

Architects' role at the end of the world

-----Related to the seminar and session of John Jordan

I had been allocated to John Jordan's seminar before the Theory Forum. In the seminar, he talked about consensus decision-making and taught us how to use it in reality. The main idea for the consensus decision-making is that the proposal must be agreed by everybody in the group or it will not be valid. So there are no minority and majority in the system which uses consensus decision-making. Then he led us to think about a nomadic permaculture/art/architecture project which the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination is preparing for Spring/summer 2009. The central idea in permaculture is the design of ecological landscapes that produce food (Steve Diver 2002). After some idea for the project had come up, we had a discussion about the project. After the seminar, I found it's very interesting to have this experience, learning some fresh idea of decision-making and empowerment from him and think about a sustainable architecture project for the future.

But John Jordan's work remains unknown to me until we listened to his Keynotes lecture. According to his lecture, his work includes protesting against the governments' inaction towards the climate change; questioning the politic system and the definition that "the market is god" by disobey and rebel; operating camps like the climate camp to testify that the community can be self-organized without hierarchy and politic leaders; combining the creativity of art and the social engagement of politics. He tries to solve the problem in action, not to represent the problems. "I don't want to make art about issues, but in them, with them. I want an art that is immediate, that is embedded in the issues themselves. An art that directly intervenes and attempts to transform the problem not illustrate it. I don't want to represent things but to change them." John Jordan (2006, pp. 11) wrote. He is an anti-capitalism activist and

artist who use art as a weapon in the protest and rebel against the government. His main achievements include: Been the co-director of interdisciplinary social practice art group Platform (1987-1995); co-founder of the direct action collective Reclaim the Streets (1995-2000); set up the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA). He had written and lectured extensively about the space between art and activism, co-editing the book "We Are Everywhere: the irresistible rise of global anti-capitalism". He is presently working on the Camp for Climate Action – a temporary self managed eco-village and direct action base, and he is co-writing a book with the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination and fictional road movie project set in Utopian communities in Europe. His lecture is very impressive and interesting to me. Lots of thought and ideas came up in my brain. But unfortunately the lecture is not too much related to architecture. So I tried to put some of his notions into the architectural world and combine the experience from his practice into our field, attempt to re-think the architects' role at the end of the world. As we all agree that the end is not far from us if we keep polluting the planet and consuming the resources unlimitedly. Because of this the green technique and sustainable architecture are spreading in our practice, and it is the mainstream of our profession.



As the artists and activists are doing lots of project to raise the people's awareness of climate change, there are numerous projects and techniques in our profession which are supposed to reduce the overheating of the planet. As

the activists are protesting against various social problems, the architects are designing cheap housing for the homeless people. The uses of green techniques are written into the schedule all over the world. We concern more about the sustainability of the buildings nowadays. In China, the cost of energy and power for a new building must be analyzed at recently. The building can only be built if it passed the analyze of sustainability. It is a positive policy made by government to reduce our country's heating effect of the planet that is one of the most in the world. But I start to wonder if it works, because we had those procedures in the building industry to reduce the heating and polluting, but on the other hand, the factories, the cars and the air-conditioners are working all day all around the world, counteracting the effort that we did. It is similar in the social aspect of architects' effort to archiving a better world. Giancarlo De Carlo (2005, pp.6) wrote: "But we have a right to ask 'why' housing should be as cheap as possible and not, for example, rather expensive. Nobody can be satisfied with an answer that appeals to the scarcity of available resources when we know how much is spent on wars, missiles and anti-missile systems, on moon projects, on research to defoliate forests inhabited by partisans or to paralyze demonstrators emerging from ghettos, on hidden persuasion, on inventing artificial needs, etc" Yes, no one can be satisfied by the fact that our government spend so many money on other things, yet ignored the people's behalf and the climate change. And we can do nothing about it. So it seems there is no solution to the environmental and social problems in architecture itself, only if the government's policy in all the aspect of our destructive way of living had changed, the money spends on different areas had changed. But we know it is impossible. However, it is helpful if the architects could begin to think about a world when the climate change had really taken into effect. It is good for the architects to imagine some kind of building to suite the environment and the situation for future, after the climate change had caused the flood of many cities in the coast. As the climate change seems to be irreversible, imagine the architecture for the future

could probably be the few things for architects to do at this time.

John Jordan (2006, pp. 4) wrote: "The question of art is no longer aesthetics but the survival of the planet." It is true that the survival of the human being is more important than the aesthetics. But does that mean the aesthetics of architecture are no longer a matter? I visited a friend of mine in Sunderland last month. He lived in a house in the residential district. I thought it would be much better than my little flat anyway. But when I arrived at there, it is not what I had imagined, it is a mass residential district with all the houses look like the same. If his house is not located at the end of the street, I simply can't find it. I slept on a spare bed in another house not far from my friend's. When I wake in the morning, I opened the door of the house and try to go to my friend's home to have my breakfast. Then I find myself lost in this district, and can't find the place where I had wake up earlier. All this area is filled with this same kind of two stores, pitched roof, red brick houses. Even the dwellings' plans are exactly the same, with a living room at the right of the entrance, the kitchen at the end of the corridor. And there had no sense of aesthetics at all for these houses. The whole district is filled by this kind of cloned houses. I just wonder around this area, and it seems to be a labyrinth without any signs of diversity and direction. At last it's my friend who rescued me from this maze. I'm absolutely depressed by my experience in Sunderland and it became a nightmare for me. How can architects and town planners build this kind of residential district without any interest and aesthetic? According to HRH's A Vision of Britain, it's the architects caused less sense of belonging and order in Britain (HRH, 1989, p, 9-13), it's the architects' ignorance of aesthetic caused this kind of disappointing situation in Sunderland. The artist can ignore the question of aesthetics, but we can't. Because the architecture is an art that people must see in their everyday life. It's different from the art in the museums, you may choose to see it or not. It must be more serious and need more consideration. The aesthetic and order must be considered when we design buildings, or it will be an earlier end of the world.

The relationship between art and politics is agreed by most of us. Politics had influence on art, on the contrary, art is the political voice from the artists and try to change politics. In John Jordan's work, he tried to combine the identity of artist and activist together, "I'm acutely aware that the world of art desperately lacks genuine social engagement and the world of politics lacks creativity and yet I try not to get stuck in either of them. I try to find a path in the very middle: the knife edge between the two, the space in between, neither one - nor the other - but both." (John Jordan, 2006, p. 5) He tried to use the creativity of art as a tool in his social engagement. It's very similar to the use of art skills in our engagement with the community when we try to get the local people involved to the process of design. In our case, we try to use the tactics of art and architecture at the same time. In fact, most lectures on the conference of Agency are related to politics and social questions. Is it possible for architecture to have some influences on politics? Can architects bring about engagement with politics within his design? How can politics be related to architecture? During the studio review, the studio 9's work impressed me a lot. Their work made us realize that the architecture is a presentation of power itself, the power system is expressed in architecture. The hierarchies in our system are display within the buildings that we live. It is displayed by the area per person and the floors allocated to different grades. And they showed us that the power within the building can be changed easily just by a fake official announcement in the elevator. The girl in the elevator just obeyed the announcement, and didn't get off below 10th floor. The power in the architecture is so strong and it is so easy to be changed. In our studio's field trip in Rome, I find something related politics and architecture together. The Piazza Venezia at the very center of Rome had become the favorite site for protesters, since the dissatisfaction of politics rises rapidly these years. The police have a standing force of riot police in the Piazza to put down any protest. The Piazza had become so sensitive, as there are lots of policeman on patrol

too. When we sit on the stairs of the Vittorio Emanuele Monument at the center of the Piazza for a rest, the policemen came up immediately. They said that we can't sit on these stairs, because it is considered to be a protest when people sit on the stairs of the Monument, we can't sit there. In this case, the Piazza and even the stairs became so political because it's at the center of Rome, and it's a time with high political tension. While the activists and artists like John Jordan are protesting for something, the architecture is providing the place for their protest. I start to realize that the activist and architect can be interdependent. It is also in the field trip that I find all the political leaders in Rome's history had their influence on the city. The Emperors build their monument to show their power. The Pope changed the axis of the city to switch the center from the ancient Rome Empire to the Christian Rome. The Piazzas, temples, theatres and other great buildings are built by the political leaders for their political purposes. Then a question came to me that, can architecture had reactions to politics, rather than just an expression of politics?

In the seminar, John Jordan introduced a method of decision making to us, that's the consensus decision-making. Its purpose is to avoid the representative and hierarchy, and it also eliminates the conflict between the majorities and the minorities. In his work, this decision-making system is introduced into the climate camp. Every climate camp was hold by the local group. There are no leaders to operate the camp, and there are no organizers tell people to do things. All decisions are made by all the people within the camp. They make decisions for themselves, not to let the political leaders and professionals to make decision for them. It proved that the small experimental community can be self-organized without hierarchies, and it works well. In our architectural practice, the participation in architecture and urban design is very similar to this kind of decision making system. The design is no longer decided by the architects along, the clients and the local residents are all involved into the process of designing. The activists' efforts to build a self-organized

community without hierarchies give me some fresh ideas towards the participation in architecture and urban design. The participation in our practice is in fact a procedure to breaks hierarchies in our profession. It breaks the traditional relationship between the architects, the clients and the users, from a relationship of simply giving and receiving to a relationship of interaction and cooperating. The participation creates a sense of belonging even before the building had been constructed, as the users have awareness of what they will get at end of the process and they are happy with that result. If we can have good participations, there will not be the case like the cloned residential district in Sunderland. A similar decision making system to the consensus decision-making can be introduced into our practice, it can build up a real democracy in the process of designing. Most of the projects nowadays are integrated with the participation to the users, but it is still the architects who decide what is to come at the end. In some case, the architect just ignored the voice from the users during the process of participation, and then imposed their big ideas unto the users. To change the system of the decision making might improve this situation.



To conclude, the seminar and lecture of John Jordan impressed me a lot. They bring me a lot of fresh experiences and new ideas. The work and effort of activists opened a new area for me. I feel it is useful to consider them under my architectural studies, and combine them together. The environment and

politics are the main interest of today's work in both art and architecture. It is very important to consider our design in the time that we are living. The rebel and disobey of the activist towards today's political systems is the major for me. The creed that market is God is not believed by everyone, and it should be challenged by both the artist and the architects.

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