

The Structure of Ordinary

-- Hui Vernacular Settlements and Architecture in China

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Abstract:

This paper aims to establish a critical position to evaluate the social use of the vernacular architecture in traditional Hui Prefecture in China, with a case study on Hong village (see figure).

Hui vernacular settlement and architecture is built as a tectonic entity for everyday life of Hui People. As architectural artefacts without architects' involvement, the adaptive evolution of Hong village is a mixed co-product from the interactions among the particular cultural-psychological mode and the mode of living pattern. The locally-rooted production and consumption of vernacular tradition has been solidified physically and presented as a relatively stable built system.

The surface structure of the vernacular architecture in Hong village refers to the physical formal mask, the skin and skeleton, and the layered cladding and supporting monolith; however what precipitates is the deep structure -- a kind of non-physical structural logic and organizational mechanism which relates to social use of the everyday. For deep structure, architectural structure, surface and material aren't limited to separated and tangible building elements; there existed complex and interactive social-anthropological and cultural-psychological links, which made the structural and constructional modes of Hong village in a cycling state of assimilation, adjustment, adaptation and evolution in temporal dimension; particular attention will be paid into the anthropological ancestor worship from Hui Merchants and the poetic construction from Hui Craftsperson in the collective presence and building rituals.

The tension emerged from the above-discussed surface structure and deep structure, as well as the ontological elements and representational ones, leads to an elemental correspondence in built form, tectonic culture and everyday social process. The structure of ordinary evolves towards the deepest dialogues between human and land through architecture as agency, from marking of the land, tracing, anchoring, dwelling, to mutual transformative process and multiple narratives after occupancy. Thus revealing the hidden layer behind the mask and unfolding the structure of ordinary will be the key to sustain the ingenious wisdom of the everyday in Hui vernacular settlement and architecture.

By placing architectural version of Hui vernacular settlement and architecture into a broader cultural and social-anthropological framework, finally this paper attempts to pave a way to inform a local-specific architectural design proposition, which embeds the contemporary modes of producing architecture with vernacular habitation patterns and craft in a more ethical, collective, bottom-up, and locally-resilient approach.



Hong Village, Traditional Hui Prefecture, Anhui Province, China

Keywords: Hui vernacular settlement and architecture; Social process of building; Everyday; Ritual; Resilience.

Biography:

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Supervised by Prof. Peter Blundell Jones, Xiang Ren is currently a PhD by Design student, PhD student representative and teaching assistant in School of Architecture, University of Sheffield, UK; He is a student representative of 'Home' Research Group, as well as a member of 'Building Local Resilience' Research Platform and Centre for 'East-West Studies in Architecture and Landscape', in School of Architecture, University of Sheffield; He has also been Overseas Editor for 'Journal of Architecture Technique and Art' in China since 2012.