



Small Museum of Contemporary Art in Chinese landscape 1998-99 Digital print

Street Theater

An installation by
Yung Ho Chang and Atelier FCJZ

Curated by:

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April 22 - May 22, 1999

Apex Art Curatorial Program

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Cover: Original Chinese characters for the Ke Da Ke Xiao installation
Architectural Association London 1998

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From
"Micro-urbanism" to
"Street Theater"

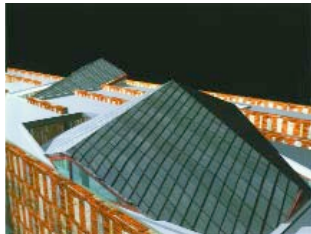


Shanyujan House Living room
Beijing 1998

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 ("Fei Chang Jian 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 globalization 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 modernization. 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 Toyo Ito, Kazuyo Sejima, Sohn-Joo Minn, Chi Ti-Nan, Kay Ngee 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 defend a regionalism based on recycling Asian traditional elements such as vernacular motifs, spirituality, "Feng Shui," Yin and Yang, etc., they open their minds toward more immediate urban conditions in Asian cities: high-density populations, fast 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 transition 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 analyzes 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 insoluble 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, "yuan" (courtyard), as part of the proliferating system of urban expansion. He is fascinated by the dialectical relationship between simple and plain facades 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 expanded living spaces in the high-

Xishu Bookstore Beijing 1996





Roofscape, Small Museum of Contemporary Art, Quanzhou, China, 1998-99
Digital image

ly congested environment. His designs are therefore often focused on creating, in single buildings, diverse and ever-changing spaces which recall real urban life. The conception of the building's interior becomes a type of urban planning while the exterior remains unique but somehow "harmonious" with the existing, chaotic urban texture. The best example can be seen in his recently completed building, "Morningside Centre for Mathematics," in Beijing.

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. Facing such a reality, he questions: "When a city is losing control of its space, can it still function?" The usual answers from the urban planners, political and economic authorities, as well as many urban and architectural professionals, are often to apply the classical modernist tabula-rasa strategy to clean up the no-longer-functioning areas and replace them with completely new urban constructions as once-and-for-all solutions to achieve new social order. On the contrary, Yung Ho Chang's solution 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 suffocating life and history of the cities. 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 time, the once sec-

ondary provider of order, may do the job of organizing the events in the city all 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/thin city," or city on the move. His "Micro-urbanism" projects embody perfectly such a consideration. On the other hand, articulation of the multiplicity and complexity of the city and its perpetual potential for transformation and reinvention 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 reformation, he designed a bookstore ("Xishu Shuwu") in Beijing using the bicycle as the basic structure. Another project that Yung Ho Chang is currently working on is to help urban inhabitants to transform their miserably 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, Yung 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 complicate and even cross 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 symbiosis of both legal and illegal systems as well as order and disorder can become an exciting terrain for architects to adventure.

Related to this kind of projects of "light" but provocative urban intervention, Yung Ho Chang also works on projects which challenge and even break the border between limited spaces and unlimited perception by putting forth the pleasure of experiencing vision-shifts and transgression of the limit of architectural structure itself. The result is that experiencing the life in his buildings one's mental world is brought towards an unknown horizon: unexpected discoveries of the Other. In his "Upside-Down Office", he reverses the usual space-vision-psychological

order and subverts the conventional distinction between the public and private spaces. One is "forced" to confront an "Other" side of oneself. In "Shan Yu Jian" 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 spaces Σ

Yung Ho Chang's architectural experiments 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 Guoqiang. Also, he has been invited to design the architectural structure for two steps of the touring exhibition "Cities on the Move" (Vienna Secession, 1997, Louisiana Museum 1999).

The exhibition in Apex is Yung Ho Chang and FCJZ'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 corporal 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 bit unbelievable. But, architects often ignore on purpose the demands of the inhabitants and are happy with useless "great designs". Some architects even intend to replace human thoughts with architectural elements. What they are looking for is a play without actors."

Definitely, Yung Ho Chang's "Street Theatre" is an action against such a "play without actors". Visible from both outside and inside and day and night, it is also the most welcoming space for direct participation of the audience. The ramp in the front room with screening of the projected street views and model presentation provides a particular space for a "micro urban flânerie" 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 "text" (reality) into the New York context while adding extraordinary visual impacts on the New York street.

To "conclude", we'd like to quote Yung Ho Chang's instruction to his students for an exercise called "left space":

1. Choose a space ignored 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. Instead you only make some architecture interventions on its borders.

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