

POST “*GENERIC CITY*” – WHEN A CITY IS NEARLY EXPIRED WATERFRONT INDUSTRIAL PRESERVATION & DEVELOPMENT: THE SHUNDE CASE, THE PRD

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“As usual, history is a seamless web, a Gordian knot, requiring some more or less arbitrary unpickings in order to get started.”¹

Peter Hall, “*Cities of Imagination*” in “*Cities of Tomorrow*”

“As we move into the unknown territories of the twenty-first century, the unresolved conflict between globalization and diversity and the unanswered question of choosing between international intervention and identity, are increasingly leading to crises as vital as the threat of a nuclear catastrophe in the middle of the last century. The task of critical regionalism is to rethink architecture through the concept of region. Whether this involves complex human ties or the balance of the ecosystem, it is opposed to mindlessly adopting the narcissistic dogmas in the name of universality, leading to environments that are economically costly and ecologically destructive to the human community. What we call the critical regionalist approach to design and the architecture of identity recognizes the value of the singular, circumscribes projects within the physical, social, and cultural constraints of the particular, aiming at sustaining diversity while benefiting from universality.”²

Alexander Tzonis, “*Critical Regionalism*”

In September, which is still summer in southern China, I drove slowly along the river bank. On the river side, there were yellow painted factory buildings, full of the flavor of 1950s and 60s; on the other side, there were arcade buildings which only exist in southern China. Near the bank, there laid small boats which I often took when I was a little kid. The hot air mixed with the smell of river water and river food blew to my face. The time seemed stopped or just passing by slowly, and a familiar pastoral feeling reminded me of my days in Liezhou peninsular when I lived with my grandma who worked in a sugar factory.

At the invitation from a governmental department in charge of culture in Shunde, I, together with some friends who were fond of southern China local culture, came to Ronggui, an old county in the southern part of Shunde. According to local officials, the water resources department, in order to protect water resources, had decided to shut down all the industrial production along the waterfront and were preparing to demolish all the factory buildings and converted the lands into public green lands. My friends turned to me and other architects, hoping that we can come up with some professional ideas to persuade the government to keep these factory buildings and convert them into other uses, such as Beijing’s 798, Shanghai’s Suzhou River or other cultural-art industry.

After visiting so many waterfronts green land parks around the country including peril river delta region, I became insensible to these all similar parks. Now, immersed in the slow living pace deliberately kept by Ronggui, with the southern childhood memory in mind, I felt a sense of responsibility, either as an architect, or as a scholar or as a southerner, to bring the necessary attention to this place which is going to be abandoned and to this living style which we became distant with long ago. What’s more important, through

¹ Hall, Peter, *Cities of Tomorrow*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2002, p.6.

² Lefaivre, Liane & Tzonis, Alexander, *Critical Regionalism: Architecture and Identity in a Globalized World*. Prestel Verlag, Munich/Berlin/London/New York, 2003. p.20.

this attention, the generic meaning of “city identity” during the industrial transformation in Pearl River Delta region would be put under spot light.

“Southern China City”

Before industrial globalization, Shunde was a typical waterfront town in southern China. The network of waterways helped people organize their lives orderly; special arcade buildings protected people against sunshine, wind and rain; special vegetables such as phoenix trees, banyan and artabotrys uncinatus were the ones which only grow in the humid and hot environment in southern China... all these constituted a leisure but also busy picture of “Along the River During the Qingming Festival”. The mulberry plantation and fish pound led to scaled production of silk. By that time, a prototype of a busy yet leisure ecological green city had come into shape.

Industrial city

The “Great Leap Forward” movement in 1958 dragged Shunde to another round of industrialization. The waterfront industrial zones, which were developed by taking the transportation advantage brought by the dense waterways in peril river, became the model of most advanced productivity and most typical urban space at that time. Especially the city scene along the river looked just like European cities in the mid eighteenth century when they became industrialized society.

Generic City

After the early ecological industry based on mulberry plantation and fish pounds and the top-down mandatory industrialization in “Great Leap Forward”, Shunde finally got some unprecedented opportunities from the “reform and opening up”. By creating an impressive GDP through diversified industries such as furniture, electronic appliances and flowers, Shunde successfully landed itself among the “four tigers” in Guangdong’s economy. The successful economic model in peril river delta region ushered in a time of speedy development when townships in China all entered into an all-round industrialization, globalization and urbanization: guided by the sole pursuit for high GDP, cities, in an instant, arbitrarily spanned, deleted and pasted, leaving no room for city managers to deal with; for a time, with a mindset of seeking for immediate interests, arbitrariness and chaos, not only Shunde but the whole peril river delta region was reduced to a universal city scene—a super “generic city” with a population of 40 million.

This phenomenon was pointed out by Rem Koolhaas, a western scholar and architect, as “Generic City”. Just as he said: it is nothing but a reflection of present need and present ability. It is the city without history. It is big enough for everybody. It is easy, it does not need maintenance. If it gets too small it just expands. If it gets old it just self-destructs and renews. It is equally exciting -- or unexciting everywhere. It can produce a new identity every Monday morning’.³

However, how long can this “face changing” game last? The rapid industrialization, globalization and urbanization at the expense of treasured land resources and environment appear unsustainable, especially at a time when peril river delta region’s “take in” and “copying” economic model is on the down turn. Thus it became inevitable that Ronggui’s waterfront industry had to be replaced by sustainable policies such as cleaning water resources and building public green land.

Post “Generic City” = New Southern China

When the network of highways and roads at various levels became as intense as that of the waterways, waterfront industrial zones were bound to reach their final days. Those industries were put into a new round of transformation crisis: while considering preserving industrial competitiveness, the local government, in the name of protecting water resources from pollution and building a sustainable city, not only shut down all the waterfront production, but also demolished the old factory buildings. Shunde’s waterfront industrial site is replaced by today’s popular “public green land” in Shunde’s five-year plan. If it’s true that all the historical dimensions can so easily be erased, isn’t it too simple in renewing city identity?

The scale and speed developed in industrialization and urbanization almost swept all the cities in peril river delta region, no matter first tier, second tier or third tier. After chaos, city space had more or less traces

³ Koolhaas, Rem & Mau, Bruce. *S, M, L & XL*, Monacelli Press, 1995. p.1250

of each era left in it. No matter survived or abandoned, these traces will become the living memories of the city and get involved into the next round of “face changing” game. By for this time’s rules, do we have opportunities to reconstruct and redefine them? Is the logically sound plan—water pollution, factories shut down, buildings demolished and green land rebuild—left us no room for questioning?

- Does the protection of water resources make it impossible to keep these industrial sites? Is it necessary that waterfront public space is in the form public green land; can it be public space with industrial sites in it?
- If the industrial sites are kept within the public space, is it possible for them to be reused as community’s “production space” with no water pollution produced or be used to upgrade the community’s industrial structure and social space?
- If the waterfront industrial site can be kept as “production space”, then is the creative art industrial model of Beijing’s 798 or Shanghai’s Suzhou River the only choice they have? Are they going to be trapped in the cycling game of “thousand factories, same parks”?

When becoming outdated in western world, the industrial preservation and protection, together with the creative industrial parks built on the sites, is spreading around China quietly along with the trend of globalization. But the research on this topic, especially on the industrial reconstruction and city space renewal is just taking start. How can the creative industrial parks regenerate themselves in globalization itself is a tough question. Between the globalization represented by creative industrial parks and the sustainable cities represented by waterfront public green lands, are there other possibilities for bottom-up approaches for renovating city industry and city design based on local culture? Finally, does public space means public green lands or community space? Can we integrate them to make more efficient use of land?

Taking the chance of teaching urban design in the Chinese university of Hong Kong, I hope that I can lead my master student to some in-depth research on Ronggui’s waterfront industrial sites against the background of industrial policy and city space. These students will try to put forward various strategies on design of the city and the future industries for the waterfront industrial zones with a diameter of three kilometers. The slow food, the Education Park X Industrial Design and the Playful Hybrid are such examples; these strategies are based upon the local culture, economy and existing city fabric, and can be integrated to produce new industrial and space strategies.

Epilogue

From industrial globalization to sustainable development, Chinese cities have always been busy catching up with the world pace, even though they can not over take (and they do not know how to). Chinese cities hope to finish the conversion from industrial cities to ecological green cities overnight, and believe that they can accomplish the “face changing” and even “rebuild” simply through repeating the three actions—shutting down, demolishing and reconstruction. Chinese people are accustomed to “understand” their new identity in dismantling the past. But each time, after the “face changing” and “rebuilding”, do we really get a new identity? Or maybe it is only an illusion.

The “generic city” represents a time divider. This concept also sometimes means the Pearl Delta River region. When the “Generic city” is no long sustainable, faced with the global economic turmoil, energy crisis and China’s industrial transformation, the “generic city” will continue to be generic, or become globalized, or return to its special local identity? In a biennial exhibition held in Shenzhen in 2007, the question of “outdated city” was put forward. After so many rounds of outdated, should cities like “generic city” rebuild themselves in the way we demolish all the waterfront factories and replace them by public green lands? To think about these questions, we have to rethink the essence and strategy of city sustainable development. The waterfront preservation & development is the first of a series of questions that “generic city” PRD region has to answer.

When all the questions are asked so many times, I believe the answer is more real and prudent than the conclusions draw from no questions. I also believe the re-generated city can better cope with future’s unknown challenges. Can the one who lost his identity in chaos re-find himself in slow paced life? Slowness at lease is a chance, just as the fastness was three decades ago.

APPENDIX

Slowfood

Fastfood *n.* Inexpensive food, such as hamburgers and fried chicken, prepared and served quickly.

Slowfood *n.* Anatomy of fastfood. However, it means much more than preparing and serving the food slowly.

We consciously eating unhealthy food from the globalization of fastfood; at the same time, we are also eating unhealthy food unconsciously. Poisonous, fake, expired food news are heard every day, and it is getting more serious undoubtedly. What will the future be, if the situation continues?

Slowfood movement was founded in Italy, 1986. It promotes to bring people the real quality of food and original food to people, to preserve traditional, regional food culture and species. It now is developed into a life style but not only about food. Shunde, the food culture origin in Guangdong, should be potentially and proficiently becomes the slowfood origin in China. We believe that the Ronggui old industrial waterfront would be more than suitable to become a slowfood town. We aimed at providing a green waterfront to the city; meanwhile, integrating the natural and cultural food industry with tourism to bring up the economy around that area.

A Playful Hybrid

In the past, large factory premises blocked the view and access to the riverfront. This led to large zoning by programs and a full life cycle (work/eat/play / sleep) was lacked within one zone. We believed that the riverfront should be enjoyed by all Shunde people as water is very important to their lives. We also believed that “play” (leisure) is an essential need of people and that this kind of activities should be available at the site. From our research, we found that the amount of hotels in Shunde is not enough to accommodate the rising number of tourists. We then came up with the following idea:

PLAY + HOTELS = Theme Hotels

“Play” would act as the new leading force to draw people into the site, give lives to the site, and generate income for the locals again. This scheme would benefit both the visitors and the locals. Visitors would have more choices, while the locals would have more leisure activities. This would also led to an increase in job opportunities for the locals since the moving away of the factories. The visitors would also stay longer with the introduction of a large variety of leisure activities and thus more income would be generated. 4 theme hotels were purposed. The Shunde Heritage Hotel and the Leisure Farm Resort are dedication to Shunde’s past. The Water Hotel is to suggest a new use of water, which is leisure, to the locals. The Art Boutique Hotel is a totally new aspect that is brought into the site as there is a lack of it at the site before. They are all situated into the site with the old buildings (forms) and existing fabrics taking into consideration. A part of the site would be dedicated to the locals and the affected local people could move to this part. They could live on the upper floor and carry out their own small business on the ground floor in the long arcade. To put it in short, the locals are taking into account in every move of our project and we believe theme hotels would be the answer for their future.

Education Park X Industrial Design

Looking forward to the future development of Shunde, the industrial design is doubtlessly an urging topic to be promoted in order to uphold the city’s honour, “Hometown of Domestic Appliance”. The potential and necessity to develop industrial design is also recognized by the government, in a way that the immature field has to be pushed forward to bring the Shunde industry of domestic appliances to the leading position.

However, it is discovered that the honour is only built from the government, professionals and manufacturers. The ordinary citizens of Shunde, which accounts for the large portion of city sector, is not included in the honour. Together with the industrial resources available near the site at Ronggui, it is proposed with “Education Park X Industrial Design”.

The proposal aims to be opened and available to all Shunde citizens. It is not the mode of education like other schools, it is a park that everyone can access and have leisure inside. Spontaneous learning mode is suggested, which is carried out by means of daily activities: Living, Moving, Playing and Working.

The park first adapts the valuable factories to be preserved. In between are several nodes of open space to connect through the site in the horizontal dimension while the village in the other dimension. The citizens

could easily access the site by cars or on foot and circulate around by bike. The arrangement of the four programmes (Living, Moving, Playing and Working) are intended to maximize the exposure, experience and discussion when one stroll through to achieve the greatest effect of spontaneous learning. Learning in industrial design becomes everyone, anytime and every action of Shunde citizens.


