

Lost in Translation?

Sustainable Urban Imaginaries: Changzhou Scenario





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“The growth of knowledge in the life history of a person is a result not of information transmission but of guided rediscovery ... The process of learning by guided rediscovery is most aptly conveyed by the notion of showing. To show something to someone is to cause it to be made present for the person, so that he or she can apprehend it directly, whether by looking, listening, or feeling.” (Ingold, 2001: 272)

01. INTRODUCTION

Sustainable Development is not a governance tool or a normative prescription, but a social and cultural phenomenon which is transforming the urban policy as result of social, economic, environmental, technological or governance-related pressures (Becker, T. 2015). It urges us to rethink about ourselves, our urban age and our habitation on earth.

Along the growing trend of city partnerships to tackle the development challenges, the idea of sustainable urban development is positively circulated among politics, consciously mobilized in business world, and powerfully disseminated in the circle of knowledge. Although there is the widely accepted definition from the Our Common Future report (WCED 1987), consensus on how to achieve sustainability is difficult to reach, given the diverse of social, cultural economic and climate conditions. Values and ideologies of what a future city are different for different people in different places and conditions. (Hulme, M. 2009)

The Learning City Project Changzhou – Essen attempts to explore the different urban form, policy and imaginaries, through an integrated urban planning approach, therefore promote cross-border knowledge transfer and mutual learning in the sustainable urban development (Schmidt et al. 2016).

The project is a Sino-German Initiative for an Interdisciplinary Urban Studio dealing with sustainable development in the frame of the urban industrial transformation process in China and Germany. The 2-year project is funded by the German Stiftung Mercator, in the context of the EU-China Urbanization Partnership of the city of Essen and Changzhou. The project is coordinated by the Wuppertal Institute and the China Sustainable Energy Program of the Energy Foundation. The academic project team of the Interdisciplinary Urban Studio Essen-Changzhou encompasses the experience of the Institute of City Planning and Urban Design (ISS) at



University of Duisburg - Essen as well as the School of Architecture at Southeast University in Nanjing (SEU-Arch). One of the primary premises is that a mutual learning process among the city partnerships in Germany and China can be used as a learning model in which interdisciplinary groups and practical case studies can be integrated into the educational framework of city planning (Schmidt et al. 2016).

How do the urban imaginaries shape the nature of the Essen- Changzhou sustainable urban learning? What is the model of sustainable urbanization produced and disseminated in the Project? By analyzing interviews with the key stakeholders of the Learning City Project Essen-Changzhou and the documents of the Learning City Interdisciplinary Urban Planning Studio, this study attempts to unravel the main factors of the Essen-Changzhou sustainable urbanization model. It takes the efforts to describe the role of sustainable urban imaginaries in the cross-border transfer, or rather, translation of urban policy and planning ideas in different political, cultural and social contexts.



02 . A VAGUE DESCRIPTION

Traced back to 300 years ago the forestry management in Germany (Grober, 2012), the widely accepted term of sustainable development is credited from the report *Our Common Future*, prepared by the World Commission on Environment and Development for the United Nations General Assembly. The report defined sustainable development as “development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. It “provides a framework for the integration of environment policies and development strategies” (WCED 1987). It represented a breakthrough the previous belief that ecological needs set clear limits to economic growth (Hajer 1996).

Due to its inclusiveness and ambiguity, the concept of “sustainable development” ignites different connotations or imaginaries for different groups of people, depending on their experiences, perspectives and available resources. For some, it might mean green or smart-technology interventions; for some, it might lead to compact and efficient resource planning; for some, it triggers economic reinvention, and for others, it is lifestyle and behavior change. Actually, the ability of the term to accommodate different meanings accounts greatly for its popularity worldwide (Mebratu 1998).

03 . LEARNING OF SUSTAINABLE URBANIZATION

Trans-local learning of urban policy and planning can be traced in a long history: from colonial urbanism, to Cold War ideological learning, and to contemporary neoliberal policy mobility (McFarlane 2011). Said (1983) developed the “traveling theory” to argue against the tendency of copying theories and applying them to another context as completely irrelevant. He suggested the “creative misreading” as part of a historical transfer of ideas and theories from one setting to another.

Robinson (2002) further explores the potential for a “cosmopolitan urban theory” to criticize the Western-centered production of urban theory and framing so-called developing world as irrelevant. By asking “How are the theoretical approaches changed by considering different cities and different contexts?” he urged the necessity to develop more situated knowledge on the diverse dynamics of “world cities”. “Scholars in privileged western environments will need to find responsible and ethical ways to engage with, learn from and promote the ideas of intellectuals in less privileged places.”

Trans-local learning for urban policy and planning “is place-focused but not restricted to that place”. It involves a continuing endeavor to forge and develop connections between different sources, routes and actors. (McFarlane 2011).

The efforts to learn between urban cultures raises ethical and political considerations (McFarlane 2011). In the contemporary globalized era the trans-local learning is produced more through engaging, learning and cooperating. For example, German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBWF n.d.) set up its China Strategy 2015–2020 as “cooperation in science, research and innovation”, assist to tackle the social challenges linked with China’s economic and technological growth with German technology and expertise. GIZ describes their task as to provide demand-driven, tailor-made and effective service in the field of international cooperation for sustainable development (GIZ).

To explore the sustainable urbanization model produced and circulated through the Learning City Project Essen-

Changzhou, the study refers to the conceptual framework developed by McFarlane (2011) for urban policy learning. It includes four dimensions:

1. The power at work in policy learning, i.e. the forms of power that promote, frame or structure the sustainable urban planning learning;
2. The object of learning, i.e. the solutions that the mobility of policy and planning finds to address the target problems;
3. The form of learning, i.e. the organizational nature of learning, by means of planning documents, promotional materials, workshops, lectures and best practice tours;
4. The imaginary of sustainable urban development, i.e. the image of sustainable future city that learning seeks to achieve.

3.1. The power at work in urban learning

The forms of power promote, frame or structure particular kinds of learning, when the idea of sustainable urbanization travels. In the transnational urban planning process, an idea becomes persuasive when the idea is from a widely credited authority (Allen 2003). This authority shall be the representative ambassador on the model, which makes the idea perceived valuable, feasible and relative in the context that it will be transferred.

The way the Institute of City Planning and Urban Design (ISS) at University of Duisburg-Essen and the School of Architecture at Southeast University in Nanjing (SEU-Arch) formulate the concept of the project to convince Changzhou City about the value of the idea can be revealed in a description from the interview with Prof. Jiang Hong at SEU.

“We discussed with Professor Schmidt. The main topic of the project is The urban Development in the Context of Industrial Transformation. Essen has a range of transferable experience in this term. The city transformed itself from coal, steel industry area into an award winning green city. Changzhou as a city with industry relied economy is meanwhile proud of its landscape and nature. These two cities should

be able to learn from each other. This is our strategy from the very beginning.”

As Prof. Yin Ming at SEU stated, “the pressure of urbanization and industrial transition within ecological red line” in Changzhou is the main driver of this project. The world recognized best practice city of Essen in Ruhr industrial area, awarded as the European Green Capital 2017, provides a powerful agency on formulating the learning. The academic expertise on urban studies from UDE, SEU and Wuppertal Institute provides the potential to secure the viable knowledge transfer. The participation of urban planning institutes from Essen and Changzhou provides the authoritative form of power to forge the policy learning. These form the power to promote, frame or structure the Essen-Changzhou learning process on sustainable urbanization.

3.2. The Object of Urban Learning

The idea of sustainable development through decoupling economic development and ecological pressure is widely acknowledged. But what does sustainable urbanization really mean and how to achieve it is under debate between different groups of people, with different backgrounds, expectations and available resources. What are the problems that the learning process of sustainable urbanization are trying to solve? The widely accepted *Our Common Future Report* definition does not provide the balanced solution to address the problems in different parts of the world with discrepancies of living conditions (Borowy 2017).

To discover the strategic object of the Learning City Project Essen – Changzhou is to find the answer of what particular problem Changzhou is facing “in the process of pursuing sustainable urban development” (Schmidt et al. 2016).

The interdisciplinary study to formulate the strategic proposals in Wujin District of Changzhou city has the objective of confronting social, cultural, economic and ecological challenges (Schmidt et al. 2016). During the interviews with

the key project stakeholders (List of interviewees and semi-structured questionnaire in Appendix), the word “sustainability” was not frequently used, and Our Common Future report was never mentioned. Instead, these four key objectives are identified to address the challenges in Changzhou, based on the analysis of interviews and documents: urban governance, urban form, urban socio-economic dynamics and urban ecosystem.

3.2.1. Urban governance: regional vs. global, urban development vs. common good.

With recognition of inherent differences in the socio-economic-technical structures between Essen and Changzhou, most interviewees highlighted the role of urban planning as a tool to facilitate the economic growth and public good in China. Prof. Jiang Hong described the aim of this urban learning project as the following: First, transferring German technology and know-how to facilitate the industrial transformation and economic growth in Changzhou; Second, multi-level governance under the umbrella of EU-China strategic win-win cooperation towards sustainability.

By rethinking the urban system and enhancing governance capacity such as multiple stakeholders' participation, city mutual learning can be contributive to reach the goal. Although the current institutional structures are not best fit for addressing those challenges, urban development practitioners must be willing to work cross-disciplinarily, have integrated thinking and develop cooperative urban strategy that involves the participation of multiple stakeholders and reaches the common good (Schmidt et al. 2016).

3.2.2. Urban form: regional urbanization and citizen participation.

There is general consensus among the interviewees that the dynamics of existing form of urban fabric need to be carefully studied. Prof. Jiang Hong described the situation of old town as: “When looking at the traditional street area of

Wujin, you see the organic Hutong fabrics. It is small, dense and social inclusive.” To create a livable city, the participatory approach is crucial to create the opportunity to preserve and revitalize the existing cultural, social and spatial structures (Schmidt et al. 2016).

The regeneration of brownfield in Ruhr Region into green infrastructures such as parks, sports facilities and tourist attractions provides the good practice model for revitalization of industrial areas in Changzhou (Schmidt et al. 2016).

3.2.3. Urban economy and society: transformation of urban industry

Beyond the nostalgia for traditional urban form and industrial heritage, in the interviews and documents there is strong emphasis on facilitating economic growth and development. Revitalization of the “Sunan mode”, an economic and social regional development mode which featured small and medium, civilian-owned entrepreneurs in Changzhou, is one of the key aims of urban planning. With recognition of the inherent differences between mechanics of industrial area of Ruhr Region and Changzhou, the project team developed a strategy that increases land efficiency, industry clusters and mixed-use of land to promote the upgrading and innovation of the industry (Schmidt et al. 2016).

During the interview with Dr. Dudden (EWG), he also highlighted the best practice model in Germany to tackle the aging society. Through facilitating German know-how transfer on capacity building and operating institutions, the efficiency and capacity of people-centered aged care in Changzhou will be improved. Changzhou can learn from German experience to meet their demographic challenge.

3.2.4. Urban ecosystem: water resource management as blue infrastructure.

This object of sustainable urbanization is intended to integrate the water resource management with the landscape and urban planning in Changzhou. Part of the water

system in Changzhou has been irreversibly impacted by the rapid industrialization and urbanization, and becomes totally fragmented, polluted and disconnected from the local inhabitants. The strategies developed by the project teams aimed to rebuild economic, cultural and social connections between city, water and people. Therefore to create common goods, improve the life quality and revitalize the overall region (Schmidt et al. 2016).

In the interviews, ecological modernization of river Emscher as a “blue infrastructure model” (WIKUE 2013) to create a new space for innovative enterprises, sustainable lifestyles and cultural development is particularly highlighted as a best practice model.

3.3. Form: the organizational nature of learning

The dissemination and syncretion of ideas about sustainable urbanization are through wide range of procedures and materials. These include: urban planning documents, research projects, conferences, workshops, journals, best practice models, study trips, business-led technological promotions, consensus-building media and think-tanks (McFarlane 2011).

The planning document produced by the interdisciplinary urban studio Essen-Changzhou provide the structured and comprehensive description of the stakeholders' perceptions on sustainability. Ideas of how to achieve sustainable urban development are integrated into the strategies throughout the document. The text, sketches, diagrams and collages outline the features of sustainable urbanization and endeavor to regionalize the sustainable urban model for Changzhou. It contributes a considerable inspiration on future urban development of Wujin district in Changzhou. (Schmidt et al. 2016).

Promotional website and press release are produced to communicate with the broader publicity. For example, be-

side the webpage at Southeast University, a report on the Sino-German Interdisciplinary Studio for Sustainable Urban Development was contributed to the China Urban Planning website portal (Urban Planning Society Of China 2016). They are often featured with the attractive photos of good practice examples and stakeholders posing photos. They reiterate the learning process of the sustainable urban practice models.

Sustainable Urbanization policy and planning ideas are embedded into forms which are designed to facilitate the knowledge transfer, for example books, journals, lectures and conferences. Among them, good practice database, compiled by the international organizations or governments play a substantial role in formulating sustainable urbanization models. One example is the European Green Capital Award (EGCA), a European Commission initiation to promote “environmentally friendly urban living” role models. Through its own environmental parameters, EGCA evaluate the urban environmental policies of European cities and promote the best practice models worldwide. This platform contributes to forge the place-based practice into a sustainable urbanization model and facilitate the urban learning in Europe and around the world. For the city of Essen, as prof. Jiang Hong described in the interview, the award of European Green Capital (2017) formulating a model endeavoring to transform itself beyond an industrial history to a ‘Green City’, plays a defining role in the process of Essen-Changzhou sustainable urban learning.

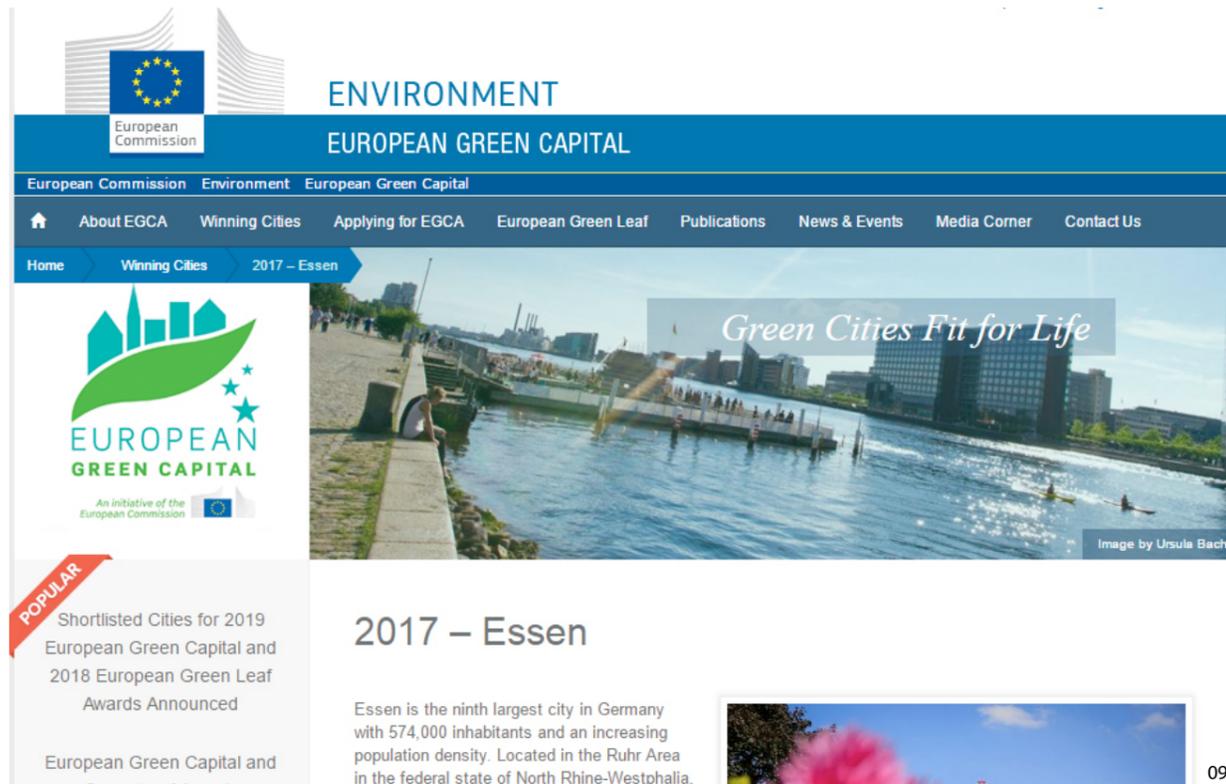


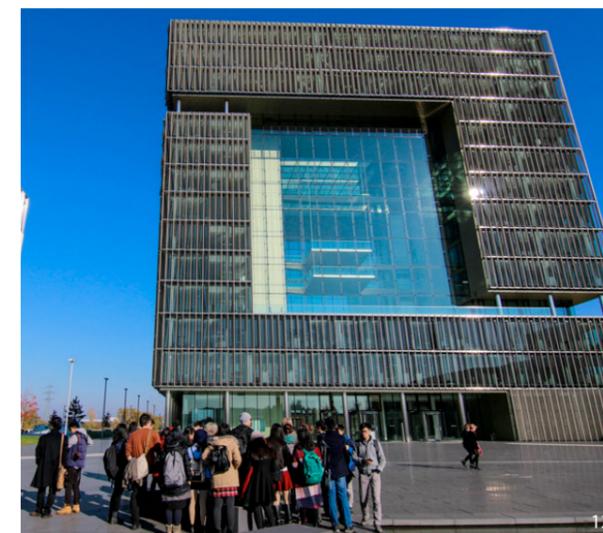
Figure.1 extract from the EGCA best practice database. (European Commission 2015)

Another significant form of sustainable urbanization learning is the study tour (Harris and Moore 2013). Figure 2 is drawn from the website of Urban Planning Society Of China promoting the Learning City project. Zhou Yijing, a participant from SEU described her experience: "During the study journey in Essen, I understood German context better. What we thought that could not happen in China before turned out to be general things in which values were shared by the public. Voices for city projects from various stakeholders are allowed to be heard, and most importantly, through platforms city planners create."

Study tour has long been a learning form to facilitate urban policy learning (Montero 2016) and had been commissioned by international organizations such as GIZ, the World Bank and ICLEI. Through guided on-site discovery, the study tour seeks to focus the attention of key urban policy actors and decision-makers in one particular urban issues by showing them in practice how another city dealt with it (Montero 2016).



Figure 2. Study tours of Learning City project group



3.4. The imaginary of sustainable urbanization

The imaginary of sustainable urbanization is the vision of what a sustainable future city should be, through which the urban learning should achieve. The imaginaries are represented and disseminated through the forms discussed

above. The following list includes the sustainable urban imaginaries described in the Essen-Changzhou Learning City project.

| Group | Description | Key Words of Imaginary |
|--------------|--|--|
| Urban System | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide solutions to the current challenges. • Reformulate the existing planning strategies by starting at the grassroots level and to develop a cooperative strategy that involves the participation of multiple stakeholders | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Livable, • Economic growth supportive • Multi-stakeholders cooperative • Mixed-used • Community supportive • Cultural identity • Small and slow • Efficient |
| The Old City | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repair and improve the “old machine” in order to keep it running, thus raising the awareness for the cultural heritage it entails and preserving the delicate social and spatial structures. • Reactivate the district by identifying its potential and integrating this potential in order to benefit from the Old Town and the surrounding areas, as well as improving the quality of life in both districts. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural inherited • Social cohesive • Old town upgraded and modernized • Urban heritage preserved • Community supportive • Stakeholders participative • Innovative and productive |
| Sunan Mode | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote the upgrading and innovation of the factories by developing a strategy that increases land efficiency, industry clusters and mixed-use of land. • Pursue the activation of vacant spaces and creation of public spaces by developing strategies for the implementation of productive and sustainable green urban landscapes in order to rethink the urban-rural duality. • Activate local inhabitants and their talents by providing a suitable empowering framework and by initiating the first sparks of urban catalysts with the expectation that the community will determine how to use and direct their talents. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local SME based • Innovative • Stakeholder participative • Industrial upgrading • Mixed-used • Urban-rural integrated • Locally productive and innovative |
| Urban Water | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise the awareness of water and to reintegrate it into the urban system, while functioning as an environmental model for the whole city. • Establish a relation between industrial production and ecological agriculture on the basis of community. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental friendly living • Blue infrastructure • Bio-diversity |

Table 1. Description of sustainable urbanization in the planning document of Essen-Changzhou Learning City project.

The Table 1 shows that it is relatively strong tendency to instil on the image of a multiple-stakeholder inclusive, community supportive, industry transformed and ecological modernized city. The imaginaries is hierarchically compatible with the

European or German discourse of sustainable urbanization through which the urban learning should achieve. The imaginaries are represented and disseminated through the forms discussed.

04. DISCUSSION

The model of sustainable urbanization circulated in the Learning City Project Changzhou – Essen is analyzed from four dimensions: The power at work is a combination of the best practice (as the socio-economic-ecological promise of a modern livable city) and authoritative power (like experts and institutions). The object of learning is to entail a discourse of solidarity, equality and ecological modernization. The form of learning is through reading, lecturing and experiencing the best practice of urban transformation in Ruhr area. The imaginary at work is that of a multiple-stakeholder inclusive, community supportive, ecological modernized city, which is more or less familiar under the European or German eyes.

How can the model of sustainable urbanization where German technologies and know-how serve as the main reference point shape the urban change in China? What is lost in the process of translating urban imaginaries from Essen to Changzhou?

The Learning City project attempts to develop a regional-problem-based model of sustainable urban development. While the principles discussed in the model are similar as what are dominantly disseminated in Europe. Certain approaches are widely introduced and place-based good practices are repeatedly referenced and revisited.

The Changzhou strategies developed during the project promises that a well-planned city can have positive relation-

ship between socio-environmental system and economic growth. This reflects the mainstream narratives of sustainable development to provide an efficient, inclusive and eco-friendly urbanization. The flexible and dynamic nature of “Sustainable Development” narratives makes it more important to consider capacities and possibilities in a specific context. That is why “a focus upon comparison as a translation strategy of multiplying the knowledges and lines of inquiry through which urbanism is learnt is crucial” (McFarlane 2011).

For McFarlane, the success of the traveling urban policy and planning ideas lies in the comparative learning through local histories and policy contexts. There is a need to learn as close as possible the work of local thinkers, the economic, political and social history, the potentials and the available resources in the local places. It means to open up the ‘black-box’ of the best-practice examples and resemble the key actors of the globally circulated model into the local context. How is the European scenario of stakeholder participation translated into Chinese social structure and institutional environment? “It calls for the deeper understanding of history and capacities in both societies”, commented Prof. Jiang Hong. Indeed, we need to carefully study the socio-economic differences in order to find out the translation strategy through which the sustainable urbanization is learnt, beyond the “creative misunderstanding”.

Appendix 1. Interviewees

| Name | Organization |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Dr. Chun Xia-Bauer | Wuppertal Institute |
| Thomas Fink | Wuppertal Institute |
| Prof. Dr. J. Alexander Schmidt | Institute of City Planning and Urban Design at University of Duisburg-Essen |
| Jiang Hong (江泓) | School of Architecture at Southeast University |
| Yin Ming (殷铭) | School of Architecture at Southeast University |
| Dr. Dietmar DÜdden | Director, Business Development Corporation (EWG), City of Essen |

Appendix 2. Tentative Interview Questionnaire

| Narratives of Sustainable Urbanization |
|--|
| 1. How do you describe the path of your professional development? What influence you the most in your career path? (person, media, education, experience...) |
| 2. How do you describe the trajectory of sustainable development in Germany / China? What are the most important milestones in the history, which shape the path of sustainable development in Germany / China? |
| 3. What has been your approach to urban planning? What are the key words in this approach? How is it different from 20 years ago? |
| Learning Process |
| 4. In your professional experience, from which projects (best-practice) did your learn a lot, therefore shaped the approach of your practice today? And in the Learning City project? |
| 5. How do you learn and share the concepts and strategies of sustainable urbanization from international scene (market), for example: media, conference, good-practice tour...? |
| Translating Urban Imaginaries |
| 6. Who are stakeholders of this project? What are their expectations through the project? |
| 7. What do you think are the drivers of a “sustainable” urban planning project in Germany / China? What are the key factors that drive the relative decision makers to decide (or accept) towards the sustainable urban planning / design? |
| 8. Did the key stakeholders mention any best-practice to explain their vision? Which aspects about the best-practice model did they mention, why? |
| 9. What are the reasons that transnational or city-city urban partnership are established? What specialties or knowledge can each side offer to the other? |
| 10. What are the major concerns in the project? (economic, social, environmental, technological, political) |
| 11. What happened to the result of planning and design? Which parts are actually being accepted and what are not, why? |

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Gloria Gaviria: 06, 07, 08, 09,13

The Learning City. Narratives and Scenarios for Wujin

District in Changzhou:

Grow your City: 01, 03

Connecting Neighborhoods – Inviting People: 02

Keep The Machine Going: 04

Agnes Jacquin: 05

SEU-Arch: 10, 11, 12

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