Street Theater
An installation by
Yung Ho Chang and Atelier FCJZ

From
"Micro-Urbanism" to
"Street Theater"

Yung Ho Chang is a leading figure among a new generation of architects to have emerged in Asia in the 1990s. After studying and working in the US for 15 years, he went back to his native Beijing to establish the city’s first private architectural firm, Atelier FCJZ (“Tei Chiang-Jen Zhu”), or “unusual architecture,” in the early 1990s. In the face of unprecedentedly rapid and radical modernization and urbanization in China and other Asian countries, the questions of international influence and Asian tradition, as well as globalisation and local specificity have become the main issues in architectural and artistic debates and practice. In fact, negotiation with modern and postmodern architecture and culture has a significant history in Asia, occurring alongside many Asian nations’ projects of modernisation. The globalization of the late-capitalist market economy and the economic boom in the Asian-Pacific region in the 1990s have encouraged such negotiation even further and turned it into a veritable theater of innovation. A new generation, including Tsing Ho Kaan, Kazuyo Sejima, Sadiqou Mir, Chi T’ien, Kay Ngoc Tan, and Yung Ho Chang, have opened up a new horizon of creation, carrying out much more diverse visions of the urban reality and highly inventive strategies to envision and construct future Asian cities. As opposed to the previous generation, who defined a regionalism based on recycling Asian traditional elements such as vernacular motifs, spiritually, “Feng Shui,” “Yin and Yang,” etc., they open their minds toward more immediate urban conditions in Asian cities: high-density populations, but uneven economic development, constantly shifting fashions and modes of living, multicultural co-existence of communities, chaotic and unplanned settlements, pollution, traffic congestion, as well as political and cultural transitions in society. More imaginative and flexible strategies and solutions have been brought about by their investigations of real life.

Having experiences in both the West and China, Yung Ho Chang critically observes and analyses the current situation of urban explosion in China. He designs novel and relevant projects to improve the conditions of urban life and architectural creation without simply importing conventional “global,” high-tech and even “virtual” vocabularies as alternatives to traditional or official styles. Putting real urban conditions for human existence at the center of his architectural research and practice, he focuses his work on finding solutions to negotiate more humane spaces and to articulate the excitement and pleasure of urban life in spite of the insidious conditions of high-density, speed, and chaos. It’s true that Yung Ho Chang has been continuously interested in Chinese traditional and modern cultures. However, the possible influences that he receives from Chinese culture are not superficial and formal, as have been expressed by many through replicas of Chinese architectural motifs. He profoundly understands the transformational capacity inscribed in traditional Chinese architecture, as well as specific rules which enrich urban life such as the multiplication of the central unit, “puan” (courtyard), as part of the prevail- ing system of urban expansion. He is fascinated by the dialectical relationship between simple and plain façades and the rich, unfathomable and infinite games of life unfolding behind the high walls between the closed exterior and the open interior. Inspired by the implicit but energetic tension generated by such a contrast, he conceives new concepts and approaches such as “Micro-Urbanism” to explore and reveal the potentials of physically and mentally expand- ed living spaces in the high-
In recent years, the pace and scale of urban explosion in China have become out-of-control in the wake of the economic boom and cultural mutation. Fixing such a reality may be a daunting task. When a city is losing control of its space, can it still function? The usual answers from the urban developmentists, political and economic authorities, as well as many urban and architectural professionals, often fail to apply the classical modernist tabula-rasa strategy to clean up the disorderly urban fabric and replace it with a cohesive and functional city. The challenge of urban intervention is to emphasize the necessity of scrutinizing the reality of existing urban life and intervene in it with open-ended projects in order to revitalize the underlying life and history of the city. He starts his reflections on urban reality and possible interventions by raising the following questions: “If space is no longer at work as the paramount urban infrastructure, does it mean that the once secondary role of the city, which is the primary task of the urban planner, is to do the job of organizing the events in the city by itself?” When the city becomes temporal, would architecture follow suit? Actually he considers the city as a multi-layered and ever-changing process. A “temporal city” or city on the move, his “biomorphic” projects embody perfectly such a consideration. On the other hand, articulation of the multiplicity and complexity of the city and its potential for transformation and invention makes him not only a great witness to the richness of urban life and history but also a designer who endeavors to carry out actions in order to turn the architectural profession into a highly flexible adaptation to real life and human demand. Taking speed as the major element in urban reformulation, he designed a biotask (“Xishu Down”), in Beijing using the bicycle as the basic structure. Another project that Yang Ho Chang is currently working on is a to help urban inhabitants to transform their meagerly dense habitats into more acceptable spaces since the Cultural Revolution many traditional courtyards (Sihe Yuan) in Beijing, which were built for single families, have been distributed among dozens of families. To claim the minimum space for everyday life, many families have built illegal structures. To solve such problems of density, the authorities apply almost systematically the tabula-rasa solution to demolish the traditional districts and displace the inhabitants to the new suburban townships. In opposition to such gentrification and destruction of urban life and history, Yang Ho Chang proposes to help the inhabitants reconstruct more reasonable and efficient structures with solid architectural design. Also, he considers such an intervention as a voluntary action. Obviously, the most challenging aspect of the project is the fact that the architect’s participation in “illegal” constructions will eventually complements and cross over the boundary between the legal and illegal in the organization of urban society like real urban life in Asian cities, which functions beyond the conventional ideas of urban order. It proves that the symbol of both legal and illegal systems as well as order and disorder can become an exciting terrain for architects to adventure. Related to the kind of projects of “light” but provocative urban interventions, Yang Ho Chang also works on projects which challenge and even break the boundary between limited spaces and unlimited perception by putting forth the pleasure of experiencing vision-of-the-reality of the unique architectural structure itself. The result is that experiencing the life in his buildings is a mental world it brings towards an unknown horizon, unexpected discoveries of the Other In his “Upside-Down Office”, he reverses the usual space-vision-ocular order and subverts the conventional distinction between the public and private spaces. One is “forced” to confront an “Other” side of oneself. In short, a joint residence, public and private parts of the residence are merged that the separation between open life and intimacy becomes meaningless in the game of floating and interweaving both the public and private space.

Yang Ho Chang’s architectural projects have been largely informed by other disciplines such as the visual arts, literature, cinema and theatre. More importantly, as a practicing architect, he has been collaborating closely with visual artists. He has designed a Small Museum of Modern Art (SMOCA) for the artist Cai Guoping. Also he has been invited to design the architectural structure for two steps of the touring exhibition “Cites on the Move” (Vienna, 1997, Louisiana Museum, 1999). The exhibition in Aix-en-Provence is Yang Ho Chang and FG1’s first solo exhibition in the US. Interestingly, it is curated by a couple of visual art curators and held in a space which is usually for visual art exhibitions. For this, Chang has created a site-specific installation to provide the audience a direct and corporeal experience with his architectural vision and projects. The installation will function as a “street theatre” in which a scenario of dialogue and negotiation between Beijing’s urban reality and Chang’s innovative and somehow provocative projects in the city is unfolded. He has always been amazed by the image of the theatre. For him, architecture is a theatre-creation a theatre of real life, with humans, real actors in it instead of over-decorated stage design. One day he comments: “Obviously, an over-designed stage can weaken actors’ action and bury a play. There is similar phenomena in the field of architectural design. It sounds a lot unbelievable, but architects often ignore on purpose the demands of the inhabitants and use happy-with-useless ‘great design’. Some architects even intends to replace human thoughts with architectural elements. What they are looking for is a play without actors.”

Definitely, Yang Ho Chang’s “Street Theatre” is an action against such a “play without actors.” Visible from both outside and inside day and night, it is also the most welcoming space for direct participation of the public. The scene in the front room with screening of the projected street views and model presentation provides a particular space for a “micro urban filmmakers” whilst the “peeping” device in the rear room can satisfy one’s curiosity and fantasy of exploring the “backyard” urban life. The project is also an intelligent and efficient “translation” of a made-in-China “cool” reality into the New York context while adding extraordinary visual impacts on the New York street. To conclude, we’d like to quote Yang Ho Chang’s instruction to his students for an exercise called “Left space”:

1. Choose a space granted by ‘official architecture’ for different reasons, such as a lane in a city. Study its effects and functions on events from as many as possible points of views.
2. Displace an everyday event into the space. The event may be very simple in the condition that it does not repeat the same thing as in the original event. Organize the space as to make to event unfold correctly here. The extent of the transformation depends of the event chosen. Perhaps, you don’t have to transform the space. Indeed you only make some architecture interventions on its borders.

© 1999 Hou Hanru/Eveline Jouanno