Who are we?: The rediscovery of the Hong Kong identities in the disappearing architecture

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Abstract:

The return of the Hong Kong sovereignty back to China in 1997 provides a timely case study to explore how the sudden change of identity of a place is de/re/constructed through the contested architectural space. We theorize that architecture is a sign that is read and interpreted through which its functions and meanings are evoked in the context of social, political, economic changes of the place. This paper analyzes this identity construction discourse in the landscape of architecture in Hong Kong. We examine how the decision making and the process of de/re/constructing two contested architectural sites (the Queen’s Pier and the Wan Chai Market) for city redevelopment reflect the convoluted relations between the national identity (China) and local identities (Hong Kong). Series of protests, including hunger strike, could not save the Queen’s Pier which bears heavy colonial sentiment and was demolished in 2008. The people won the case for the outdoor Wan Chai Market but the Bauhaus style indoor market could not survive. The paper argues that the final fate of the two sites is a result of a series of political struggle between the state and the citizens. The analysis of the negotiation of the identities is based on the views reported and portrayed in the media such as news, films, video clips on YouTube, the printed materials for the protests, the court decisions, and author’s interviews in the field. Through the close comparison of the discourse of these two cases, we can gain a valuable insight into the intertwining relation between ethno-cultural identity and architecture, and the paper concludes: 1) architecture provides an excellent symbolic and visual testimony to document the fluidity of place identity construction; and 2) the dynamics of identity searching reveals the complex issues of place representation and the ownership of the city.

Key Words: ethno-cultural identity, architecture, place making, Hong Kong

Introduction

“Constructed in 1937, the Wan Chai Market at 264 Queen's Road is one of the oldest wet markets in Hong Kong. It has been listed as a Grade III History Building, and is believed to be one of the two remaining Bauhaus-style markets in the world.” (Yeung, April 10, 2007)

“…the outrageous mutilation of the much-loved, unique and historic Wan Chai market [sic], with the so-called preservation scheme - building a monstrous 148-metre-high residential tower on top of it. Of all the historic buildings and areas in Wan Chai, the one building and area that absolutely should have been conserved properly is the historic Bauhaus-style market, with its marvellous interior spaces, its form which so well fits the site, the collective memory of generations of Wan Chai and other Hong Kong people….” (Borthwick, January 13, 2008)
Wan Chai Market at 264 Queen’s Road is one of the kind? Much-loved, unique? Marvelous interior spaces? The collective memory of generations of Wan Chai and other Hong Kong people? I myself attended secondary school in this area for three years in the early 1970s. I passed this structure numerous times, alone and with schoolmates. This Bauhaus style market was known to the residents in the area who acknowledged that the structure was unique, but much loved? Far from. It was seen as an unwelcoming market. People complained its dim interior and the trapped smell inside. Preference was given to the outdoor street market next to it. At the time, the architectural style of this market was not in the everyday vocabulary, not to mention the concepts of collective memory, conservation and preservation. What magic does this structure have that suddenly turned the indoor market into the spotlight in the eyes of many Hong Kong people when it was going to be demolished for high-rise residential building? This paper does not focus this market alone. This is only one of many pieces of architecture that have drawn “noises” particularly in the post-colonial Hong Kong. The heated conservation battle of Wan Chai Market is not an isolated and incidental case.

Another place that drew “noises” is Queen’s pier. I personally have relatively strong attachment not to this particular pier per se but the City Hall that was adjacent to the pier. There was a public space between the pier and the City Hall. The City Hall was officially in use in 1962. Its lower block which is next to the pier has been hosting many concerts, art festivals and exhibitions. A Chinese restaurant and a cafe there entertain many guests. A memorial garden is situated between the high block and the lower block which is on the south side of the site. The lower block once housed one of the biggest public libraries in Hong Kong, and still functions as libraries for different purposes from the 2nd floor to the top 11th floor. The 1st floor is the office for Marriage Registry. The garden and the public space between the pier and the lower block is
popular for wedding pictures. Many wedding banquets have been held in the Chinese restaurant located in the lower block. I visited the libraries there frequently when I was young, and my parents took me to the pier for a ‘walk’ numerous times. The ice-cream trucks in the public space had made many families, particularly children, happy.

The pier, which had undergone replacement, was not useful except for the place of arrival and departure for the British royal family and Governors of Hong Kong and as a venue for ceremonial events. The last Hong Kong Governor departed for the Great Britain on the return of the sovereignty of Hong Kong back to China in 1997. The Hong Kong residents used the public space mostly for leisure such as fishing, boarding yachts, and a place for romance, and socializing. Then why were many interest groups, political parties, the mass, and even protests in the form of hunger strike against its demolition announced in April 2007? Did some Hong Kong residents want to keep the site as collective memory for the colonial past? Did they have a strong attachment to space where they had a fond memory about their wedding and family life? Or did the Hong Kong residents have something else in the mind and agenda?

This paper uses these two cases as a starting point to understand the ethno-cultural identity of Hong Kong that is experiencing challenges of de/re-construction through the lens of architecture.

Why the lens of architecture? The theory behind this approach comes from a synthesis between the theories of ethno-cultural identity and architecture.

**Theoretical Perspectives**

The theoretical framework (see its details in Leung and Lau, 2009) that will be used to guide the directions of this proposed study is summarized in the following paragraphs.

*Ethnic Identity*
The recent debate concerning formation of ethnicity has been dominated by the instrumental approach (see Dirlik and Prazniak, 2001) because scholars are convinced that the sense of belonging to the group expressed in ethnicity is a social and cultural construct. In other words, it is always in the process of being formed. Ethnicity emphasizes cultural traits of a group through which it expresses a sense of belonging and solidarity. Culture is the everyday practices of a group. Everyday life emerges from the social, economic and political changes in a given society within a given time frame. The conditions change, the culture changes; therefore, the cultural practices of an ethnic identity can change accordingly. In short, the behaviors of an ethnic group can change across time and space. The study of an ethnic group inevitably involves an examination of what cultural components a group uses to mobilize its identity.

Hutchinson and Smith (1996: 6-7) articulate the six elements that contribute to form an ethnic identity: a common proper name, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, common culture such as language, customs or religion, a link with a homeland, and a sense of solidarity. On the one hand, the complexity of ethnic identity lies in how a group constructs its sense of belonging by using some or all the six elements. It varies from group to group. On the other hand, some groups might use their identities to form a nation, but some groups do not follow this pattern. (See Roudonmetof, 2001 for detail discussion on the development of ethnic and civic nationalism.) In the process of mobilizing the identity, the concepts of “we” vs. “them” are formed.

Many studies (see Driedger, 1989; Anderson, 1991) have already explored how different cultural components contribute to ethnic identity: media use, language, religious practices, marriage patterns, and food. However, they often neglect the contribution of architecture. Without a doubt, architecture is an integral cultural practice.
Architecture

Architecture can be conceptualized as a way in which humans build to meet their needs: to shelter, to monumentalize activities, to create physical boundary and segregation, and to express the desire to identify who they are (see Gutman, 1972; Nesbitt, 1996; Menin, 2003; Ballantyne, 2002; Hosagrahar, 2005; Ching et. al., 2006). The execution of such desire, the material culture, and the formal expression in relation to function can be transformed to different terrains as technology advances. In short, architecture amplifies the generality of the human desire to shape the land to suit itself (Shepheard, 1994).

However, the meaning of a piece of architecture often changes across time and space. The Eiffel Tower was once considered to be an eyesore, but now it is an icon of Paris and France. The pyramids of Egypt were once tombs of some pharaohs; now they are the national icons of Egypt. Structuralism conceptualizes the dynamics of the (re)interpretation of this process. Leach (1997, 164) states, “Structuralism has obvious applications to the world of architecture through the discipline of semiology – the science of signs. Semiology offers a mechanism by which the built environment can be ‘read’ and ‘decoded’” (also see R. King, 1996). The (symbolic) meaning of architecture can change across time according to the varying social, cultural, political, and economic conditions of a given society. This change is particularly accelerated by the forces in globalization (see A. King, 2004).

Ethno-cultural Identity and Architecture

Since ethnicity is closely related to cultural practices, in this study we use ethno-culture to term the identity of a group. The discourse concerning ethno-cultural identity and architecture reveals some intriguing intersecting and intertwining relationships. Ethnic identity and architecture share an important common component: land. An occupied land or territory,
whether it may be a nation or a province (Catalonia) or a community (Chinatown, Greektown, Little Italian as examples), is the heart of an ethnic group. Land is the foundation of architecture. That land is a driving force, in both ethno-cultural identity and architecture, to separate the inside and outside, the in-group and the out-group. These spatial relationships manifest attributes very similar to those of ethnic relationships. At the same time, architecture and social groups connect and communicate because most human activities take place in buildings. It is the continuum of the flow of messages, people, and materials between the inside and outside, the in-group and the out-group that is manifested in space and in social relationships.

Furthermore, similar to the (symbolic) meaning of architecture, the interpretation of an ethno-cultural identity, such as that of the Chinese, changes over time. Identity is a very fluid concept (see Gupta and Ferguson, 1992). What we can observe is that the meaning of architecture, ethnicity, and even a nation always undergoes de/re/construction that is subjected to the social, economic, and political conditions where a group lives.

Thus, Jones (2003) observes that architecture is a tool for nation-building that expresses particularism, a marker to distinguish the ‘we’ and ‘them’. Ethno-cultural / national identity and architecture reinforce and intertwine with each other in such a way across time and space in an ever-changing social, economic, and political terrain.

**Historical Background of Hong Kong**

Over a century ago, Hong Kong consisted of a number of small fishing villages and farming communities. China was forced to sign the Treaty of Nanjing (1842), after being defeated by the British in the Opium War (1839-1842). One of the conditions of the Treaty was to cede Hong Kong Island and the harbor to the British. The first governor, Henry Pottinger, declared Hong Kong to be a free port.
In more than a hundred years, the laissez-faire Hong Kong has a very different developmental path from the mainland China. Along the prosperity developed in the globally connected city, the political, economic and cultural differences from the mainland China have nurtured a very different Hong Kong ethno-cultural identity. Hong Kong people do not deny that they are ethnically Chinese, but particularly those who were born and socialized in the colonial Hong Kong are proud to identify themselves as “Hong Kong People” which is used deliberately to set themselves apart from the then China which was economically backward and politically oppressive. Yet the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997 forced the people to rethink who they are.

Architecture as Identity Maker

The nurturing of a group identity can come from many sources such as language, religion, territory, shared memories and so on (see above); architecture can be a powerful identity-signifier which is boldly visible to anyone. Yet we argue the meaning of a piece of architecture is always in a process of making and the interpretation of the meaning is constantly required or being deliberately or unconsciously ignored, according to the political, economic, social and cultural settings and practices at the time.

Before the announcements on the demolition of the two sites, almost no attention was paid to the cultural significance of these two pieces of architecture. What did it “give” the meaning to the Wan Chi Market that some Hong Kong people now see the Bauhaus structure represents their ethno-cultural identity? It started with the survival of the owners of the market stalls in the indoor market. Some of the owners could be relocated to a newly built indoor market nearby after its demolition, but the available units could not be sufficiently allocated to
all the owners. Those who could not be relocated were forced out of business. Some owners asked help from some social workers who worked in some NGOs in the district. One of the social workers explained to me that the “old” strategy which was to ask for compensation from the government would not work effectively since the public and the government would see the move meant for only financial gain. He then promoted the outdoor market which was near the indoor market as a traditional practice of not only traditional Chinese culture, but particularly the tradition in the Wan Chi district which is under massive urban renewal. In the course of promoting Hong Kong local culture, the heritage value of the Bauhaus-style indoor market was discovered. Only two such structures were left in Asia. Many Hong Kong people started to “learn” about this heritage building, and to support the preservation of the structure not to be demolished for luxurious residential building that is beyond the affordability of many of the locals.

The story behind Queen’s Pier is more complex. The motives behind the massive protests were multifaceted. The Hong Kong government planned to demolish the pier and then to reclaim some land from the harbor for a mega-commercial and infrastructure development. Other than constructing a 4 lane highway along the harbor coastline to link the already built highways in the east coastline so that traffic congestion in the inland would be lessened, the land reclaimed from the already shrinking harbor would be used for commercial development, that is “translated” by some Hong Kong people in the following thoughts: “less open space for the public”, “additional high-rises to the already dense urban space”, and “the death sentence to the harbor, a symbolic natural resource, from which Hong Kong is named after”. Some even argued with a conspiracy theory that the Hong Kong government, a limp duck to the mainland
government, wanted to erase the colonial history of Hong Kong that had given meanings to many Hong Kong locals.

Discussion

What can we learn about the ways of understanding ethno-cultural identity through the lens of architecture? Perhaps it is useful and relatively easy to examine the ethno-symbolic power of the pyramids, the Eiffel Tower, the Great Walls and so on. Yet there are many other buildings that can carry significant cultural meanings to the locals yet the meanings have not been constructed or realized well. However, once these buildings start disappearing, this alerts the consciousness of some locals who start to re-construct their relevance. The disappearing architecture indeed is a very useful tool to help us understand the making of a place identity and a group identity. An analogy will help understand this social mentality. If an ethno-cultural group is a human body which has grown from an infant to an adult, s/he develops his/her self identity. This person might have used many experiences such as living style and his/her physical features such as the look on face, hair etc to construct his/her identity. Achieved statuses could be the ingredients for the identity making as well. Yet as time goes by, these experiences and physical features have been taken for granted. Until one day, this person lost an arm in a car accident, or starts losing hair because of aging or lost a career for whatever the reason. This person looks at the mirror. The image becomes a stranger. S/he suddenly asks who this is. The deconstruction of the Hong Kong ethno-cultural identity is the disappearing of the colonial status. The reconstruction of this is to learn to belong to a nation which was much absent during the colonial time. In this process, the increasing use of Mandarin use in Hong Kong, more influx of people to Hong Kong from the mainland, more integration of Hong Kong economy to the China’s, and other “confusions” have disrupted the taken for granted identity. The rise of many
buildings that carry new geo-political meanings and the gradual or sudden fall of heritage architecture that interrupt the continuity of the identity start to awake the Hong Kong’s collective identity. Who are “we”? One of the ways is to examine the disappearing architecture in Hong Kong. And the construction of the ethno-cultural identity is always a convolution between the state, the business sector, and the citizens.

References

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