

URBAN RENEWAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE IN DATONG: A PATH TOWARD SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

The revitalisation of the historic city centre of Datong in Shanxi Province, China, is a complex process of heritage protection, economic modernisation, and social transformation. In the 21st century, urban revitalisation projects were developed and implemented to rebuild the ancient city walls, restore historic spaces, and promote tourism as a driver of local development. These initiatives improved the city's image and infrastructure, but also presented numerous challenges related to authenticity, resettlement, and sustainable management. Datong was chosen as a case study because of its importance as an example of an industrial city transformed into a cultural and tourist centre. The study utilised terminological analysis and a literature review using databases such as Web of Science, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). In situ observations were also employed, allowing the authors to explore socio-spatial processes. The study situates Datong within the broader context of the evolution of urban revitalisation in China, from centralised to pluralistic, stakeholder-based governance. Understanding the complexity of these processes can provide a point of reference for other countries seeking a balance between heritage protection and contemporary development.

Keywords: urban revitalisation, Datong, cultural heritage, sustainable development, urban renewal, heritage conservation

INTRODUCTION

Revitalisation is a complex process encompassing spatial, social, cultural, and economic transformations. Culture-based urban renewal and urban revitalisation are being promoted worldwide. Cultural heritage is an important element in understanding a region's history and culture, as well as an embodiment of regional culture. Investing in resources and developing cultural heritage can bring numerous benefits to the environment, economy, and society. As Sheng, Liao, Xiong, Zhu and Cheung (2022) point out, numerous studies indicate that the activation and development of heritage are linked to the social environment. Authenticity is crucial for defining a historic landscape. As UNESCO pointed out in 2011, integrity and authenticity also require appropriate knowledge and planning tools. In recent years, the city of Datong, located in Shanxi Province, has become one of the most prominent examples of historic urban centre revitalisation projects in China. Datong has a rich history, stretching from the ancient settlement of Pingcheng – a strategically located city – through its

development during the Ming and Qing dynasties, to its rapid industrialisation in the 20th century. Throughout its history, the city has served as an administrative, defensive, and commercial centre, reflected in its urban planning and historic monuments. Major challenges arose with the coal industry, which became a dominant economic factor (Xue, Zhang, Sun, Sun & Yang, 2021). Intensive industrialisation led to challenges in air quality and the condition of urban spaces. In the early 21st century, the authorities began a transformation toward heritage tourism, culminating in the revitalisation of the old town, the main stage of which was completed in 2016. This involved the reconstruction of the city walls and buildings in a historical style, a subject of discussion in academic literature. These activities enhanced the attractiveness of the space, but, as some researchers note, they also highlighted challenges related to preserving the authenticity of the heritage and the social continuity of the site (Audin, 2020; Lei & Zhou, 2022). The formal reconstruction process of Datong began around 2008, when the decision was made to reconstruct the central area of the city, including the city walls and historically styled buildings. The goal of these activities was to renew the urban fabric, improve the quality of life for residents, and develop tourism. The idea was to create a new identity for the city – a centre of cultural heritage in Shanxi Province. At the same time, the project sparked discussions about the authenticity and social consequences of revitalisation, as well as changes in the structure of the local economy. The aim of this article is to analyse the decisions made, the means used, the goals achieved, and the long-term effects of the revitalisation process, using the example of the Chinese city of Datong. The discussion places particular emphasis on discussing the decisions made and the new direction of sustainable design adopted after 2016, focused on ecology and identity.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The city selection criterion was its significance as a case study in the transformation of an industrial city into a cultural and tourist centre. Datong (Shanxi Province, China) was chosen for its long history, diverse urban fabric, and extensive revitalisation efforts. It is also a representative example of China's approach to revitalising historic city centres, combining urban, social, and cultural aspects. This article utilises terminology analysis to systematise key concepts related to revitalisation, cultural heritage, and sustainable urban development. A literature review was conducted using the following databases: Web of Science, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). The research was immersive in nature; the authors observed the space in situ and analysed the social, economic, and societal processes occurring within it. The collected materials are supplemented by the authors' own photographs. The research approach is characterised by an interdisciplinary approach, combining urban planning, architectural, sociological, cultural, pro-ecological, and revitalisation aspects. The results and discussion section provides a spatial analysis of Datong's revitalisation efforts, a discussion of the social and economic impact of the transformation, and a discussion of heritage authenticity. The paper concludes with key findings regarding the effectiveness and limitations of revitalisation as an urban strategy.

RESULTS

Literature and terminology analysis

The Latin phrase "*re + vita*" literally means "to bring back to life", "to revitalise." The term "revitalisation" refers to activities carried out in existing urban areas. Revitalisation activities include the reconstruction of cities, old centres, degraded areas, and the restructuring of post-industrial and post-military areas. The Polish Revitalisation Act of 9 October 2015 defines revitalisation as the process of lifting degraded areas from a state of crisis, conducted comprehensively through integrated actions for the local community, space, and economy, focused on a territorial basis, and led by revitalisation stakeholders based on a municipal revitalisation program.

Stakeholders include, in particular, residents, owners, and perpetual usufructuaries of real estate (Ustawa z dnia 9 października 2015 r. o rewitalizacji). Revitalisation effects can also be achieved through surprise, culture, new technology, beauty, outstanding creative achievements, originality, magnificence, or splendour. The goal of urban renewal is harmonious and multifaceted development achieved by adapting old resources to new needs. The result is improved living conditions, the conservation of resources, and the integration of historic and contemporary buildings. The concept of renewal is the overarching definition. Revalorisation involves restoring the former value and appearance of neglected structures, as well as restoring the building to its original condition at the time of construction. Rehabilitation, a term frequently used in France, denotes the recovery of degraded buildings. This process may include: supplementing social infrastructure, stimulating the organisational forms of life and the personal activity of residents, renovations, and modernisations. Reconstruction is the restoration of the historic state based on existing documentation. These activities aim to remodel and introduce new elements into existing buildings while preserving the existing spatial layouts. The term “reconstruction” refers to the restoration or re-erection of something that has been destroyed. Modernisation is the modernisation and improvement of something. Renovation is the act of renovating or refreshing a building, for example, a façade.

The industrial revolution led to an increased demand for fossil fuel energy, and by the late 1960s, people began to pay attention to emerging environmental problems (Du, Wang & Feng, 2023). Rapid demographic and economic growth, along with the urbanisation trend of the 21st century, has led researchers and practitioners to incorporate environmental factors into urban development. The Chinese central and local governments are initiators of the development of sustainable cities. In 1994, the Chinese government adopted Agenda 21 (adopted at the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro), and the following year, sustainable development was recognised as the country’s core strategy (Zhan, De Jong & De Bruijn, 2018). In 2015, the United Nations proposed Agenda 2030, marking a turning point in the global commitment to sustainable development. Implementing the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) described in the document relies on the cooperation of governments around the world and requires the involvement of many stakeholders (Zhou & Dai, 2024). Chmielewski (2010) emphasises that sustainable development should maintain a balance between the needs of current and future generations. He also points to the necessity of interdependence between economic needs and environmental protection needs (Chmielewski, 2010). Sustainable construction involves limiting the negative impact of construction on the environment while simultaneously striving to improve the quality of life (Piętocha, Li & Koda, 2025). Architects and urban planners worldwide should protect the ecosystem and maintain key resources (Piętocha, 2024).

History of Datong

Present-day Datong, historically known as Pingcheng (平城), was a settlement of strategic importance in ancient times, but its prosperity began only after it was established as the capital of the Northern Wei Dynasty around 398 AD. Located in a basin surrounded by the Hengshan Mountains, the city was fortified with rammed-earth walls and planned along a North-South axis, with a clear division between palace and residential areas. This layout combined Chinese urban traditions with elements of steppe culture, reflecting the origins of the Northern Wei rulers. After the capital was moved to Luoyang (494 AD), Pingcheng lost its political significance, but its structure and fortifications became a model for later cities in northern China. During this time, the city retained its strategic role as a defensive point on China’s northern border, protecting the empire from nomadic raids and controlling trade routes toward Mongolia throughout the Tang Dynasty (618–907) (Guo, 2019). During the Liao Dynasty (907–1125) and Jin Dynasty (1115–1234), Datong gradually regained its position in the region. Parts of the fortifications were rebuilt, and new city quarters were incorporated into the urban plan. During the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), Datong became a major trading centre on the route, connecting China’s agricultural zones with the steppe regions (Zhang, 2010). During the Ming

Dynasty (1368–1644), the city walls were completely reconstructed and completed in 1372, giving the city its rectangular layout, largely preserved to this day (Lu, 2014). The walls, with their four main gates, were part of the empire's extensive defensive policy against invasions from the north (Zhang, 2010). Thanks to its location on military and trade routes, Datong once again became a significant administrative and commercial centre. It retained this position during the last Chinese dynasty, the Qing (1644–1911). In the 20th century, Datong developed into one of China's major mining cities, dominated by the coal industry and a railway infrastructure connecting the city with Beijing and Tianjin (Gu, Wu & Xie, 2022).

The aim of revitalisation

The process of transforming Datong into an industrial centre was linked to the recognition of Shanxi Province as one of China's most important mining regions. After 1949, with the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Datong became a priority centre for industrialisation in northern China. The development of mining, energy, and transportation infrastructure (railways connecting the city with Beijing and Tianjin) contributed to the city's dynamic growth, earning it the nickname China's "coal heartland" (Lei, 2022). In the following decades, until the 1980s, Datong based its economy on coal mining and processing, which shaped its spatial and social structure. Industrialisation fostered the development of workers' settlements and population growth, while simultaneously posing new challenges for environmental protection and residents' quality of life (He, 2018). Since the 1990s, as a result of falling global coal prices, rising mining costs, and economic reforms that limited state subsidies, Datong's existing model has gradually begun to lose its stability. This led to a period of serious economic and social hardship, including rising unemployment, population migration, and deteriorating environmental quality (Gu et al., 2022). Furthermore, poor air quality and deteriorating urban spaces have contributed to the perception of Datong as a site facing challenges related to industrialisation and environmental protection (Audin, 2020). As a result, the city was included in the national resource-based cities transformation programme, the aim of which was to diversify the economy and reshape Datong from a mining centre to a centre for cultural tourism, heritage, and green energy (Gu et al., 2022). This project was part of a broader strategy of the Chinese municipal authorities, combining urban renewal with the promotion of heritage and historical aesthetics as a means of economic revitalisation, improving the city's image, and attracting investors and tourists. In the case of Datong, revitalisation was not only a material process but also a tool for redefining urban identity – transitioning from a "coal city" to a "heritage city". As a result, since the late 2000s, Datong has consistently promoted itself as a "city of historical renaissance", whose space evokes the aesthetics of former dynasties and supports the construction of a new urban identity (Audin, 2020; Lei & Zhou, 2022). Implementing Datong's revitalisation programme involved extensive spatial, economic, and social measures. Following the collapse of the mining sector in the 1990s, caused by the collapse of many mines due to falling commodity prices and reduced state subsidies, the city was included in the government's resource-based cities restructuring programme. Within this framework, central and local authorities conducted a process of planned closure of unprofitable coal mines and the consolidation of mining enterprises, aimed at diversifying the economic structure and reducing the industry's negative impact on the natural environment (National Development and Reform Commission [NDRC], 2013; He, 2018; Gu et al., 2022). The second step, constituting the most visible aspect of the spatial transformation, was the extensive reconstruction of the city centre. Between 2008 and 2016, modernisation and urban transformation were carried out, eliminating post-war and industrial buildings to create space for a new spatial layout (Lei, 2022). As Lei and Zhou note, these activities were a comprehensive reconstruction, aimed at creating an urban space that corresponded to contemporary notions of a "traditional Chinese city". The centrepiece of the programme was the reconstruction of the city walls and the creation of the so-called new old city – a stylised urban space reflecting the architecture of the Ming and Qing dynasties. The project included the reconstruction of four

city gates, the construction of new watchtowers, and streets with an axial layout consistent with the principles of classical Chinese urbanism (Lei & Zhou, 2022). This undertaking significantly improved the city's visual image and became an important element of its tourism promotion. However, as some researchers emphasise, it sparks debate about the relationship between the aestheticisation of the past and the authenticity of heritage (Audin, 2020).

Effects of Datong's revitalisation

The Datong revitalisation programme has yielded complex and multifaceted results, encompassing both significant achievements and diverse opinions regarding its impact. From an urban planning and aesthetic perspective, the project significantly improved the quality of public space and urban infrastructure. The reconstruction of the city walls (Fig. 1), street revitalisation (Fig. 2), improved transportation systems, and the introduction of modern infrastructure solutions have raised the standard of living of residents and strengthened the attractiveness of the city's central areas. The revitalisation also had a significant impact on Datong's image – Datong was promoted as a “city of heritage”, and the renovated city centre became a showcase for Shanxi Province and an example of China's cultural tourism development policy (Lei & Zhou, 2022). The revitalisation positively influenced the diversification of the local economy. Increased investment in the service and tourism sectors contributed to the creation of new jobs, particularly in the hotel, restaurant, and cultural sectors (He, 2018). Combined with actions to limit coal mining, these initiatives improved air quality and environmental conditions, which was one of the long-term goals of the transformation (Gu et al., 2022). The preservation of material heritage was also of particular importance in the revitalisation process of Datong. During the revitalisation process, some authentic historic buildings, such as the Huayan Temple Complex (Fig. 3) and the Shanhua Pagoda, were placed under conservation protection and incorporated into the new urban layout as key cultural heritage landmarks (Wang, 2020). At the same time, many former urban structures, especially from the post-war period, were demolished and rebuilt in a historical style, often using modern materials and construction techniques. As Lei notes, the result was a “city with a dual identity” – combining authentic monuments with newly constructed, stylised structures. This was one of the long-term goals of the transformation (Gu et al., 2022; Lei & Zhou, 2022).



Fig. 1. Datong city walls, 2024

Source: photos by the authors.



Fig. 2. Datong in 2024: Qipan Street area – example of a stylised structure (a) and one of the restored streets of Datong Old Town (b)

Source: photos by the authors.

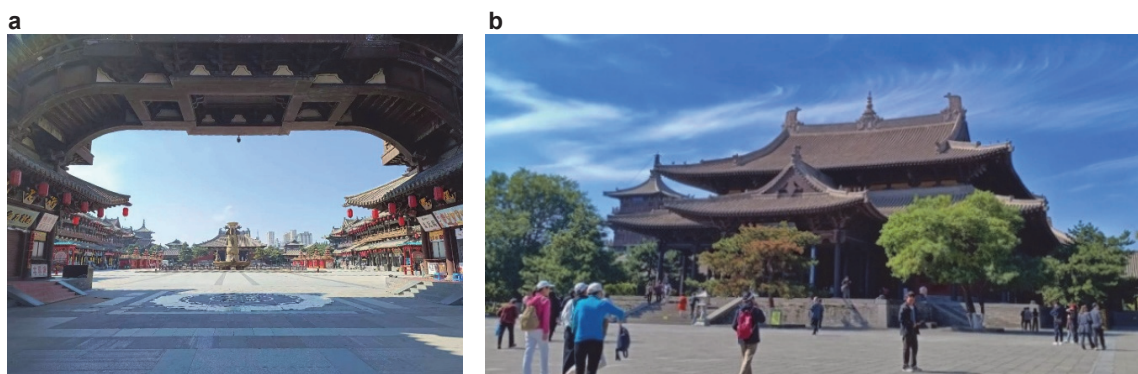


Fig. 3. Huayan Temple in 2024: view of the restored square (a) view on the surroundings – new, stylised buildings were built around the monument (b)

Source: photos by the authors.

At the same time, some newly created spaces remained underpopulated (in the literature, this phenomenon is referred to as ghost towns). This is due to high maintenance costs and limited resident influx. This phenomenon has highlighted the challenges associated with spatial reconstruction projects based primarily on aesthetics (Lei & Zhou, 2022). From a cultural perspective, revitalisation has contributed to strengthening heritage awareness and promoting local culture, but it has also sparked an academic debate on the concept of authenticity. Audin and Wang note that the case of Datong can be interpreted as an example of the “aestheticisation of history” and “managed heritage”. Despite emerging tensions and debates, Datong’s revitalisation is considered an important urban planning experiment on a national scale, demonstrating the potential of integrating heritage protection with the development of tourism and the urban economy (Audin, 2020; Wang, 2020).

DISCUSSION

Revitalisation in the People's Republic of China

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the country has achieved significant success in economic development, environmental improvement, infrastructure construction, and poverty alleviation. Urban revitalisation has played a significant role in China's economic development and continues to evolve with the changing needs of urban development. As Zhu, Song, and Bai emphasise, by the end of the 20th century, the real estate market became a key driver of urban revitalisation. In the 1990s, a series of regulations and laws were widely adopted that initiated urban revitalisation. Simultaneously, local governments published policies encouraging social capital to invest in urban revitalisation (Zhu, Song & Bai, 2024). Xie, Zheng, Zhai, Yuan and Qiming (2024) emphasise that China's urbanisation process is currently in a transition phase – from rapid to slow growth – and urban revitalisation is one of the fundamental mechanisms for achieving sustainable urban development in China, receiving considerable attention. Revitalisation promotes the reuse of abandoned buildings and land, improves energy efficiency and the natural environment, and engages multiple stakeholders. However, conflicting interests can lead to social risks (Xie et al., 2024). Chen, Zhou, Huang and Ye (2021) divide urban revitalisation in China into four stages, resulting from the perspective of governance. They specify: unitary governance, binary governance, tripartite governance, and pluralistic co-governance (Chen et al., 2021). In the literature, neighbourhood regeneration is referred to as “urban revitalisation”, “urban renewal”, or “urban regeneration” (Zabielaitė-Skirmantė, Burinskienė & Maliene, 2023).

The example of Datong, 2008–2016

Despite its ambitious goals and visual successes, Datong's revitalisation programme became the subject of intense debate in academic, media, and social circles. Discussions focused primarily on the authenticity of the recreated urban space. Many of the reconstructed old city quarters were built from scratch, using modern technologies and materials, which, as Lei and Zhou note (2022), gave them a symbolic rather than historical character. This approach is sometimes referred to as “heritage aestheticisation”, in which the historic form serves a representative and educational function, not necessarily reflecting the original urban fabric or serving as a carrier of the memory of the place (Lei & Zhou, 2022). From a social perspective, the Datong revitalisation process involved the relocation of residents and the transformation of local neighbourhood structures. The relocation of people to new, peripheral neighbourhoods entailed adaptation challenges, changing existing social relationships, and changing daily lifestyles (He, 2018). As Audin notes (2020), these activities led to the creation of a “dual city” system, encompassing a representative part dominated by tourism and residential functions, where the daily lives of residents are concentrated. Economically, the project required significant financial outlays, primarily from loans and public funds, which led to a burden on the city budget (Wang, 2020). Public debate suggested that these funds could have been used, for example, to improve social conditions, education, or industrial modernisation (Gu et al., 2022). At the same time, supporters of the project emphasised its long-term value – building the city's image, cultural tourism, and improving the living environment (Lei & Zhou, 2022).

New directions for Datong's development after 2016

After 2016, after analysing the experience of the previous revitalisation phase and facing new financial constraints, the Datong authorities began redefining the city's development strategy. The focus shifted from monumental reconstruction to the protection of authentic tangible and intangible heritage. New city plans, aligned with the guidelines of the National Cultural Heritage Administration, emphasise the importance of preserving the original substance of historical monuments and integrating heritage protection into the life of the contemporary city (Wang, 2020).



Fig. 4. The UNESCO World Heritage Sites of the Shanxi Province in 2024: Yungang Grottoes, mostly built between 460–525 during the Northern Wei Dynasty, located about 17 km northwest of Datong City (a), and Hanging Temple, located about 80 km southeast of Datong City (b)

Source: photos by authors.

Local authorities are placing greater emphasis on the conservation and adaptation of existing sites, such as the Huayan and Shanhua temple complexes and the historic streets near the former city walls, rather than their complete reconstruction (Lei, 2022). Simultaneously, a number of initiatives were introduced for sustainable tourism development and revitalisation through culture. This strategy assumed a shift from mass tourism to quality tourism, focusing on authentic experiences, local culture, and ecology. Projects such as the Datong Cultural Green Belt and the Cultural Revitalisation through Heritage programme promote the integration of tourism with education and environmental protection (Gu et al., 2022). The city government, in collaboration with universities and community organisations, is also developing green energy and sustainable infrastructure initiatives, striving to connect cultural heritage with a modern low-carbon economy (He, 2018). This new approach is based on the belief that true revitalisation is not simply about restoring form but also about restoring the meaning and social function of a place. As Lei and Zhou emphasise (2022), the shift in urban policy in Datong represents a shift from “symbolic reconstruction” to “living heritage”, in which heritage becomes an integral element of residents’ identity and daily life.

CONCLUSIONS

The case of Datong has become a point of reference for a broader reflection on contemporary understandings of heritage in China. It has revealed the existing tensions between authenticity and representativeness, between economic development and social integration, and between cultural identity policy and economic realities. Datong can be seen as a kind of laboratory for the Chinese approach to heritage – a place where history has been integrated with spatial planning processes and the city’s image strategy. More broadly, revitalisation in China demonstrates the complexity of the relationship between the state, local community, and the market. The evolution from unitary governance to pluralistic co-governance reflects the gradual integration of more stakeholders into planning processes. As the pace of urbanisation slows, the importance of spatial quality, heritage, and sustainable development is clearly increasing, making revitalisation one of the key tools

of 21st-century urban policy. Research on Chinese methods of managing urban revitalisation, its successes, and its challenges, can provide a benchmark for other countries seeking a balance between heritage protection and modernisation. The case of Datong's revitalisation, based on its cultural heritage, could become a catalyst for the transformation of post-industrial cities worldwide. Future efforts should focus on the need for interdisciplinary action, public participation, and integrating revitalisation issues with a long-term regional development strategy. All projects and implementations should be conducted in accordance with the principles of sustainable development.

Authors' contributions

Conceptualisation: A.P. and M.O.G.; methodology: A.P.; validation: A.P. and M.O.G.; formal analysis: A.P. and M.O.G.; investigation: A.P. and M.O.G.; resources: A.P. and M.O.G.; data curation: A.P. and M.O.G.; writing – original draft preparation: A.P. and M.O.G.; writing – review and editing: A.P. and M.O.G.; visualisation: A.P. and M.O.G.; supervision: A.P.; project administration: A.P.; funding acquisition: A.P.

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ODNOWA MIEJSKA I DZIEDZICTWO KULTUROWE W DATONGU: DROGA DO ROZWOJU ZRÓWNOWAŻONEGO W CHINACH

STRESZCZENIE

Rewitalizacja historycznego centrum miasta Datong w prowincji Shanxi w Chinach jest złożonym procesem ochrony dziedzictwa, modernizacji gospodarczej i transformacji społecznej kraju. W XXI wieku opracowano i zrealizowano rewitalizacje miejskie mające na celu odbudowę starożytnych murów miejskich, odrestaurowanie przestrzeni zabytkowych i promowanie turystyki jako siły napędowej rozwoju lokalnego. Wymienione inicjatywy poprawiły wizerunek i infrastrukturę miasta, choć proces wiązał się z wieloma wyzwaniami dotyczącymi autentyczności, przesiedleń i zrównoważonego sposobu zarządzania. Datong wybrano jako studium przypadku ze względu na jego reprezentatywność – miasto przemysłowe przekształcone w ośrodek kulturalny i turystyczny. W badaniu wykorzystano analizę terminologiczną, przeprowadzono przegląd literatury z wykorzystaniem baz danych, takich jak: Web of Science, Google Scholar, ResearchGate i China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). Zastosowano również obserwacje in situ – pozwalającą autorkom na eksplorację procesów społeczno-przestrzennych. Badanie sytuuje Datong w szerszej perspektywie ewolucji rewitalizacji miast w Chinach – od scentralizowanego do pluralistycznego sposobu zarządzania opartego na interesariuszach. Zrozumienie złożoności procesów może stanowić punkt odniesienia dla innych krajów poszukujących równowagi pomiędzy ochroną dziedzictwa a współczesną zabudową.

Słowa kluczowe: rewitalizacja miejska, Datong, dziedzictwo kulturowe, rozwój zrównoważony, odnowa miejska, ochrona dziedzictwa