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REPORT

on the ICOMOS Reactive Monitoring Mission to World Heritage Site

Classical Gardens of Suzhou (China)

3 to 6 June 2004

Kazuyuki Yano

Monitoring Mission Report on

The Construction of the New Suzhou Museum adjoining
The World Heritage Site of the Classical Gardens of Suzhou, China

Kazuyuki YANO (Secretary-General, ICOMOS Japan National Committee)

Duration of the mission

3rd to 6th June, 2004 (4 days and 3 nights)

3 rd June	Tokyo, Narita → Shanghai → Suzhou Explanatory session by Suzhou City about plans for the Suzhou Museum and its vicinity, followed by a discussion session. Overnight stay in Suzhou.
4 th June	Inspection visit of the projected site and its vicinity, located by the Humble Administrator's Garden (one of the World Heritage Site of Suzhou Classical Gardens), followed by a discussion session. Overnight stay in Suzhou.
5 th June	Inspection visit of water towns landscapes in the outskirts of Suzhou. Overnight stay in Shanghai.
6 th June	Shanghai → Tokyo, Narita

Participants to the mission

From ICOMOS

Yano Kazuyuki (Secretary-General, ICOMOS Japan National Committee)

Guo Zhan (Secretary-General, ICOMOS China National Committee)

From Suzhou City

Gao Fumin (Director, Suzhou Municipal Administration of Culture, Radio and Television, Suzhou Municipal Cultural Relics Bureau)

Yin Zhan Qun (Chief of Cultural Relics, Suzhou Municipal Administration of Culture, Radio and Television, Suzhou Municipal Cultural Relics Bureau)

Jiang Renlie (Vice-Mayor, Suzhou Municipal People's Government)

Shao Jian Lin (Deputy Secretary-general Director, Suzhou Planning Bureau, the People's Government of Suzhou City)

Zhou Hao (Foreign Affairs Office of Suzhou Municipality Suzhou International Exchange Center)

1. The construction project for the New Suzhou Museum

In regard to the Construction Project for the New Suzhou Museum, because of the location of the project site in the historic centre of Suzhou City and its location in what constitutes the buffer zone for the Humble Administrator's Garden, one of the World Heritage Site of the Classical Gardens of Suzhou, questions such as "Is there no problem to the construction itself?" or "Is there no impact to the landscape?" were raised. An inspection was conducted to evaluate the current situation, and receive explanations from the Suzhou authorities. Mr. Zhan Guo, Secretary-General for the ICOMOS China National Committee, accompanied the mission.

1.1 The current situation

At present, execution plans for the New Suzhou Museum are completed. However, final discussions are still going on, e.g. about roof materials, following objections from experts in the country.

On the site, preparative works of the site and setting of provisional fences are nearly complete. The main construction works have not yet started. Works for the relocation and reconstruction of some historic buildings that were on a part of the site are under way.

1.2 The design project by I.M.Pei for the New Suzhou Museum

- Choice for the architect

The architect for the project is Mr. I. M. Pei, the world-renowned Chinese-born American architect. Mr. Pei belongs to the family that owns the Lion Grove Garden, one of the Classical Gardens listed as World Heritage, which is also close to the Humble Administrator's Garden. For these reasons, one can say he corresponds to the ideal of an architect who is familiar with the culture of China and of Suzhou in particular, and has the capacity of understanding the western way of thinking at the same time. Certainly, there were also apprehensions as to whether his design would not have an impact on the landscape of a World Heritage Site, for his past project for the glass pyramid at the Louvre Museum in Paris raised both praise and criticism.

- The site of the project

The current Suzhou Museum uses the buildings of the former Residence of Prince Zhong of the Taiping period (the Taiping Rebellion 1851-64, is the rebellion of Christian peasants against the Qing dynasty) . However, due to the deteriorated state of these buildings, the functions of the museum as a place of storage, display, and study cannot be fulfilled any longer. The construction of a new museum was thus decided.

There were 6 possible sites that were proposed for the construction of the new Suzhou Museum. Discussions including experts from China were held over a period of three years, and the final decision opted for the current site located next to the Humble Administrator's Garden. The site has a surface of 9800 square meters, and is bordered by roads to the west and to the south. The eastern side borders with the buildings of the former Residence of Prince Zhong, that currently houses the Suzhou Museum, and the northern side adjoins the Humble Administrator's Garden.

Of great concern was whether to build inside or outside the core area of the old city surrounded by moats and which contains many World Heritage Sites. Suzhou City enforces policies of restriction on developments inside the old city, while existing factories are moved towards industrial development complexes in the outskirts. The decision seems to show that building the new museum in the old city where much of the cultural heritage is located would clarify the position of the project within such policies, and bring greater benefits from the viewpoint of the use of cultural heritage at the same time. The concrete arguments for the decision are as follows.

- The project can be situated as being a part of the general project for the maintenance and development of the Humble Administrator's Garden and of cultural heritage in its vicinity as a historic and cultural urban area.
- Existing buildings on the proposed site are in a decayed state and also pose a problem from the landscape viewpoint.
- The project's location is convenient within the 'cultural belt' that will link the four cultural preservation zones (by decision of the State Council, 1999)
- The buildings of the former residence of Prince Zhong that currently house the Suzhou Museum (7000 square meters) can be renewed into the old annex and be used in relation with the new museum buildings.

Furthermore, the buildings of the Benevolence Hall of the Zhang Residence dated 17th century and the Manor House of the Zhang family (social welfare facilities of the Zhang family) dating back to the 19th century used to stand on the project site. However, these were occupied by a great number of residents (87 households) and the buildings were heavily transformed. A three-storied hospital was built in the 1970s, which detracted from the landscape surrounding the Humble Administrator's Garden.

- **The architecture**

The total floor surface of the New Suzhou Museum amounts to 15391 square meters, of which 8432 square meters are underground, 5882 square meters on ground level, and 1077 square meters on the first level. The building is for the most part built on one story, and is partially built with a second story. The maximum height is approximately 24 meters; the

height of the building was kept as low as possible. Architectural detailing mostly refers to features of traditional Chinese architecture, and does not use much of the glass that is otherwise characteristic of Mr. I.M.Pei's designs. The outer walls use white walls that are common in the Suzhou region, and the buildings' roofs are provided with slopes.

- **Underground archaeological heritage**

The *Map of Pingjiang*, a map of Suzhou drawn during the Song period, mentions the site as 'rice paddies' or 'fields'. It is thought that in regard to underground archaeological heritage on the project site, there probably is not any especially outstanding remains of structures dating back to the times between the era before Christ and 1250 A.D.

- **Water**

The classical gardens of Suzhou are always provided with a recreational pond, and the Humble Administrator's Garden also features a lotus-planted pond. The water of the pond is not linked to the canals, and water supply is not continuous. This is because this land is located in a low area surrounded by canals, and therefore the water level is high, and there is also the possibility of underground water supply. However, when the water level of the pond is low in the dry season, extra water is supplied via the waterworks system, and when the water level increases in the rainy season, the overflow is disposed via the sewage drainage system.

In the new Museum, a pond of approximately 300 square meters is designed in the garden. According to the final plans, the pond is planned to be independent, i.e. not linked to the pond of the Humble Administrator's Garden. It is thus believed that it would have no impact on the recreational pond of the Humble Administrator's Garden.

1.3 Conclusion

Although it is a problem that the buildings of the new Museum are too close to the Humble Administrator's Garden, examination of the details of the project leads to the conclusion that the new building would hardly be visible from the Humble Administrator's Garden, and would not show much from the street. The building can also be appreciated as a piece of contemporary architecture that is respectful of the tradition of China in general and of Suzhou in particular. In brief, it does not seem to be a problem that the buildings would be built in the buffer zone adjoining the core area of the World Heritage Site of the Humble Administrator's Garden.

If there is a concern, it would be in regard to the historic buildings found on the site, the Benevolence Hall of the Zhang Residence (17th century) and the Manor House of the Zhang family (19th century), that are still partially present and in the course of relocation. After an architectural survey has been carried out, these buildings are relocated in another part of the Humble Administrator's Garden Historical and Cultural Preservation Zone. The relocation and reconstruction works are nearly complete, and the buildings are planned to be used as a

museum for traditional paintings. A report is due to be published about these relocation works that also would include results from the architectural survey.

2. The Humble Administrator's Garden Historical and Cultural Preservation Zone Plan

If a museum is to be constructed nearby the Humble Administrator's Garden and the buildings of the former Residence of Prince Zhong of the Taiping period, the number of visitors and tourists will probably increase considerably. On the other hand, the historic landscape of the neighbourhood is currently not necessarily good. For these reasons, there are plans to arrange and maintain the area that includes the Humble Administrator's Garden into a preservation zone, the Humble Administrator's Garden Historical and Cultural Preservation Zone, and initial works for this have started. Plans for this zone include a group of museums such as the museum for fine arts and crafts, the Folk Museum, the Museum of the Women Painting School and the Silk Museum (these would reuse historic buildings found on the site itself or relocated historic buildings), a car park, canals and the reconstruction of rows of townhouses. The car park is planned to be a large-scale underground parking lot.

Among these features, canals, stone bridges, town houses and alleyways that are distinctive features of Suzhou and have long been constitutive of the historic town, would preferably be developed and maintained with their comprehensive conservation as a prerequisite. It is also important that people continue living in these places as they are being maintained for development. For this purpose, it is the author's strong wish that detailed execution plans are made for Suzhou to be maintained subsequently while fully retaining its values as historic town and cultural landscape.

3. Others

According to the plans made by Suzhou City, approximately three hundred thousand residents currently live in the old city (the area surrounded by moats). Some houses are occupied by many households, which makes the living conditions of some areas particularly poor. There are thus policies for parts of the population to be relocated outside the old city. Relocation of factories is also carried out according to plans. In addition to this, re-direction of water from Lake Taihu to improve the water quality of the canals, reconstruction of walls surrounding the old city or of canals that had been filled up, are under way.

Such kinds of water purification and improvement of waterside environment are being carried out at quite a fast pace. The author would like to pay homage to these efforts made by Suzhou City.

However, there is concern that because works are carried out at such a fast pace, there is not sufficient discussion about their execution. That is to say, whether or not too many

buildings are constructed imitating the traditional landscape is questionable. To clear away this apprehension, it is necessary to conduct thorough surveys of the historic buildings and cultural landscape of the old city area, to make sufficient evaluation of what should be kept, and to carry out maintenance and development with conservation in mind. The scope of the policies of Suzhou City can be supported, but these policies should be made in full consideration for the process of planning and of execution. Moreover, in regard to the execution of these policies, setting up a joint committee of both Chinese and international experts would be most welcome.