

Design a relationship between user and space

MAAD Maggie Sun

Abstract: This essay aims to discuss how an architect can deal with the relationship between user and space. By the “Taking care of public space” project, I try to research a political model “agonistic pluralism”, discuss the process of users’ participation. How a dominate space be appropriated, public space can be taken cared of by individuals. Create humanistic buildings using flexible design language.

Introcuotion: The relationship between user and space is a topic which is quite important to design, an architect who can respect the relationship and make an active response will design better space. In this essay, I refer to Mouffe’s political theory and Henri Lefebvre’s the production of Space to discuss the topic, and develop some design strategies to develop the relationship.

Through the Theory Forum, I attended a group which concerned on the public space .The project Garden Service was commissioned by art institute (The Common Guide, Edinburgh and DCA, Dundee).They seek the rights to own the garden for the local residents, give them space and stuff to build by themselves, the result is amazing. By organizing and observing the project, they explored the democracy model of participation, find a public expression of private care and a shared benefit, I think it is worth thinking.

When the architects began the project, they found some theoretical base from << politics and passions>> and essay of Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism which were both written by Chantal Mouffe. “Politics”, on the other hand, indicates the ensemble of practice, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of “the political”.(1) The architects used political models to explore the participation process of the garden. The garden would be used by the residents, how can it achieve a kind of democracy between its users? In the model of “deliberative democracy” model, in order to achieve a kind of rational consensus, people have to give up their own thought, they can’t think politically, ask questions and offer political answers. The Voting by showing of hands for some existing proposals is a direct way to get a consensus, but can it include all the ideas of the individuals? Can it solve the complicated problems with a lot of possibilities?

However, the Mouffe offered another model “agonistic pluralism”. Politics is always concerned with the creation of an “us” by the determination of a “them”. In the “agonistic pluralism”, “The crucial issue is to establish this us /them discrimination in a way that is compatible with pluralist democracy.” “Envisage from the point of view of “agonistic pluralism”, the aim of democratic politics is to

construct the “them” in such a way that it is no longer perceived as an enemy to destroyed, but an adversary.” (2) An important difference with the model of “deliberative democracy”, is that for “agonistic pluralism”, the prime task of democratic is not to eliminate public’s passions to render a rational consensus, but to mobilize those passions towards democratic designs, to encourage people engage in this democracy process.

In the project of garden, they applied this theory, architects created opportunities for the residents discussing, the specific plants they want to have, where to put them, how to put them..... Every Sunday, when residents came to the garden, they could “DIY” using the tools and plants provided by the architects. In this case, architects played a role of helping organize and arrange the activities, collect ideas, accelerate the achievement of these ideas. This participation process is not only driven by the users, it needs the architects as a catalyst. The architects should know the process of people make decision, know how to make it democratic to meet people’s needs as much as possible. You can imagine many traditional methods which make people have less passion to build the garden, because they can’t change the garden as they

want, they will not engage in it. To some degree, the process of build can be seen “agonistic pluralism”, it combines all of the residents’ opinions. In the survival of the fittest principle, the good opinions will come into reality.

To rethink this project, I feel architecture is an art including the relationship with its user, as an

Taking Care of Public Space
 a seminar with Meike Schalk and Apolonija Sustersic



Meike Schalk and Apolonija Sustersic will be presenting additional material from their projects to facilitate discussions around questions of “social space” (Lefebvre), “performance and performativity” (Butler), and “agonistic pluralism” (Mouffe). In order to prepare for a good discussion, students should read the following literature:

Henri Lefebvre, *The production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), from the chapter “Social Space”, XI, pp. 164-188; and from the chapter “Contradictions of Space and Differential Space”, IV, pp. 356-357.

Judith Butler, “Excerpts from Subversive Bodily Acts”, in Jane Rendell, Barbara Pennes, Ian Borden, *Gender, Space, Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 96-98.

(Both Mouffe texts are published on the net)
 Chantal Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism”, *Political Science Series 72*, edited by Christine Neuhoff and Gertraud Hafner (Vienna: Institute for Advanced Studies, 2000), pp. 1-17.
http://www.ihs.ac.at/publications/pol/pw_72.pdf

Chantal Mouffe, “Politics and Passions. The stakes of democracy”, *CDS Perspectives* (London: Centre for the Studies of Democracy, 2002), pp. 1-16.
<http://www.wmms.ac.uk/~st191/pdf/Mouffe%20P%202.pdf>

Grant Hester, “Conversation Pieces, community + communication in modern art”, *University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2004*, pp. 82-123

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architect, I should understand how people cognize the space, how they make their own connections to the space, and how they interact with other people in the space. After that, it is a wise way of using their language to engage them. For example, if you are going to build a kindergarten for children, you could design some games even provide some awards to them into the survey process, because you know they would have fun and be happy to express what they think it might like about the kindergarten.

In the seminar, we also discussed a “space park” project which is a huge waste of time, money, and labour force because of the false estimate of the architects. The space park was built in a small town in order to attract people to visit at the beginning. The developer invested a lot including the large area of land, the technology equipments for visit, and the expenditure of construction, expecting a good return. However, the fact is opposite. The native children were all led by their parents to “Space Park” for one time, and their parents couldn’t afford to take them there for a second time. There were few people from other cities or town liked to drive a long

way to see the “Space Park”. As time went by, the developer was anxious about this situation, finally they worked out an idea of turning the space park into a shopping mall. It would provide more employment opportunities for the small town. Nevertheless, the people who came for shopping were not much more than the people who sold commodities. What a dilemma it is now! The developer still wants to get the money, they are struggling with the problem of how to make use of the huge space, but what can they do now? I remember the music in the documentary film was bleak, I can experience the hopeless feeling of the people in the town. They have desire, but can't organize the action, what if the developer and architects had collected ideas from the native people before building this monster?

From another angle of view, the project is a good example of dealing with dominant space and appropriation space. “Dominant, whose acme we are fast approaching has very deep roots in history and in the historical sphere, for its origin coincide with those political power itself. Such space are usually works of construction rather than ‘works’ in the sense in which we have been using the term, and they are not ‘the product’ in its narrow, modern, industrial meaning.”(3)

At the beginning, the garden was controlled by the government who wanted it to be used for city tourism. However, there were little tourists visiting the garden because they would think it belong to the residents, while in fact the residents couldn't use it. The thing liked a paradox .

The art institute noticed that and strove for the rights on behalf of the residents, after that the government gave the rights to the residents. In this process, architects acted as mediation and brought space into play. What is the public space? Can a public space used by individuals privately meanwhile? The public is composed of lots of individuals.....These questions come into my mind. Then I read the book<<The Production of Space>>, Henri Lefebvre points the paradoxical situation that in order to protect public space, and the individuals in public space, a space is dominated by rules and regulations. A situation created for preventing violation is always immanently built upon a conflict between domination and appropriation. Before the project, as a dominant space, the garden wasn't appropriated by any residents, so it counted for nothing because no one can use it.

In this project, the architects put the activities to shape space, the appropriation makes space valuable. As what is said in the book, although there is always a spatial conflict between domination and appropriation, dominate space and appropriate space need to be combined. However it not always easy to decide in what respect, how, by whom and for whom it has been appropriated. Once the architects made a good beginning for the residents to get a spontaneous results, the process can be seen that the dominate space is appropriated, what really effect is the generation and the abandonment of residents' wills. It is the residents' ideas, actions that make the garden as it is now.

The very act of participating in these exchanges of ideas made the residents better engage in discursive encounters and decision-making process. For one thing, they were led to see themselves from others' angle of views and were, at least, able to be

more critical and clear about their own opinions. Because when one has different opinion with others, he need to find some reason to support his view, then he will persuade others, achieve his ultimate goal. For another, “DIY” in the garden create a space from which that environment can be perceived and transformed. The connection with space is not only in the physical sense, but also in the mental sense. After planting something in the garden, people will have special feelings to the place which can drive them go again to see how their creatures are. The use of the space is a process which can be enhanced, once the connections between people and the space are built, people can add new meanings to the space continually. In fact, the architects create an objective space to let people make some personal links, make a dialogue between people and space, the objective space becomes a subjective space for people. This appropriation process of dominated space adds much more new texts to of the space.

How can architects apply the user-space relationship into the design process? As the writings in <<actions of architecture>>, “.....Two related ideas maintain this hierarchy. The first, the denial of the user, assumes that the building need not be occupied for it to be recognized as architecture and the second, the control of the user, attributes to forms of behaviour acceptable to the architect. To imply that they can predict uses, architects promote models of experience that suggest a manageable and passive user, unable to transform use, space and meaning.”<4> In fact, sometimes the models made by architects are at variance with the real life. For example, when my parents bought the house for my family, the developer said that there would be a green ecological hall on the ground floor. But after lots of people moved into the block, there are few using it as a natural leisure space because people can enjoy nature in the real garden, in this case, the user don’t act as architects’ intention. As the example of the “space park”, when architects are commissioned by the developer, they had to meet developer’s demand, sometimes it is hard to take the rights of the user into consideration. Shouldn’t architects serve for the users? If we keep it in mind, there would be less impractical, fault design.

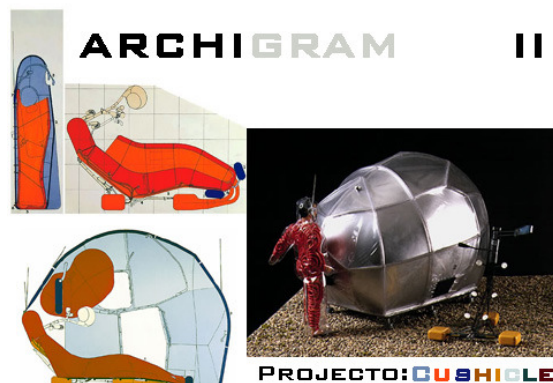
Given the relationship between user and the building is statistic and simple, the design will become an meaningless work, users can’t gain any fun from the spaces we created .I think as an architect, it is good to rethink what we have done at short intervals to check if we are trapped in the intricate network made by ourselves, we should also try to discuss with others, and see the design from a different angle of users’ view. At the same time, observation to how people occupy the space is also a good way to avoid impractical design at normal times.

In fact, building is not a machine which can “work with people”, it is a machine “worked by people”. The architecture is not only an object, but also includes an active relation between the user and building. In the traditional meaning, the residents are passive users for the garden, they can do some activities as what the architects planned, but in the garden project, the architects give the residents the scope to the imagination, everyone can appropriate some of the garden , change it , turn his idea into reality. To some degrees, the residents have become a kind of creative users.

Every user has its creativity, comparing one design proposal to the sum of their creativities will be a stressful thing for architects, but making the building have as many as possible uses is an effective way to make use of the people’s creativity. “Flexibility is based on the principle that a building can absorb, or adapt to reflect, changes in use”. (5)

In nowadays, architects have some strategies providing the building a lot of possibilities, for example, a regular structure with light-weight, uniform demountable floor, wall and ceiling panel. If people can change the division of the space by mounting walls, they can easily get whatever they want from the space, open space or close space.

Furthermore, projects focusing on the interface between users and building have come out. The interface between biotechnology, cybernetics and architectural technology have makes the new progress for the relation between user and the buildings. The “Cushicle” by Mike Webb proposed spaces that are an extra skin to the body and the “apparatus-House” imaged the house as a body composed of apparatus, the



buildings can have the characteristics of a physical body. From the “Cushicle”, we can see the prospect of relationship between people and the building, if we can coexist with the building naturally, the environment will be more harmonious.

Open space is another strategy for increase the possible uses of space. Open space can make changes of use which is dependent on the changes in the perception of the user, the sliding door is a good applicant of this .When people can go though the space freely , making different flowing circuits, an open plan succeed in shaping a flexible space. There is also another example of Foreign Office Architects’ project for Yokohama Port Terminal, they made an articulation of a passenger cruise terminal and a mix of civic facilities for the use of citizens in one building. The project starts with what the architects have named as the "no-return pier", with the ambition to structure the precinct of the pier as a fluid, uninterrupted and multi-directional space, rather than a gateway to flows of fixed orientation. In fact, this building blurs the boundary between interior and exterior, and is a three-dimension used building. From this case, we can see that not only architects can make some passive response to the relationship between user and space , they can also make some new chance for them, exploit the potential.



Conclusion:

Architects should apply social knowledge and design language into the process of exploring the relationship between the user and space, make our buildings more humanistic and imaginative.

Reference:

- 1 Chantal Mouffe, Deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism, p15
- 2 Chantal Mouffe, Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism, p15
- 3 Henri Lefebvre, The production of Space, the chapter "social space", p164-165
- 4 Jonathan Hill, actions of architecture, p10
- 5 Jonathan Hill, actions of architecture, p31