



The landscape of Improvisation -- Nexus of Culture and Narrative in Singang Township --

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Abstract

The paper deals with phenomenological experience and narrative possibility in the spatial formation of Singang Township. The discussion and interpretation in this paper could help urban design discipline in terms of place-making and design thinking. By walking through Singang township, taking photos on various places, looking into historical documentary and consulting with design-related literature, the paper tries to explore the possibility of incorporating various design theories with walking experience in the context of township's time, space, culture and metamorphosis. Special attention will be paid to the interaction between people and townscapes, especially the permutation and combination of places and people during different time periods.

The main research method used in the paper is employing walking as an urban design methodology combined with hermeneutic analysis, thus engaging in a multiple understanding of cognitive mapping. This cognitive mapping is essential to urban design's place-making, and it not only concerns with Kevin Lynch's perception of cognitive mapping, which represents mainly our physical environment, but also Fredric Jameson's cognitive mapping, which seems to extend into the reflection of temporal, social and cultural aspects. The study starts with the characteristic investigation of walking and continues by focusing on the experience of walking in the townscape, as well as takes purposeful photos on various specific places, which will later be used as objectives in urban design discipline to conjure related thinking and theory.

Keywords: landscape of improvisation; phenomenological experience; spatial formation; Singang Township; walking

1. Introduction

Singang was a small settlement in southern Taiwan. Its people came from old port Pengang after several fatal floods and riots. Later it developed into a pivotal trading spot for agricultural products. From Qing Dynasty to Japanese Colonization, Singang showed different spatial formations and cultural representations which corresponded to different historical contexts. Recent economical, social and cultural developments conducted in Singang demonstrate a new-liberal approach of community development cooperating with culture-lead town regeneration.

The study of Singang employs walking as a mode of experiencing places and the township. It is an intriguing activity and temporal practice, which could be used as supplemental method in urban design discipline. Walking is a primordial way of moving through space, enabling us to sense our bodies and the environment. By walking, we rhythmically pass through various places, reflectively interact with environment. While walking through the townscape, we engage with time and space, becoming immersed in

temporal continuums of every life activities blended with space, movement and events. (Wunderlich, 2008:125; Tschumi, 1987) This characteristic description of walking aims at projecting its essence into the study and confirms its legitimacy on the discourse of phenomenological experience and narrative possibility.

The study uses photos taken in the walking process to represent fragmented images which possess a variety of connotations concerning time, space, culture and metamorphosis of the township. Therefore Singang acts as a laboratory for exploring these connotations, which could form both Kevin Lynch and Fredric Jameson's (Jameson, 1990) cognitive maps, thus providing a possibility to employ them to better urban design result. In this study, the narrative possibility will be presented with a collection of fragmented sections, which is analogous to a collage of painting or a montage of film.

2. The Collection and Narrative Possibility

2.1 The Ruin and Resilience





Picture1

Picture1 shows a couple of oxen roaming about a street's vacant land. The scenario of in-between space has a connotation of apocalypse, a landscape of ruin or a vestige of civilization. Tracing back several hundred years, the history showed that part of Pengang's residents resettled in Singang because of various fatal floods and riots. In 1906, a catastrophic earthquake destroyed several hundreds of Singang's buildings. This kind of memory and oxen-roaming scenario remind us of Arata Isozaki's statement:

... The exhibit I curated at the Japanese Pavilion of 1996 Venice biennale...entitled "Architects as Seismographers," directly provoked by this disastrous earthquake in the region of Kobe... I have frequently called to mind the scenery of ruins. By ruminating on the image of Japanese cities bombarded in 1945...a return to that point where all human constructs were nullified that future construction would again be possible...Ruins to me were a source of imagination...Professing faith in ruins was equal to planning the future... (Isozaki, 2006: 97-100)

The expression of frailty and vulnerability of contemporary cities is also explained in Isozaki's other two essays: "Rumor City" (Isozaki, 2007a) and "City Demolition Industry, Inc.". (Ibid.) Recently, Isozaki presented a lecture in Harvard's GSD, (Isozaki, 2007b) on which he discussed the relationship among Terragni's Danteum, Katsura Palace and his own project Tsukuba Center. By citing Botticelli's "The Chart of Hell" in the beginning, his lecture entails an apocalyptic connotation. The spiral in Botticelli's picture of hell was used to analogize and interpret Danteum, Katsura and Tsukuba's spatial formations. In taking notion on Katsura Palace, he used a scroll of "The Tale of Gengi" to show that floating spatial continuum, and this mythical floating sequence has a strong ephemeral sensation. In the end of his lecture, Isozaki used a vivid illustration depicting Tsukuba Center in ruin. The lecture, perhaps, imply that the joyful process of construction might be inhabited in the decay and death of the building reality, and the historical cycles of ruin and resilience floating like the mythical figures in the ancient scroll.

2.2 Permutation and Improvisation



Picture2

Picture2 shows a couple of senior citizens gathering under a fancy modern school's elevated sporting tracks in 6:00 am. The new high school's ostensibly high-modern appearance and its policy to open its campus to the nearby inhabitants indicate a new phenomenon of the township's spatial formation and the interaction between the inhabitants and the environment.

The inhabitants use the newly created space in an improvisational manner. These senior citizens gather from different directions and have a cozy chat around this unpredictable place. Around 7:00 am, these senior citizens disperse and the students of the school start to show up. This daily life activities and its rhythm consist of essential quality of the place. This everyday social practice, a poetic permutation of time and space, with a spontaneous manner forms an authentic character of the townscape. In Henri Lefebvre's essay "See from the Window", he states that:

...With its diverse spaces affected by diverse temporalities-rhythms... (1996: 224)

This succinct sentence clearly defines the connection between space and temporality. In the same context, the seniors-gathering scene represents Singang Township's specific temporality, as well as its unique place formation. In another essay "rhythmanalysis of Mediteeeanean Cities" (Ibid.) he writes:

...with his thoughts and emotions, his impressions and his wonder, and whom we will call the 'rhythmanalyst'. More aware of times than of spaces...of the atmosphere than of particular spectacles... (Ibid., 228)

The argument here is especially recognizable in analyzing picture2 which represents a fragment of overall townscape. The school here is a newly-built artistic high school initiated by world renowned choreographer Lin, who founds Cloud Gate Dance Company. The world status of Lin, and the school's fashionable style designed by architect Gon who graduated from Harvard's GSD, make the Singang Artistic High School an iconic building. The intriguing part of picture2 and its connotation is that these seniors probably do not recognize the school's iconic status, and they occupy the school by their everyday temporality and improvisational need. Accordingly, they are more aware of time than of space and of the atmosphere than of particular spectacle.

For urban design implication, picture2 invokes



another idea related to Tschumi's discourse on the design of Parc de la Villette. (Tschumi, 1987) In the project, Tschumi employs point, line and surface as the elements of spatial formation, and events, movement and space as different ingredients to create a new combination disassociating with historical context. Moreover, he uses red metal follies as a system of coordination. His main intention seems to lie on the creation of interactions between people and those elements. Tschumi's urban design methods and its implied advantages comfortably reflect on the scene of seniors-gathering inside the iconic artistic high school in Singang Township.

2.3 The Sign and Reading



Picture3

Picture3 shows one of the main gateways of Singang Township. Its complicated scenario requires multiple reading and interpretation. On the right side is the sign of Authentic Jesus Church. Left from it is a women's close-up, which is a candidate billboard for local election. The horizontal writing on the main gate means that the whole town is welcoming the heavenly mother of Daja cruising to Singang. The small horizontal sign means there are eight kilometers from Lojau. Another small vertical sign means there is a parking lot. Under the gate, the sign with many small words is a commercial billboard advertising a cram school which specializes on official exams of public services. Picture3 divulges social, cultural and geographical contexts of Singang Township. It could work both as visual and mental mapping, and it carries political, religious, geographical, commercial and cultural messages.

The strategy of these billboards is overlapping many layers of two-dimensional symbols and signs to attract people's glimpses in a very short time. All the signs and symbols seem to compete with each other for passengers' first sights. In the picture, the connotation of improvisation and spontaneity is evident. The practice of social tolerance and reconciliation is also obvious. The co-existence of various elements and fragments is a typical post-modern scenario, but this improvisational character reflecting on the community issues might cause difficulty in gaining people's

consensus. Fortunately, the creation of Singang Cultural and Educational Foundation, with its achievement in culture-lead development and promoting civic society, is an optimistic sign against that suspicion.

As for design thinking, picture3's context could easily connect to one of the architectural masterpieces *Larning from Las Vegas*. (Venturi, 1977) In the book, Venturi talks about billboard's legitimized function and its spatial possibility and social connotation. His argument lies on that architects who can accept the primitive types of architecture, such as industrial and vernacular architecture, should also accept the commercial vernacular. The billboard is the representation of commercial vernacular. Meanwhile, Venturi also mentions some topics like architecture as symbol, symbol in space and architecture of persuasion.

In picture3, all the billboards process different persuasions. They juxtapose together forming a compact spectacular which directs toward different necessities. It is a cognitive map that easily distracts people's attention from contemporary spatial formation of Singang Township. Furthermore, the photo shows a framed gateway, which is an instrument to facilitate vernacular pilgrimage, with a sign of church, a sign of political campaign, and a commercial sign of chain cram school. The gateway and all signs apparently take the advantage of the pivotal position.

2.4 The Culture of Congestion



Picture4

Picture4 shows the congestion of morning market which is active around 5:30 am to 7:30 am. The local market's vitality is amazingly humane. We almost can retrace it back to the primordial era while human start to know the trading business. The temple rooftop on the backdrop implies the coexistence of economic and religious activities. When urban designer Fred Kent lectured about place-making, (Kent, 2006) he emphasized on four elements: sociability, uses/activities, access/linkages, and comfort/image. These four requirements for place-making are over-presented in the traditional market of Singang. The market place is actually a market street, where the acting of improvisation prevails. It is a natural place with a bustling street as a theater of everyday life. It



attests Lefebure's temporality and rhythm, and the sensation of Yi-Fu Tuan. Tuan's discussion about place is experiential:

...places are points in a spatial system...places are constructed out of such elements as distinctive orders, textual and visual qualities in the environment, seasonal changes of temperature and color...places are thus know both directly through the senses and indirectly through the mind...(Tuan, 1975)

The congestion in the market street is more than a fancy picture. It is the congestion of the daily life that makes the place significant. The market street is a landscape of smell and voice with physical and visual experiences.

In *Delirious New York*, Rem Koolhaas talks about the congestion as the practical ways to realize some metaphoric models:

...The Culture of Congestion proposes the conquest of each block by a single structure....On each floor, the culture of Congestion will arrange new and exhilarating human activities in unprecedented combinations. Through Fantastic Technology it will be possible to reproduce all "situation"... (Koolhaas, 1994: 123-125)

The scenario of Singang's market street is the culture of congestion in horizontal version. It possesses similar improvisational pragmatism as New York's vertical high-rises.

2.5 The Poetic and Phenomenon



Picture5

The gate in picture5 belongs to the ancestor of Lin, who is a world renowned choreographer. The post box and electric meters date back several decades. The flower beds are improvisational. The onslaught of globalization seems to have little impact on the local scene. Seven Holl once stated:

... the most essential auditory experience created by architecture is tranquility. Architecture presents the drama of construction silenced into matter and space... (Holl, 1994:31)

The scene in picture5 is not only visual. It possesses an essence of serene silence, having connection to temporality. It is the scene of time, history and memory. The basic material, texture, and colors transcend into a timeless transparency.

The sensation of memory is evident in picture5. The words on the top of the gate indicate the original hometown of the family. The words on the right side of post box mean Singang, and the left side ones mean

other areas. Most people can sense spatial distance by the words. The flowers around the post box are well-cared, and people could image a sympathetic person caring them. The electric meters belong to old technology, and their surfaces are worn out. All these speculations are about collective memory. Aldo Rossi is insightful on this theme:

...the city itself is the collective memory of its people, and like memory it is associated with objects and places. The city is the *locus* of the collective memory. This relationship between the *locus* and citizenry then becomes the city's predominate image...(Rossi, 1982:130)

Rossi's argument reminds us of Singang's civic society. Although the Singang Cultural and Educational Foundation has played an important role in promoting culture-lead activities, its prototype such as Reading Club had existed in various local townships since 19th century. Choreographer Lin's grand grand father was a Suochai, a given social status when people passed local official exam during Qing dynasty. His activities concerning public welfare in Singang helped building the tradition of civic society. Thus picture5's connotation is covered with phenomenology, history and civic society.

2.6 Cultural Industry



Picture6

Under the merit of globalization, Singang employs a culture-lead economic development strategy. Its main temple and the plaza in front of the temple naturally become the hub of the new cultural and economic development. Every year many people make a pilgrimage to Singang's temples and these people spend a lot for Singang's economy. Besides, the township engages in a new culture-lead strategy, which is to revive endangered professions such as producing polished clay figures for temples' decorations. Nowadays the same factory is renamed Ceramic Arts Studio, with supplementary restaurant, museum and teaching spaces for students' extracurricular activities. The photo showed here contains polished clay figures which were used to decorate temples' frieze areas. Nowadays people transform these heavenly figures into a rock band. The connotation is about cultural marketing. Even these traditional Taoist figures are descending into this commercialized modern world. The pop culture and market system have reinvented them into mundane people to entertain this world.



According to legends, these Taoist figures had meditated and disciplined themselves for many years to become supernatural beings. This process is analogous to a construction process in architectural term. Their descending into mundane world and sporting a rock band are analogous to deconstruction or undoing. The same ruin/resilience cycle and the same death/ resurrection connotation also exist in various Isozaki's tempo-spatial discourses.

Additionally, the city-marketing advisor Charles Landry states that:

...I use the suffix *-scape* in soundscape, smellscape and mindscape as I would in *landscape*. I want to convey the fluid panorama of perception...and mediascape, the representations and media through which cultural images are conveyed...(Landry, 2006:45-46)

The transformation of the Taoist figures is mainly a transformation of mediascape and mindscape. The spatial territory in our mind (mindscape) engages in metamorphosis through media (mediascape). This conception of whatever landscapes might derive from the study of urban multiplicity, and it might reshape our perception of the world, as well as our cognition maps of physical and mental geography.

2.7 The Wall



Picture7

Picture7 combines traditional vernacular house with an improvisational gate. The special gate is made of tin plate. It is cheap and available. At first sight the gate is incompatible with the vernacular house. For the pragmatic sake, the tin-plate gate forms a formidable wall to prevent trespassing. On the other hand, the cheap metal provides a popular taste easily accepted by the township's easy-going inhabitants. Architect Tadao Ando has manifested his perception of wall:

... The more austere the wall...the more it speaks to us. At times it is a sharp weapon menacing us. At times it is a mirror in which landscape and sunlight are dimly reflected. Light that diffuses around a corner and gathers in the general darkness contrasts strongly with direct light. With the passage of time these two "lights" blend and enrich the space... (Ando, 1989:211)

The quotation reflects Ando's perception of wall as the mirror of light. Besides, he states that walls serve both to reject and affirm:

The tense between inside and outside is based on the cutting of wall, and this cutting, as a sword does, for Japanese is not destructive but sacred.(Ibid.)

In picture7, the tin-plate gate also acts as a wall, and it separates not inside and outside, but outside and courtyard. Its improvisational quality is not sharp but dull, and a bit awkward.

Actually, the whole townscape is full of improvisational scenarios, such as the roof-top adding, or putting two or three chairs in front of the house and making that area public. By walking through Singang Township, we could make a photomontage that is full of improvisations. It could be this quality of improvisation that provides lubrication between harsh process of globalization and sentimental affection of preserving local identities.

3. Conclusion

The merit of the study might lie on its narrative possibility, social concern and its humane aspect. The study tries to explore unnoticed social and cultural mapping possibilities beyond traditional spatial perception. Therefore it is a try to look into the in-between void of traditional urban design methodology which concerns with the spatial representation and figure/ground relation. By paying more attention to temporal concern, which is represented by long-term social relationship, cultural activity and everyday routine, the study intends to bring the temporal and spatial elements together to achieve a more flexible and effective urban design methodology.

John Steinbeck once depicted a special *gray time* after the light has come and before the sun has risen. (Steinbeck, 1994:64) It is this interstitial void that provides a possibility beyond Western opposition of time and space. (Jameson, 2007:851) These two notions could be a concise message of the study. It is to look into interstitial space of social and cultural significance for urban design possibility.

Finally, the study might have some similar notions as Prof. Haruhiko Goto's article "Lifescape as Social Capital." According to Goto, Lifescape could not be obtained by conventional aesthetic theory of landscape; it might be understood by introducing the idea of "lifescape as social capital" and its value could be improved by connecting people, reality of lives and accumulation. Connecting people is about the social networks in the past, present and future; reality of lives is provided by citizens but not by government, market and company; accumulation concerns regional characteristics enhanced by the accumulation of time and space. The concept of these three criteria is evident in most of the narrative scenarios provided by the study. Thus "The Landscape of Improvisation" could have some connotation of "Lifescape."

Although traditional mapping methods might require the seven provided photos to be located on an in-scale town map, it is not the intention of the study. The overlapping of the seven provided scenarios leads to a conceptualization of new urban design methodology. The number of the scenarios could be



changed according to different requirements. The social connotation and cultural implication in-between various scenarios are the constantly anticipated urban design materials that could help us achieve a more sustainable tempo-spatial constellation.

Note

1. This paper, first presented in the Conference of Urban Design Asia 2009, keeps the original title, makes some minor revision, and adds the idea extracted from Prof. Haruhiko Goto's "Lifescape as Social Capital" which was also presented in the same conference.

2. Picture2 was taken from National Singang Senior High School of Arts. Picture6 was taken from a local ceramic arts studio. Other pictures belong to local streetscapes.

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