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Recommended Citation

Lin, Sin-Yu, "Aesthetics Of Public Space : Taiwanese And Western Concepts Of "public"" (2021).
International Programs. 168.
<https://surface.syr.edu/eli/168>

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Aesthetics of Public Space

Taiwanese and Western Concepts of "Public"

Lin, Sin-Yu



Figure 1 The Ghost Festival, Sinyu Lin, Aug 2021



Figure 2 The Acropolis of Athens viewed from the Hill of the Muses <https://www.flickr.com/photos/carolemage/14220794964/>



Figure 3 Taipei Performing Arts Center. <https://www.oma.com/projects/taipei-performing-arts-center>



Figure 4 Shilin Night Market, the king of night markets in Taipei <https://www.nickkembel.com/best-taipei-night-markets/>

Background

As shown in the Figure 1, recently The Ghost Festival had been held in my hometown. It is a private ceremony, but the street, which is supposed to be public space, is sharing its space with the private ceremony. It is almost two-thirds of the street. Sometimes, they don't even need to apply for the occupation, they just do it on the street. Though it is quite bothersome when people are chanting and occupying on the street, I would rather conceive of it as an interesting phenomenon and figure out something interesting in it. Moreover, I will compare the concept of public and private from the western perspective to the concept of sharing in Taiwanese perspective.

Professor C. David Tseng¹ states that it is always challenging for Taiwanese to distinguish the difference between public and private, for people tend to regard public space as "sharing space." Of course, it does not mean that there is no "public" space in Taiwan. However, the general public had not acknowledged this term before the 19th century, when the Japanese colonized Taiwan by introducing western urban governance. From the West's perspective, particularly from the Classical Greek period, the public was served in Acropolis², which represents "city on the hill" and sacred space, and Agora, which became Forum in Rome³. In a way, they separate private and public into different spatial characteristics—they even isolated religious space and living space. On the contrary, in Taiwanese culture, people tend to weave public and private spaces together. It turns out, the boundary between public and private becomes blurry. They share spaces where every individual owns them. However, why is knowing how "sharing" works essential? Jacobs mentioned that designers and planners should not separate different kinds of uses in urban spaces; instead, they should consider a combination and mixture of uses, which should come with an uncertain area, so people would start sharing spaces⁴. Though a mixture of uses in a city can negatively impact a place, we should not give up the opportunity it brings us—making a place more livable and flexible.

Public spaces from the Western Perspective

Two public space prototypes were developed in Ancient Greece—Acropolis and Agora, which became the core models of the western perspective of public space. Acropolis (Figure 2), which would be regarded as an exclusive public space as it was only for the aristocracy, few people, and ritual ceremony, was a root type of what we call "public." People took hundreds of steps with relatively high risers, up to an overall pitch of 45 degrees for approaching the area. In actual practice, however brief, the requirement for such an intensive effort excludes less physically able people, limiting the steps⁵. As a result, the Acropolis was more likely a sacred space than a living space. However, it also had publicity and functions. The space of the Acropolis showed significance as ritual function, aesthetic space, and festival space. Agora, on the other hand, at the bottom of the Acropolis, separated from the pure Acropolis, was a kind of open space of assembly in the city-states of ancient Greece. Generally, Agora (Forum in Rome period and Piazza in the middle ages) was a place where people gathered together, allowing people to debate on public issues, assemble, or conduct business. Agora provided the function of commerce and daily activities. There was a hierarchy between the religious and the general public in ancient Greece. Followed by this context, modernist urban planning, which Le Corbusier introduced, shared the same concept⁶. It divided different kinds of uses into other areas with a clear hierarchy. Each service had its explicit definition and boundary.

Conceiving Public Space as sharing

Inspired by the phenomenon of the night market and the street life in Taiwan, Rem Koolhaas described it as he participated in the architectural competition of Taipei Performing Arts Center (Figure 3)⁷, "This arts center would be architecture in limbo: specific yet flexible, undisrupted yet public, order within chaos, iconic without being conceived as such. Mixed with sharing like a night market and hot pot." When, why, and how did this place become so mixed with sharing? Before the 20th century, when Japan colonized Taiwan, there was no such concept of "plaza." From the perspective of the relationship between religious and public space, as mentioned in the last paragraph, Greek people lived in their own private house, gathered in Agora, and celebrated on Acropolis. On the other hand, people from the 16th to 19th century in Taiwan lived in their own houses with markets and temples without a clear and exclusive plaza area within their daily lives. Unlike the Greek city-state with relatively clear boundaries between each area, in ancient Taiwanese cities, they all coexisted together (Figure 5). Without a clear area or a single plaza connecting people, people gather on the street or around the temples. After being colonized by the Japanese in the late 19th century, they started placing modernist methodology of urban planning into Taiwan. The Japanese colonial government imposed rigid urban planning onto the ancient city context. Though it looked awkward and conflicting, it brought an interesting phenomenon when Taiwan was first introduced to Western discipline. They separated residential and commercial areas, planned a public sphere, centralized political places, and introduced modernist infrastructure. However, the Japanese could not eliminate all Taiwanese traditional habits and context. People started sharing items with the public. They put plants onto the sidewalk where it was supposed to be a public space, conducted business with vendors on the arcade, and grew vegetables in the park. They thought public space was a place of which everyone shared the ownership. They continue to feel this way.

Conceiving Public Space as sharing

People in Taiwan tend to think that Taiwanese streets should be improved, for they are disorderly, chaotic, and out of control. Traditionally, modern urban planning has always treated the city as an unorganized and complex problem, turning compact into simple. Indeed, a compact and chaotic environment can negatively impact a city, including noise, air pollution, and public health. However, I would rather conceive of it as an interesting phenomenon and find possibilities in disorderliness. Selected by **《Time》**⁸, Taipei has been on the 2021 World's Greatest Places list, affected by extraordinary circumstances, found ways to adapt, build and innovate. Undoubtedly, Taipei has been growing its order with chaos, making this city livable and flexible. Let us assume that Jane Jacobs would be inspired and amazed by this place if she were here once. Suppose people thoroughly understand this chaos and disordered status and improve its drawbacks, making it an even better place for people to live. This is the enlightenment of night markets, twilight markets, and arcade vendors (Figure 4). It represents distinguishable aesthetics when Taiwan met the western discipline: rigid but flexible; sharing in-between public and private.

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