

Encouraging Magical Realism in Chinese Architecture

This paper is inspired by the thought of Adam Sharr, who gave a presentation on the topic of 'Strange Decision: Subversiveness and Magical Realism in Architecture' within the Agency Theory Forum.¹ Some interesting thinking of magical realism in architecture given by Adam Sharr would be highlighted in this paper. Moreover, I would argue how the notion of magical realism could be applied to evaluate the agency in Chinese architecture.

What is magical realism?

Magical realism is a genre of literature which generated in around 1950s in Latin America.² The literature of magical realism is based on the reality but mixes a lot of strangeness into the reality. However, the strangeness in the reality could be accepted through the logic of magical realism. And this drives the world in the literature mysterious as well as surprising. The literatures of magical realism reflect the objectivity in reality but also describe the curious happenings which reflect the society in that time. We can see the literature of magical realism through Adam Sharr's words:

'Wars, colonial exploitation, a massacre and the ever-present drudgery of housework are the circumstances in which occur birth, life and death, love, marriage and incest. A plague of insomnia, children born with pigs tails, yellow flowers raining down, a public ascension to heaven, alchemy and prophesy happen at decisive moments in the narrative and are accepted without fuss by the natural order of things.'³

The aim of authors such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Isabel Allende and Jorge Luis Borges in magical realism is to reflect the poor lives' quality of people in Latin America, which encourage the people to fight for the colonial exploitation and the better lives.⁴ However, the notion of magical realism could somehow link to the evaluation of the agency of architecture.

Idea of magical realism in architecture by Adam Sharr

Adam Sharr who gave some creative thinking to the design of the house in Ingoldingen, Germany, certainly believes there is possibility to evaluating the agency of architecture by the notion of magical realism.⁵ Magical realism emphasizes the strangeness happens everywhere in reality. It leads to the thinking that creative outlook should be encouraged in architecture.

First of all, changes should be taken in the design of building under the current situation. Architecture is all about people's living. It emphasizes everyday life. All the usage within a building should be well organized within the mind of inhabitants. As

an architect, paying attention to the daily routine contributes greatly in design thinking. However, the usage of buildings would change in terms of different inhabitants. And because of that, different shapes of buildings, different selection of architectural elements and different organization of space could be generated in terms of different projects no matter what the general image of that kinds of buildings are. Everything is changing over time, including construction elements, architectural style, building materials, etc. We should not continue the old notion of architecture which is not suitable for the living of the inhabitants.

Moreover, we should generally obey the rule of planning, but in specific moment some new notion of design could be explored in terms of the special habits of the clients. As an architect, we should possess the notion of creativity anytime and anywhere. Inhabitants' individuality is crucial to the contribution of producing the most incisive design. Exploring the parameters of brief, the site which vary greatly between different projects in depth contributes to the suitable decision making of design. Even we encounter to design two same types of buildings, with consideration of life style, individuality of two different clients, we can avoid designing the same building but different ones which are suitable for inhabitants respectively.

In addition, the economy within the field of construction is a huge obstacle of progress of creative thinking in architecture. Not every good design is money-consuming, but with sufficient financial support, great masterpieces could be imaging. Most of the time, the clients, especially some professional and institutional clients who want to control the costs of construction, hire the consultant team to do the costs management. The consultant teams qualify everything exhaustively. In that case, architects who connect the clients and the buildings most closely, would become passive in the project as well as less creative. Moreover, the instinct of architecture is not measured by profits, which are presented in the way of charts, bills, etc. The comfort of the inhabitants and the pursuit of perfect does not equal to what could be measured by money. However, the thought of magical realism could changes the fate of profit-focused construction industry, which states in Adam Sharr's words 'As long as economic logic is unable to deal meaningfully with delight and dreams and fear and love – unavoidable constituents of architectural experience – curious motivations will remain ever-present and stubbornly resistant.'⁶ In this game between architects' creative thinking and profit-focused construction industry, only the inhabitants themselves could really have the power to guide the architects to making creative changes despite of the profitable focus.

Why Chinese architecture need the thinking of magical realism?

By considering Adam Sharr's thought about magical realism in architecture, I understand the core of it is to be creative in the design of architecture. We should have the thinking of making progress with everything, change whatever seems mundane and improper. As a developing country, China has a lot of defective thinking

to architecture market. And most of them need to be improved or changed to continue the development in the future.

Reform and opening policy has operated greatly since 1978 in China. Ever since the reform and opening policy released, China has dramatically developed to one of the strongest countries in the world. Because of the booming of economy and technology which is due to the reform and opening policy, the consumption of building is huger than any time before.⁷ Since China became an industrial society, large amount of modernism architecture has become the protagonist within the architecture market. Modernism architecture which came into existence in 1920s, encourage the succinctness in architectural design. It emphasizes the methods of rapidly constructed. Construction elements would be designed following the similar approach, which could be both easily and rapidly constructed. Under that situation, buildings seem similar all over China.

Some buildings representing the traditional spirit of China continue to be constructed. These buildings in the form of Chinese traditional architecture are just simple continuance of the building in Chinese history. And the elements of the traditional building are complicated to produce, which is unreasonable to the construction and the costs of it. Moreover, consumption of the massive architecture is large in Chinese architectural market. The design of the form and organization of the space in traditional architecture is unsuitable because principle technology of Chinese architecture is with the relatively small buildings, e.g. residential buildings. Changes must be taken into account to convert the situation of the anonymous buildings.

The system of architectural education in China is not well-organized. It simply emphasizes the architecture in the narrow sense. Unlike the architectural education in western country which has deep foundation of theory and culture, Chinese architectural education just focus on the technical training. How to organize the space, what sorts of material should be used, how is the ventilation in the building are the usual topics. In terms of the relation between architecture and sociality or economics, the education rarely talks about. In my opinion, it is all because of the rapidly growing consumption of buildings which need to be designed and constructed in relatively short period. The defective of education leads to the defective of architecture. A lot of copy buildings are generated because of the lack of architectural sense and time. Influenced by the post-modernism, deconstructionism in western countries, a trend of avant-garde design enhances. The character of this design is simulation of the appearance of western architecture without thinking the meaning of the building.

There is no denial that the status of the architects in China is not high. Among all the roles within the process of construction, such as clients, contractors, architects and construction worker, architects ranks the third in terms of responsibility to the projects. Although architects are related to the design and the clients, but in many

circumstances they submit to the profit-focused construction industry. In addition, some of the clients are typical business people who just focus on profits. Seldom of them get the sense of aesthetics. New western buildings in China are generated under that situation. New western buildings which represent the worship of everything foreign are decorated by using the elements of the classical architecture in western countries. However it is actually putting on a nice 'clothes' for the building. If get rid of these elements, it is totally a modernism architecture.

Example of magical realism thinking in Chinese architecture

Although there are a lot of inappropriate situation in the Chinese architectural market, some of the local architects make the efforts to change it. This phenomenon, in my opinion, could be deemed as the magical realism thinking in Chinese architecture. One of the examples of it is the modern Chinese style architecture.

Modern Chinese style architecture is one of the most popular architectural styles in China these days. It reflects the continuity and creativity of Chinese architecture and Chinese culture. As a country which has five thousand years of history, China has wonderful culture and ancient architectural achievements. Through years of evolution, these styles of architecture have been proved to be excellent and suitable for the living of inhabitants. Modern Chinese architecture combine with ancient Chinese architecture and elements of the modern architecture from western culture, represents the excellent combination of foreign and Chinese culture.⁸

Modern Chinese architecture consists of two parts which are continuity and creativity. Continuity is crucial part within it. A lot of ancient Chinese architectural elements which is suitable for inhabitants through years of evolution need to be continued. Such as the classical gardening architecture in Suzhou, courtyard houses in Beijing which are comfortable to the inhabitants are recommended to continue.⁹ In terms of the creativity, the differences between the ancients and modern people should be considered, especially the domesticity within a building. On the culture level, this could be how the communication within people themselves, nature and architecture is in the modern lives. We could not use the style of ancients living without changing. In addition to research of the domesticity, the application of modern architectural elements could be important as well. The combination of modern architectural elements such as glazing, steel and reinforced concrete and the form of architecture should be well considered. In terms of the appearance of the architecture, the ancient Chinese architecture were decorated with great care and complicated, which opposites the simplicity of modern architecture. In that case, the appearances of modern Chinese architecture are designed in the forms of simplicity which drives the building as a modern one. However, we can see there are a lot of buildings just simply wear the 'clothes' of ancient architectural elements. It is the typical misunderstanding of modern Chinese architecture. The correct ones get the Chinese character both inside and outside.

One of the most successful examples of modern Chinese architecture is a community project called 'The Fifth Courtyard'. The project is located in Shenzhen which is in southern part of China. I would like to discuss magical realism in Chinese architecture through this project. Continuity and creativity are both in the project. A lot of classical form of ancient Chinese architecture such as Beijing courtyard houses and classical gardening architecture in Suzhou has been applied in this project. However, some of the ancient elements need to be changed and other modern architectural elements were used in it because of the unsuitability in modern people's lives. This could reflect the notion of magical realism. Courtyards which are deemed as the soul of ancient Chinese architecture have been applied in this project. Courtyards could easily organize the ventilation within buildings as well as served as a view of nature to the inhabitants. However, the implicit lives of ancient Chinese people drive the courtyards to be isolated from outside. Considering the modern lives, courtyards in 'The Fifth Courtyard' were designed to be openness so that to encourage communication of inhabitants within the community. Moreover, garages which were not in the ancient architecture have been designed to combine with courtyards. In terms of the form of architecture, simplicity acts as an important role, which I think is affection of modernism in Chinese architecture under the social context. The complicity of tile roofs have been changed into steel roofs in simple geometry shapes. The simple full height glazings were put into use instead of complicated decorated windows in order to contribute to the view as well as ventilation. The applications of basements are a new idea of ancient Chinese architecture. The basements could maximize the space within a building as well as give inhabitants another way of living. The design of descend courtyards which is also a creativity beyond the ancient Chinese architecture is related to the basements. Descend courtyard change the two-dimensional plan of courtyard to a three-dimensional way of planning, put the effort to ventilation and natural light within a building. In addition, new technologies such as energy-saving technology which is the blank in ancient Chinese architecture were applied in 'The Fifth Courtyard'. In my opinion, all of the creativity within this project could be evaluated by the notion of magical realism.

How to change the situation of Chinese architecture?

The notion of magical realism should be applied through in the field of architecture. The core of it is to change everything which is not suitable. There are some thought of renovation in Chinese architecture. First of all, we should not focus on the conventional patterns of architectural design. Conventional patterns were generated in the previous certain time and suitable in that period. However, it is not suitable if we continue this pattern. So we need to get rid of it and make some renovation, such as the renovation of thought on architectural design and the change of some architectural regulations which are not suited for the development of architecture. Moreover, architectural education is very important in the development of

architecture. However, we can learn something from the western countries about the architectural education which are developed through a long period. We could also use advanced thinking and technology from abroad to improve the architectural condition. Through years of development, the architecture in western countries is advanced. Both the humanity of architecture and the construction of building are well developed. Compared with western countries, China which is a developing country simply focuses on the technical aspects of construction because of the large consumption of building and time stress from the project. However, the most important parts of architecture is to create a comfortable space for the inhabitants. Completely understanding about the lives of the domesticity of the clients and challenging parameters of the brief can be the core of creative thinking in the architectural design.

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