coalitions engaged in various economic, social, and cultural activities that ‘register’ transformations. However, choices and decisions about urban regeneration generally operate within a range of settings in the present that guides the creation of meaning for past and future effects. Subjectivity in urban processes has an independence of thinking, acting, and designing at multiple scales; however, goals are continuously updated beyond individual projects according to more general references.

The theme was originally develop within structuralist analysis by Anthony Giddens (1984) and re-proposed with reference to contemporary urban complexity by Patsy Healey (2007). The systems of meaning are composed of frames of reference, ideologies, rationalities, and discourses, and built upon allocative structures of material resources and authoritative structures (i.e. norms and procedures). Structuralist analysis has pertinence within Watersheds' deconstruction of urban processes. Allocative and authoritative structures are flattened in the visualization of processes as forms of document production and of the correlations among documents and effects. Systems of meaning can be seen through the correlations of the diagrams.
The systems of meaning that set the horizon for public decisions can be explicit, as is the case in some of the processes examined here. The plan approved by Liwan District in Guangzhou clearly declares its aims, such as urban beautification and the reinvention of the historic urban landscape, with an array of correlated imagery. Systems of meaning may be embedded in the implication of measures, such as with slum clearance and forced relocation in Turin and Hong Kong, which is meant to affirm urban decency and legal rights. These systems of meaning make the sequences of effects that exist in urban processes consistent. Altogether, these effects make sense: the place is going in a certain direction (safer, with better green areas, more accessible, etc.).

Projects concerning the public realm are determinants in the confirmation and development of their systems of meaning, whether these projects are made real or not. Negotiations and conflicts revolve around systems of meaning, on which interpretations may diverge. The landscape of vegetable gardens beside Sangone River in Turin may have vaguely appealed to local institutions as an expression of urban sustainability, although they were not to be defended as far as they were not legally framed, and were strongly defended by the informal occupants of the neglected public land. Both were guided by expectations regarding open green spaces, but the institutions were concerned with legal frameworks, safety, fair access, and illegal tillers around their own businesses, as well with collective local interests. Proposals to relieve the contrasting positions have worked on spatial forms and procedures that accommodate instances from different parties. Forms are manifested for others in disputes (photos, drawings, and CAD renderings always appear). Projects do not need to appeal to eye-catching emotions or picturesque representations if they are used in dialogue and deliberations. Sometimes, however, fictional projects are instrumental in moving processes ahead. In Hong Kong, this is the recurrent systems of meaning...
specific work of the Alliance for Kai Tak Development, a local grassroots movement. In general, projects should support rational decisions on uncertain issues. The systems of meaning provided our documental selection with the lens of 'pertinence' and 'background' during the construction of the four diagrams. Systems of meaning appear through all of the transversal issues of urban regeneration, such as vacant industrial sites, undefined urban borders, obsolete public domains, and cultural heritage that is reinvented and codified as distinctive categories of our society. In parallel to the correlation between documents about space and their effect on space, the reduction of subjectivity in urban regeneration processes reveals concealed threads on the meanings that are associated with the way in which people expect public space to be. Spatial projects, more than other methods, can translate these imageries into the language of common people's spatial experience, one that is comprehensible by all disciplines and all individuals. However, given the common commitments in contingent conditions, it is difficult to draft universal trends. To some extent, the whole effort of visualizing the process is largely beyond the realistic commitment professionals can have in the transformation of urban space. One important remark, in conclusion, is that if, in the traditional scheme of decision-design-spatial change, the expected performance is to be 'on track' (with a slightly different accent, see Healey, 2007), when contingent aspects prevail, as in urban process visualization, the final purpose of each action has to be readdress as 'keep it moving'.

REFERENCE LIST
Ordinary public spaces matter

Once I heard a high-rank official in Guangzhou declaring that «Both magnificent works and people’s talk shape the urban space». Possibly, it was the first time that this understanding on people’s role in city-making by the means of ‘words’ made its way in the mass media. Behind the obvious rhetoric, it is the sign of a great change. Public officials do not easily admit the knowledge and the power of people – who cannot be entirely controlled – to build ‘works’ of words and thoughts. For local governments, the work in the urban realm is constrained between the political commitment to write the annals of local history (in some cases it is the willing to do something that others are not allowed to do, I have to say), and on the other hand the fear that personal actions can be easily contested and withdrawn. Back to the words of our official, I would rather see another deep meaning: urban projects cannot be taken too personally, their direct impact on city’s dynamic may be a flash in the pan. However, the effects on common urban spaces are likely to last even when the names of their makers will be neglected.
Opportunistic works
In some cases projects have to satisfy instances made by others. Some urban projects will never be made public; they serve for internal discussion in the administration. They may be neglected for years. Also there are projects which indirectly produce new problems, and more future projects. To work in the public space is always a challenge for designers, as the contexts continue to change in terms of resources, objectives, priorities, timing. Lizhiwan Canal is quite instructive. The government in Liwan District was strongly committed to gain something from the organization of the Asian Games, although almost none of the official events were planned in the historic district of Guangzhou. As other projects for public facilities required lots of time and resources to be implemented, the project for canals daylighting was selected. Later it developed into a major urban change, but it was not the first choice in the general urban strategy. After 18-year discussion, Lizhiwan Canal showed up before the Asian Games as the ideal public project that was not intended for direct profit neither in the public nor in the private realm, a transformation ‘for all people’. Quite likely, similar conditions will not repeat very soon. There are many unsatisfying decisions that are made due to special conditions. But special conditions offer unexpected chances.

Behave politically
Among the task of project making, the interpretation of the conditions is always crucial. This phase relates with both past and present urban conditions. It offers some clues about dos and don’ts. As a designer, I may have some convictions that are not shared by those who have the power to decide on the project approval. The reasons of design will hardly find the way to dialogue with the individual’s power of decision. The ground for dialogue should be shifted to political thinking. There is one point of the diagram that illustrates the transformation of Lizhiwan Canal which is exemplary. In the diagram is no more than a little circle. Indeed, within that circle named ‘phase 1’ there is a micro-story of a wheelchair ramp that was designed in detail, approved and built. After its construction, it was replaced with a stairway, as the form of the sloping walkway did not satisfy the governmental responsible of the construction site. The technical team of designers convinced the workers to rebuild the slope according to the original project, and finally there was an argument between the two parties at the building site. The reasons of aesthetic taste and personal understanding of the site have no way to mediate. Finally the slope was accepted on the basis of public space accessibility. The work was part of the special urban programmes that preceded the Asian Games. As for the Olympic Games, one week after the major programme concluded, it was scheduled the opening of the Paralympic Asian Games. Guangzhou had made a point of honour to welcome all athletes, including disabled athletes, and a public space that was not accessible and did not allow embarking at the tourist piers to wheelchairs was not acceptable.

Urban processes are pinball machines for projects: to perform effects, the same action has to be reiterated a number of times. Designers have to be patient and should know the kind of game they are playing in. It is not their personal waiting that concerns urban transformations. It is the time for the process to unfold into new situations.
Subtle influence
There is little chance for designers to become those who direct changes in the public realm. The government will not ascribe one result to technical consultants. It is the process that kick designers back from the main stage. It is requested by standard procedures to have a plan approved by the government through multiple steps. In China there is first the experts' checking, based on land use and technical features, than the governmental check in which each department (such as planning bureau, land resources department, culture office, etc.) should deliver opinions, and designers have to answer in technical language. The third stage is a consultation among the general public and the stakeholders—everybody can appeal, even if only the few who are really interested dare to find some pieces of information. Whether these suggestions are accepted or rejected depends on the professionals, but changes have to be justified. Moreover, there are media press reviews, organized by different institutions, which eventually can include interviews to invited local inhabitants. After the first technical approval a plan will seldom be rejected. Different committees care about diverse issues: mayors' committee has an opinion about budget and new policies. External professionals represent non-technical people. Members of or invited by People's Congress and CPPC also offer opinions to make the plan more inclusive and “to make it better”. Suggestions may be either relevant and meaningful small things, or irrelevant, but it is unlikely these opinion will make substantial oppositions.

This way of preparing the consensus in advance may seem inefficient or just role playing. However, it is safe for the government and, if fairly managed, offers spaces to have a say in decision-making. To know and obey the procedure is not at all a predetermined mechanism, indeed it is the way to access ‘breathing spaces’ for design. Everyone want to make decisions safely in this process, in order to avoid later contests. This is the framework in which we have to settle and balance our work.

There are two other stages, the approval of the Party Committee, and – if the project is accepted – the meeting of the City Planning Committee. To some extent, the latter is the real decision maker that can withdraw or pass the proposal. For this reason designers have to act in advance and build ahead a solid ground for their work.