



II URBAN REVITALIZATION AND CULTURAL MEMORY: RETHINKING TAIPEI'S URBAN RENEWAL PLAN REGARDING WAN-HUA

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Urban renewal planning for cities in the Third World involves a set of complex issues pertaining to the local cultural heritage and its tension vis-à-vis the dominant global forces of urbanism. The changing global context in the latest developments of capitalism, moreover, creates new conditions and new dynamics, which calls for radical rethinking about urban revitalization in general and on the preservation of cultural heritage in particular. The purpose of this article is to begin to situate and untangle the complexities of the urban issue in this new global situation. The vehicle for this critical reflection will be Taipei's urban renewal plan (1997) regarding Wan-hua, a historic district in the city.¹

The dominant urban form in Taipei, the capital of Taiwan, is shaped primarily by rapid economic developments in the post-war decades. In Taiwan, as in many other so-called Third World countries, plans for rapid development have generally meant systematic repression and ruthless destruction of the cultural specificity in the urbanized areas. There was indeed a tragic tension between modern urbanism and the traditional spatial settings. Modernization, after all, was an imperative to develop, lest one should face the threats of national survival. Due mainly to the loss of its cultural distinctiveness, Taipei's effort to enter the mainstream modern culture inadvertently turned itself into one of those important yet faceless nodes in the world. It now has an appearance like many modern cities, a mediocre copy of Houston, Frankfurt, or Tokyo. It is a typical modern, exchangeable, anonymous urban form, a place that represents merely a global unit in the capitalist economic system.

It is Wan-hua, an aged urban district in Taipei, which renders the city a recognizable uniqueness. Wan-hua was founded in the early 18th century under the reign of the Ching Dynasty in approximately its present location. It was an old port town by the Tam-kam River where the Chinese people and culture first settled in the northern part of Taiwan. With the silting up of its harbor, the shipping of rice, hemp, and medicine from the port ceased a century later. Today's Wan-hua is a locale of 130,000 people with a total area of about 860 acres. It is an urban community with visible signs of the past still evident, such as the ancient Buddhist/Taoist temples. In the past decades, these temples have added new significance to Wan-hua, making it an emerging religious center in Taipei. While its commercial area is largely modernized, Wan-hua still provides us with the glimpses of early settlers' economic and cultural life, such as the shops in which artisans worked and musicians performed.

If we were to turn to Taipei's urban renewal plan of Wan-hua and to examine its discussion of the urban issues, we find that in spite of its insistence on preserving historic buildings in this area, this plan reflects in its deployment and outlook

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the ahistorical and universalizing intellectual tendencies typical of the mind-set in the heyday of modernization. It continues the same pattern of throwing simplistic physical solutions at complex societal processes and cultural problems, which assumes that selective refurbishing of the historic buildings will lead to desired qualities in the cultural realm. It is obvious to us that this plan does not respond in any way to the current transformations in global relationships caused by changes within the capitalist world economy. We are referring here to the new world situation created by the emergence of what has been described as late capitalism or global capitalism.² What is interesting about the situation is the way in which capitalism is becoming more geographically dispersed. Businesses and corporate powers need to maintain their competitive edge through flexible responses to global consumer markets and labor processes.³ These new dynamics of global capitalism do have significant cultural repercussions. However, they are hardly addressed in the plan, if at all.

To bring about a more up-to-date vision of a modern city and the direction for its renewal, planners in Taiwan, or in other Third World countries for that matter, need to better understand the economic and cultural dynamics in the latest developments of global capitalism, and its corresponding impacts on cultural politics and urbanism. To achieve a better understanding as such, we have made the following observations:

(1) Global capitalism has transformed Taipei into a pluralistic society which enjoys unprecedented economic affluence. People of the middle class are economically empowered to engage themselves in issues other than those at the subsistence level. Amongst them, one key issue emerges: after decades of unquestioned modernization/Westernization, how do a people in the Third World face their own history? In the past, people in Taiwan regarded themselves as underdeveloped and deemed rapid development as the first order of the day. Today, their economic well-being begets a sense of cultural pride amongst its residents and the desire to seek stronger self-identity. Buttressed by economic viability, political democracy and an environment of social pluralism, people seeking their cultural identity and distinctiveness now find that their previous insistence on being "modern" has lost its steam, and choose to give their own tradition a second look.

(2) Global capitalism's more flexible motion of capital emphasizes the new, the fleeting, and the fashionable in modern life. It creates the disorienting urban experience of living in a "perpetual present".⁴ This disorienting experience is again intensified by the stark monotonous modern urban setting. The triumph of modern urbanism thus inversely produces people's psychological needs to identify themselves with their past, with their ancestral traces still legible in some of their physical surroundings. Against this backdrop, the older areas in the city now function as invaluable therapeutic milieus. The more solid and deep-rooted values inherent in the traditional spatial patterns provide a sense of stability, familiarity and anchorage. The residents begin to cherish the ideals and the emotions that these physical settings represent. The faults of modern cities, as a result, seem to be much

lessened when people can live and enjoy themselves as before in social and cultural relationships provided by the proximity of these more traditional spatial settings.

(3) The historic fabric of places has been viewed as a barrier to economic growth. In the new global situation, however, cities which are able to demonstrate their historical richness are more appealing to those with capital seeking stable and secure locations. Stronger historical identity and greater cultural well-being do demonstrate certain qualities of trustworthiness of a place. Such a place tends to attract long-term investments, instead of short-term opportunist speculation. The distinctiveness of particular places thus assumes greater significance in gathering capitals. Historic sites and cultural heritage now become the dynamic assets that combine the local and the global: they establish the local specificity and cultural strength which are attractive to a globalized flow of capital. In turn, the concentration of capital as its result helps to structure and protect the localized patterns of development brought about by ample economic exchange. This local-global linkage explains in part why the conservation of historic sites can create profitable conditions now for the Third World cities if they seek to retain and expand their competitive edge.

These tendencies as outlined above indicate a set of new dynamics between the forces of globalism and local culture. The global and the local are no longer in a tragic tension as before. In the new world context, they have become dependent upon each other's existence, instead of mutually excluding one another. In short, they have developed a symbiotic relationship, one that is imbued with a certain constructive tension. It is in responding to the impacts of these new dynamics which lies the edge of change: Now, contemporary urban issues in many Third World regions should be understood and seriously dealt with as indigenous place-making processes where a traditional cultural landscape reemerges to claim its due territory and seeks to reconcile with the forces of global capitalism. Such understanding could yield culturally appropriate views on urban development, and avoid the curse of the postwar economic development paradigm: the promotion of wholesale modernization, in places with culturally charged spatial forms or areas where important historic sites are located.

Examined in light of the changing global situation, Taipei's urban renewal plan regarding Wan-hua obviously lacks the awareness that what is fundamental to urban planning for a Third World city such as Taipei is cultural politics, and that urban planning can play an instrumental role in promoting transformative cultural directions and ways of life. It lacks an understanding that, at this moment in time, a project such as renewing Wan-hua has significant cultural implications at the local, the national, as well as at the global level.

Not surprisingly, the renewal plan under our scrutiny here ends up articulating empty principles which are clichés mostly and too vague to be of use in any genuine effort to seek a sensible new urban culture. For instance, the primary prescription for Wan-hua in Taipei's urban renewal plan is tourist development. And yet, the makeover of a heritage

landscape into a production of neatly-packaged tours for quick consumption is questionable. It is an agenda which sets up conditions that contravene the more traditional pattern of life still extant in the historic site. It tends toward the kitsch policy of recapturing the historic buildings in the form of a hollow scenography, which may transform the authentic cultural landscape into a theme park. The significance of this historic site may thus be appropriated for and reduced to market values pending tourist consumption.

Unlike a commodity or fashion trend, a heritage site is the genuine cultural experience of a people as inscribed in the built environment. It is the crystallization and the physical manifestation of their deepest imaginations and feelings. In fact, what makes the traditional spatial settings attractive and moving is exactly their ability to empower the public's imagination and intrigue their cultural memory. A tourist or commodified version of the heritage landscape, however, would only deteriorate the historic area further by feeding the public but flimsy visual impressions instead.

According to Connerton's theory, collective memory can be either inscriptive or incorporating. The inscriptive discursive and representational process of remembering, however, are less powerful than the incorporating rituals which are impressed on our deep-seated experience mechanism through action and form the essential part of our social memory.⁵ In the case of Wan-hua, various ritual activities and religious ceremonies performed in the area do make the otherwise monotonous urban living a fascinating cultural experience. For instance, visitors frequented the temples in Wan-hua. The biweekly (the first and the fifteenth day of each month) observance of worship rituals in the temples attracted a sizable amount of visitors on such dates. These dates of observance are regulated according to the Chinese lunar calendar, which are believed to have sacral meanings in traditional Chinese cosmology. This certainly adds an imaginative dimension to modern urbanism. Moreover, folk legends are often associated with the food, the drinks, the medicinal products, and the goods. Take the snake soup, for example. The cook would perform the art of skinning a snake alive and cook it for the customer. It is a ritual-like performance, a mixture of popular legend and folk beliefs. What makes the soup attractive then is not what is made for consumption, but the ancient mystery and the adventure associated with the cuisine. Such dining activity generates cultural variation and colorful imagination added to the mediocre and insipid modern urban experience.

It is alarming, therefore, to view visitors to the historic site merely as tourists—those wandering observers who get canned impressions instead of intriguing imagination and deeper cultural experience. We prefer an urban renewal plan that accordingly effects a re-centering of people's cultural experience around this historic site, turning Wan-hua into a magnetic nucleus for the public's imagination. The cultural memory of a people can thus be rekindled by the adventure and romance that Wan-hua provides. In our view, this aged urban district in Taipei should be perceived accordingly as the emerging new frontier for Taipei's development—a mysterious and enchanting core of our urban life.

Culture generates its desired space. Any plausible cultural theory of the Wan-hua district, and of its renewal, rests ultimately on its potential to reinvigorate those silent and subordinate folk traditions it now hosts, in order that these traditions can appropriate space in their struggle for territory and manifestation. It calls for the construction of a general doctrine of the historic site as a distinct form of existence, a form of localized pattern of social-economic relations. Doreen Massey (1993) holds that a place "is constructed out of a particular constellation of relations, articulated together at a particular locus," where the social processes are at work.⁶ Manuel Castells (1983) comprehends the city as spatial forms formulated by social actions within a given mode of production: "Spatial forms [of a city], at least on our planet, will be produced by human action, as are all other objects, and will express and perform the interests of the dominant class according to a given mode of production and to a specific mode of development."⁷ In regard to Wan-hua's renewal, we also believed that it is vital for the plan to resonate with the concerns and orientations of the ingrained social relations in this specific locus. Tending to this goal, we need to set up guidelines, thereby reinstating a localized mode of production and consumption as the basis for attaining those social-economic relations.

This localized economic pattern helps to construct place-based activities, articulated at the popular level and in social interactions. Take for example the localized form of exchange in the traditional market place. It is the immediacy and spontaneity of human interaction that is appealing to the customers of the traditional market. The prices of the goods are negotiable. One can get good bargains through knowledge and experience. In this mode of exchange, what has been exchanged is more than monetary credits and commodities. The customer and the vendor in the exchange process share vital social information. It is a process of human interaction in disguise, which creates a sense of social belonging and bondage. This mode of exchange is, in fact, a perpetual form of social interaction that intensifies social identification and reinforces social stratification on the local level. This accounts for the fact that traditional market places, despite their now often ill-managed environments, continue to attract a good fraction of the urban residents.

In our attempt to reestablish traditional social relations, the goal before us then is to instill renewed vitality in the traditional social and spatial structures, by providing them with corresponding modes of production and exchange. In other words, it is to animate traditional cultural practices and social relations through promoting indigenous modes of production and exchange in the area. Traditional market places, crafts-shops, medicine shops, tailor's shops, the traditional retail enterprise, eateries, temples and their "miao-chen" (squares in front of the temples for ritual performances), etc.—these are social agents of our rebuilding localized social-economic relations in Wan-hua and cultural catalysts of the urban-spatial transformation we envision for Wan-hua.

Conclusion

Our rethinking of Taipei's urban renewal plan regarding Wan-hua begins with the more profound conception of "cultural memory" that Wan-hua can trigger, and its role in sustaining Taipei's economic virility in the changing global context. The emphasis, moreover, is put on establishing a milieu of indigenous social interactions. For collective memory is often communicated through the performance of different social activities in particular places.⁸ The traditional social and economic context of Wan-hua, within which the collective memory can be rekindled, should be restored and reinvigorated by reinstating the traditional modes of production and exchange, and the traditional patterns of social interaction and ritual activities. New policy mechanisms and incentive strategies should be devised to secure and enhance the social and economic fabric upon which the desired historicity and cultural vitality is based.

Wan-hua, as a historic site of significance, is indeed at the forefront for planners in Taiwan to deal seriously with the issues of cultural heritage, and to rework the official narrative of development into a new lesson of urban cultural politics. In this new lesson, we envision a genuine multi-cultural cosmopolitanism for the future of the global society in which each member, while actively participates in global relationships, retains its own cultural memory and manifest its own uniqueness. It is intended to achieve an authentic globalization of cultural diversity by reintroducing into the world of the distinctive voices from the earlier forms of urban settlement. It means that each member in the world community can in its own way help reveal societies globally of their complex heterogeneity and their distinctiveness.

Notes

¹ The Bureau of Urban Development of Taipei City, *The Rebirth of Meng-ga: Urban Renewal Plan of the Wan-hua District*, BUDTC 1997.

² Late capitalism or global capitalism are terms coined by David Harvey and Fredric Jameson, among others, to describe a new phase in the development of capitalism which gives birth to the ascending postmodern culture. See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford, 1989), and Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (July/Aug. 1984): 53-92.

³ Harvey, op. cit., 158.

⁴ Fredric Jameson adopted the phrase "a perpetual present" to describe modern men's schizophrenic comprehension of time. See "Postmodernism and The Consumer Society," in *Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed., Hal

Foster (Seattle, Wa.: Bay Press, 1983), 119.

⁵ See Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 37-43.

⁶ Doreen Massey, "Power Geometry and A Progressive Sense of Place," in *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, eds., J. Bird, B. Curtis, T. Putnam, G. Robertson, L. Tickner (London: Routledge, 1993), 66.

⁷ Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (Berkeley, Ca.: University of California Press, 1983), 79.

⁸ David Middleton and Derek Edwards, eds., *Collective Remembering* (London: Sage, 1990), 24-32.

