

*Travel report
Lund September 2019*

This year ICOMOS CIAV (scientific committee on vernacular architecture) and ISCEAH (scientific committee for earthen buildings) has a joint meeting in Pingyao, China 6-9 September 2019. The conference has the broad theme on vernacular and earthen architecture towards local development and three sub themes on 'architectural features, values and conservation', 'challenges and possible solution', 'contemporary conservation and technical innovation' and 'adaptive reuse and revitalization towards local development'. In addition to special theme on 'heritage conservation going public' with a case study of Pingyao city. Over 130 paper contributions are published in the conference book proceedings with wide spectrum of papers were presented in the conference from over 25 countries. Personally, I contributed with a paper in using vernacular materials like reed, straw and earth in contemporary practice through a hand on experience with master students in designing and building. The title of my paper is 'Dare to Build: Designing with earth, reeds and straw for contemporary sustainable welfare architecture. I tried in this paper not only showing this experimental design studio but also critically reflecting on the challenges and obstacles that hinder the wider applicability of using natural materials and vernacular techniques in contemporary practice. It is not only in Sweden but in many parts of the world, codes and standards together with building regulations don't allow for using straw, earth or reeds in contemporary buildings except for rare.

After the conference sessions we had a technical visit to the Pingyao city wall. It was an interesting case for a rammed earth ancient wall that is under threat from pollution, traffic, heavy rains and most importantly earthquakes. The walls managed to survive for centuries but every now and then parts of the walls collapse or deteriorate quickly. There was an onsite debate and discussion on the local approaches used in consolidation, preservation and rebuild. Some of the solutions adopted affected the authenticity of the wall specially when cement or another earth technique is used. Post conference technical tour was also interesting in terms of looking at one of the most common universal problems within vernacular settlements. Vernacular towns and villages suffering from gentrification. Those dwellings are gradually missing the local inhabitants with their daily habits and social norms that used to keep those buildings alive. No maintenance from the locals as before leaving their homes to deteriorate quickly. Some still use their buildings as storage areas or barns for animals. Only seniors are still in the old towns where the traditional knowledge are still kept alive but will be lost as soon as seniors died. The transmission of knowledge will stop and it is rarely documented. Modernity and globalization are taking their way to vernacular earthen towns and villages. Locals' appreciation to the vernacular style is diminishing and is being replaced with tide of cement blocks and cladding with shiny ceramic tiles. No judgment for their taste on how their buildings should look like or their hopes and aspirations, I am just stating facts based on observations. Some villages are luckily well documented and some other received financial support from the government to restore them. But still they are abandoned ghost cities left as open museums for tourists without any living features from the local inhabitants' presence. Some villages and cities are only alive and vibrant but only during day time. Streets are full with both locals and tourists (majority of tourists are also local Chinese tourists). However, at night majority of the locals sleep outside the ancient city walls in their modern houses and tourists are the one staying in small hotels or motels (adaptive reuse for old courtyard houses in the ancient city) like the case of Pingyao. On one side, rehabilitation and adaptive reuse are two good conservation strategies, at least buildings get a good care and maintenance by being used. On the other side traditional dwellings become expensive to live in. Rents rise up and houses are for who can afford and that is the big threat of gentrification.

After the conference, both CIAV and ISCEAH committee members were invited to a round table workshop to discuss challenges and future prospects for Pingyao city. Representatives from local authorities and representatives from local residents in Pingyao were present. The discussion was for more than 3 hours and ended up with recommendations and suggestions for preservation and further development of the city. It felt a bit colonial that foreign experts are here to give local experts some good advice. As CIAV and ISCEAH committee members we tried to steer the conversation as dialogue for exchanging experience and we stressed in this meeting that locals are the true experts. We can only give a fresh eye look to things and our recommendations are just advisory.

N.B: The proceedings are valuable if any of ICOMOS Sweden members are inserted to read them.

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