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Hybrid and creative Taipei

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Abstract. *This paper examines the hybrid condition of Taipei's built environment within its socio-cultural context and daily activity of the city. It also points out certain forward-looking policies adopted by the City Government that over the last decades gave way to interesting and radical ambiances within the city. To illustrate this fact three case studies are described from the point of view of a pedestrian and on the basis of a journey. By identifying the key qualities that define these new ambiances, some relevant conclusions for urban intervention based on the creation of significant urban ambiances are finally extracted.*

Keywords: *creative city, walkable city, multisensory city, cultural identity, Taipei*

Introduction

The concept of *Hybrid* is defined as anything derived from, or composed of, different elements. The hybrid condition in Taipei city comes from a series of events that took place in the last two centuries and that shaped the built environment of the city: the Qing Empire, the Japanese colonial rule, the Chinese settler rule, the period of economic support from the United States, the extremely fast economic growth, the political transition after abolition of Martial Law and the democratization of the Republic of China after the Kuomintang (KMT) lost the presidential election to the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in 2000.

At the same time, the social structure in Taipei city is complex and interesting. Legacies from the Chinese traditional society, from Japanese culture and also from American culture share their presence in the urban landscape of the capital. Hybridization is found in the daily activity of the city: in the mixing of public, domestic and commercial realms where local and international markets cohabit.

In the last years the City Government adopted a creative attitude towards urban intervention, and this gave way to a special diversity in terms of urban ambiances in Taipei city. After a two-month exploration of the city, walking around and recording the experience, the urban environments identified in Taipei city meet one of the following models:

- a) Local models, common to many other metropolis in Eastern Asia, in which superimposition of activities comes naturally. In some areas of the city, every floor of the buildings is filled with pubs and KTV (Karaoke Television Clubs) together with numerous food stalls and restaurants, as well as sales of every kind of products (e.g. Tinghao Commercial Area). The hybridization of the public, domestic and commercial realms that takes place in these areas has been designated as “dividual space” in relation to its presence in the city of Tokyo and to an urban nomadism also characteristic of Taipei city (Almazán and Tsukamoto, 2006).
- b) Globalization models, conceived according to a unitary design and aiming to be integrated within an international context. The scale of these projects is huge and quite often they boast about a level of sophistication that excludes spontaneous appropriation of space and atmospheres that do not correspond with a brandy luxury image (e.g. Xinyi Commercial District).

- c) Models of conservation and restoration of old buildings and neighbourhoods. Taipei's development started in the western sections of the city but over the last decades it has moved eastwards rapidly. "Reverse the axis; activate both sides" is a slogan raised by the urban planning authorities in order to re-focus efforts on urban renewal and preservation projects in the neglected western part of the city (e.g. Dadaocheng redevelopment plan).
- d) Recycling models of disused sites for artistic practices. In 2000, the Council for Cultural Affairs, under the newly-established DPP Government, announced that the reuse (as opposed to preservation) of neglected public-owned historic sites was one of its significant policies (Liu, 2009). These places usually give a transgressor appearance due to the fact that they welcome urban art works and are opened to participative processes (e.g. Huashan Creative Park, Treasure Hill Artist Village).
- e) Greening models aiming to improve the urban landscape of the city under the "Taipei Beautiful Project". This project together with other initiatives that seek to mitigate Taipei urban heat island, are expected to turn Taipei city into a green city where urban development and nature are closely integrated (e.g. NTUT campus, Chenggong Public Housing).
- f) Models in which hybrid complexes provide the citizen with endless interiors. These projects are linked to transport interchange, shopping malls and real state investment, and lately they have adopted the build-operate-transfer (BOT) approach with fifty-year contracts (e.g. Taipei Bus Station and Q-Square, Underground City Mall, Taipei City Hall Station).

From this framework, three case studies located in the city center are selected, each belonging to a different model from the previous ones. The reasons are that they provide richer multisensory environments and that they were conceived as urban interventions concerned with the restoration of memory. They are analyzed considering the assessment of the qualities that define those ambiances from the point of view of a pedestrian going through them.

Case studies

NTUT campus, the urban Eco-oasis

Deeply integrated into the urban fabric of Daan District, NTUT campus constitutes an oasis of tranquility in the middle of one of the busiest areas of the city center. It serves as a shortcut for the pedestrian and a shelter against the busy surroundings, stifling heat and traffic aggressiveness.

During the last decade, professor Jen-Hui Tsai, from the Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Design, has made a great effort to obtain financial support from institutions in order to transform NTUT existing old school buildings into an Eco-campus and to recover certain original environmental features from the site. Since 1980, when the administration bought a large number of stones, adorned the Chinese banyan garden and other spots of the campus with water scenes, and planted various vines on the walls of several buildings, a number of initiatives under the concept of Eco-campus have been carried out (Tsai & Kang, 2007).

Projects like "Site Revegetation, Wall Revegetation and Rainfall Eco-Reservoir Project" or "Site Water Conservation Improvement Project" were carried out in 2003 and later the "Eco-Balcony and Wall Revegetation Project", "Campus Waterscape Project" and "Technology Greenhouse (Eco-Green Architecture)" were also implemented.

Since its inception in 2000, the NTUT Water Environment Research Center began to introduce water ecology issues. The idea of connecting the eco-campus space to the surrounding urban area through ecological interface gave way to the stream flowing around the campus, still under construction (Tsai and Kang, 2007).

Crossing the campus diagonally from NTUT's Green Gate at the corner of Zhongxiao East Rd and Shinseng South Rd to Jianguo South Rd provides the pedestrian with a sequence of exposures and enclosures, from the radical immersion into vegetation (see figure 2), the microclimate experienced in the aquatic reservoir and the murmur of the streams, to the permeability of arcades carrying parallax effects and crossing views, or the large open spaces surrounded by vertical gardens.



Figures 1 & 2. NTUT campus (LFM)

The Underground City Mall

In the Japanese colonial era, there was a railway line running along the present-day Zhonghua Road. After the KMT's retreat to Taiwan some soldiers built illegal houses along the railway line to sell goods and food and eventually it became one of the most popular commercial spots in the capital, and was called Zhonghua Market. In 1992 the City Government demolished the railway line and the market to carry out the MRT construction works (Liu, 2009).

The enormous Underground City Mall runs underground from Taipei Main Station node comprising the MRT Station and the Train Station, incorporating Taipei Bus Station (2009), Shing Kong Mitsukashi Department Store (1993) and Q-Square Mall (2009), stretching under Civic Boulevard, Zhongxiao W. Rd. and over MRT Danshui Line to Shuanglian Station. It opened as Taipei Underground Market in 2000 providing premises for the original tenants from the demolished Zhonghua Market. It involves several areas each one devoted to specific products or activities: clothing, books, arts and humanities, restaurants, souvenirs and video games. Each area is identified by a color and other uses can be found such as MOCA underground creative Studios, which are exhibition rooms that are run in collaboration with Taipei Museum of Contemporary Art. Connecting corridors are used as art galleries displaying photography and painting exhibitions. There are also areas devoted to dancing in which music and choreographies exert their influence in the perception of the space, and some people take advantage of the air conditioning during the summer to go jogging along Zhongshan Metro Mall, which is nearly one kilometer long.

The complex is directly connected to the over 66.000 square meters of Q-Square Mall in such a way that the endless experience of indoor consumerism can spread out the seven floors of this mall. Success is assured thanks to the connection to the most important transport systems in the city and also thanks to its city-of-refuge character, safe from the weather conditions.

Walking along the Underground City Mall corridors for hours constitutes a radical experience of interior space in which artificial conditioning, colors, commercial stimuli and signage define this collective ambiance.



Figures 3 & 4. Taipei Main Station and Q-Square Mall (LFM)

Dadaocheng shophouses, the multisensory experience

The two oldest settlements of Taipei city were set up around port enclaves and the commercial activity with the continent. These settlements gave way to the current districts of Wanhua and Datong. Dadaocheng area is known for its dense concentration of shophouses where regional goods, Chinese medicines, candies, dry food and fabrics are sold. Dihua Street was the first market street to emerge in the neighborhood.

Chieh-wu, the shophouse, is the prototype of private house in immigrants from continental China settlements, very popular in densely populated cities and frequently linked to commercial use. It is about 4 meters wide and as long as 30 meters long, with a couple of courts that introduce light and serve as a garden or transition space (Lin, 1999). These long buildings are packed in parallel and aligned in such a way that their narrow facades give way to a quite uniform front.

Given that the area was full of retailers selling traditional medicine and dry food that the locals used to purchase before the coming of Chinese New Year, since 1996, the City Government designated the Street as the “Spring Festival Shopping Street”, so that every year during that specific time period the street is packed with people buying traditional candies (Liu, 2009).

Dihua Street provides the passerby with three different fields: the axis of the street, where pedestrians and traffic cohabit; the arcade, that protects from sun and rain although it is frequently packed with scooters; and the deep shop interiors. Unifying the whole there are two factors: the repetition of the same typology described above and the most intense, attractive and characteristic sensory stimulus of this area, namely, the mixing of delicate aromas that on sale goods give off together with their textures and colors. Walking along Dihua Street from one end to the other means experiencing a rich sensory experience in which the architectural structure, the depth of views inside the shophouses, the textures of the products and their aromas merge into a continuum. The local ambiance that people can enjoy in this area differs enormously from the one that is characteristic of the eastern commercial areas.



Figures 5 & 6. Two traditional deep shophouses in Dihua Street (LFM)

Conclusions

During the last two decades the question of Taiwanese cultural identity has been centre of attention for artists and writers, and it has also led some Government decision making. It has been stated that Taiwan's open and free attitude towards the hybridization of cultural identities is due to its colonial and then settler past: *As the unit that takes its place in the world's cultural interactions, Taipei provides a genuine creative cultural synthesis, which means in fact its authenticity* (Harrel & Huang, 1994). Focusing on urban intervention, the restoration of memory and preservation of traditional and local practices coexist with a great concern with economic growth and promotion of consumerism and, recently, with ecologically-friendly policies.

On the other hand, Taipei has a subtropical climate, with warm temperatures and abundant rainfall. Its urban area is surrounded by hilly topography on all sides making heat more stifling. The city may experience a number of typhoons in summer and fall, which tend to bring hazardous weather conditions. Thus, one of the key aspects of any successful urban environment is its capacity to protect individuals from weather conditions.

From the three case studies taken into consideration we can conclude that the most successful is the one that meets current *taipei-nese* habits in terms of consumerism and trends, allows spontaneous appropriation by the citizens and provides them with a shelter against the weather, that is, the Underground City Mall. In Dadaocheng traders complain about the lack of sales out of Chinese New Year's period. Nevertheless, because of the special atmosphere that this area provides, could be an attractive spot for tourists as well as specialized public. Finally, the radical introduction of nature into the city center through NTUT Eco-campus and its influence over the campus surroundings, is starting to attract people out of the academic activity, people who want to enjoy the pleasant atmosphere of NTUT, and also pedestrians who need it as a short-cut in their route.

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