



Materiality or Spirituality

An Architectural Phenomenon in the Chinese Desakota Region

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Abstract. At present, Chinese desakota region, which has attracted increasing attention on the Internet, has been struggling with the chaos of regional construction. Taking the architectural design of Evergrande Football Stadium in the urban fringe of Guangzhou as an example, this paper discusses a typical communication case on the architectural design review and public aesthetics. It is a typical example of Chinese ugly buildings identified by netizens, which has become a hot topic in the public eye. Firstly, the background of architectural aesthetics in the desakota region is analyzed and then the evolution of postmodernism in China is summarized in three stages. It is considered that since its first appearance in the 1980s, postmodernism still plays a role in the rapid urbanization stage of the current desakota region in China, which has been reflected in the diverse architectural form.

Keywords: Chinese desakota region · mass communication · architectural aesthetics · postmodernism

1 Introduction

The construction of Guangzhou Evergrande football stadium designed by Hasan A. Syed started on April 16, 2020. According to the project work plan and timeline, this stadium would be completed within three years by 2023. Before the implementation, the real estate investors of Evergrande Group had expected that this would become an international football field with the largest-scale facilities and the highest technical level in the world. This seems to be an ambitious and aspiring program, though it is located in the urban fringe of Guangzhou central city. However, since the design drawing of the stadium has been posted on the Internet on the same day through new media platforms including Weibo, WeChat and TikTok [1], it aroused huge anger of Chinese netizens all over the country.

As the original design proposal introduced, the architectural inspiration for this stadium mainly comes from the ‘lotus’, a plant with philosophical and religious meanings of sanctity and tenacity in the context of Chinese traditional culture. However, the kind moral of the design obviously failed to be welcomed by the public due to its exaggerated form. Moreover, architects, scholars, as well as media staff, actively guided and controlled public opinion through the Internet, where they can freely and openly express

their personal views. On the one hand, this postmodern metaphor of football victory was questioned about the process that only a few decision-makers have determined the final ideas [2]. On the other hand, some people worried that the new building, which covers an area of 150,000 square meters, would make an ugly appearance in sharp contrast to the rural environment. Due to the negative reaction among the public, the second version of the football stadium design was made public on July 3, 2020, completely overturning the former. This study reviews the phenomenon of so-called ‘ugly building’ in Chinese desakota region and traces reasons from a perspective of postmodernism by means of social communication.

2 Background of an Architectural Aesthetic of the Ugly

2.1 China’s Top Ten Ugliest Building Survey

As a way of public participation, the survey of China’s top ten ugliest buildings has been issued yearly since 2010. Then Internet users could freely browse and vote for public buildings through this unofficial website. The latest survey of 2021 involved more than 323,000 people, indicating that people are still concerned about the aesthetics of their living environment in the past decade. One reason is that ordinary people have few opportunities and channels to put forward their views and opinions on public buildings and space design, especially in the desakota region where the level of urbanization is significantly lower than that of nearby cities.

2.2 Architectural Aesthetics Confusion in the Chinese Desakota Region

It is too complicated to comprehensively analyze this kind of social concern about ugly buildings, because it involves different fields such as art, humanism, history et al. But a key point is that desakota in China is in confusion about architectural aesthetics for a long time [3]. Desakota is a mixture of agricultural and non-agricultural activities, usually extending along the corridor between the core of large cities [4], where the building style is influenced both by the urban and rural areas. There is a temporal hysteresis in architectural design in the desakota region, leading to a growing gap with modern cities. With the gradual popularization of the Internet, people living in desakota began to feel more and more dissatisfied with those urbanscapes that were blindly copied or imitated from the existing buildings in the cities. On the contrary, they are attracted by the images of modern architecture in the metropolitan area, of which overseas architecture is the first choice. Such ambivalence of people to architecture style reflects that desakota region has gradually lost their local characters and culture, which are usually identified by the appearance.

2.3 Architecture as One Kind of Medium

The “5W” model of communication proposed by Lasswell H, explains a typical streamlined process of “Who (says) What (to) Whom (in) Which channel (with) What effect” [5]. It is illustrated that complete communication consists of five parts: communicator, information, medium, audience, and effect. In the era of self-media, the challenge

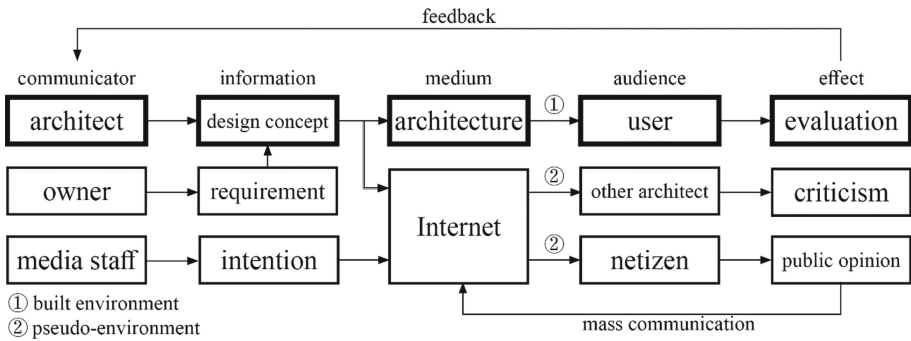


Fig. 1. Architectural communication in the era of self-media.

faced by public buildings lies in the fact that architectural communication becomes more intricate than the leaner one (see Fig. 1). Initially, architects express their ideas through space design and obtain evaluations from space users or building owners. This kind of information feedback includes the comprehensive perception formed by visual, auditory, tactile and olfactory senses in the built environment. But nowadays, this is no longer a single way of communication because multiple sides take part in the design process with their respective purpose, especially for some important projects. With the trend of reading pictures online, architecture has gradually become a hot subject of mass media photography, which is later appreciated, criticized and even rejected by a wider range of audiences rather than space users. The extra effects of criticism and public opinion come from a wide range of audiences except for the building owners. As a result, the two-dimensional visual effect grows into a vital factor in architecture design, driving architects to create a pseudo-environment constructed in the form of pictures and videos, which will be transmitted later through self-media platforms. Consequently, some architects might grab potential chances of becoming celebrities after their products become famous.

3 Postmodernism: A Short-Term Design Strategy with Long-Term Influence

3.1 First Appearance of Postmodernism in Large-Scale Buildings

In the 1960s, the development of postmodernism broke the rational and straightforward fatigue of Western modernist architectural design. Architects such as Robert Venturi and Frank Gehry created figurative forms and diversified grammars of architectural semiotics to express specific or multiple meanings and even the personality of architects. As a scientific study of signs, semiotics puts forward three basic symbols for communication in architecture: icon, index and symbol [6]. About 20 years later, due to the Chinese reform and opening-up policy, this decorative and symbolic way was widely welcomed and imitated by Chinese architects. At that time, the issue triggered a debate about the regional identity and nationality, that is, how to deal with the relationship between modernity and tradition, especially for the representative buildings in public

Table 1. Cases of postmodernism design in large-scale buildings.

| | Case 1 | Case 2 | Case3 |
|--------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Project Name | Fragrant Hill Hotel | China National Stadium | China Pavilion at Expo Dubai |
| Built Year | 1982 | 2008 | 2020 |
| Metaphor | Chinese classical garden | bird nest | red lantern |
| Photo |  |  |  |

places. Chinese architecture circle began to pay attention to the reinvented communicative means of redesigning the historical background in terms of ornament, metaphor and signs et al. The shifting architectural style with unique characters showed a revival of traditional products including Chinese classical garden and red lantern, which were endemic to China. Taking Fragrant Hill Hotel as an example, the architect Ieoh Ming Pei endowed this national-level hotel with veiled meanings and cultural expressions of Chinese classical gardens and traditional dwelling houses. Wang X commented that these are modernist buildings designed in postmodernist languages [7], which led to a deep impact on contemporary thought. So far, it can be seen that architectural ornament and metaphors of nationhood have always existed, especially in public works on the international stage (see Table 1). Not only the national stadium built in 2008, but also Expo pavilion built in 2020 contain specific metaphors to express significant meanings.

3.2 Development of Postmodernism in the Chinese Desakota Region

After postmodernism was widely accepted as the design strategy of public areas such as museums, malls, monuments and stadiums, it gradually permeated from central cities to desakota and rural regions through urban expansion. In the process of urbanization, desakota is facing a situation similar to that of an architectural creative city. Limited by the design budget and manpower resources, a common and less error-prone way of construction practice for the desakota is to learn directly from the city. Consequently, the fake Eiffel Tower, the Arch of Triumph and other foreign landmark buildings reappeared through imitation and copy in the desakota area. By contracts, another extreme way is to follow the tradition and visualize the folk art symbols, rather than worship the foreign signs from the West. These two phenomena exist at the same time, reflecting that desakota is fighting for his identity.

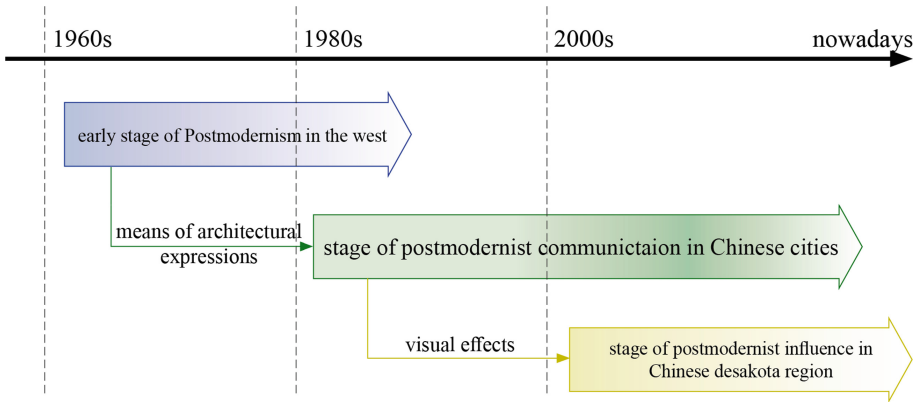


Fig. 2. Development and communication process of postmodernism.

3.3 Beyond Postmodernism

The pluralistic trend of a modernist, classicist, postmodernist as well as the neo-avant-garde in architecture development shows that desakota is losing its autonomy. Recently, more and more people have realized this problem and began to carry out exploratory construction practice in the deskota. They are no longer involved in the disputes between tradition and modernity, representation or abstract, materiality or spirituality. In fact, these are not the main contradictions of today's pioneer architecture, which is intended to keep pace with the development of technology. Advanced robotic technology and material innovation in building construction help pioneer architects to achieve visual effects beyond conventional patterns, which would contribute to unpredictable values of architecture communication and raise people's attention (See Fig. 2).

4 Conclusions

In the world, although postmodernism responded to history and spirituality, its formalistic decoration, linguistic confusion and aesthetic deviation could not be ignored, which eventually fell into decline in the age of consumerism. However, its appearance in China had a far-reaching impact on the shaping of public aesthetics and cognition, and liberated architectural design from tradition. There are two main types of existing states: one is applied to landmarks and national buildings, and the other is to cater to market demand and meet public aesthetic needs. To sum up, the evolution and development of postmodernism in China, especially in desakota area, is full of ups and downs with the enhancement of public awareness. It is reasonable to think further about the alienation of architectural style in the context of the mobile Internet.

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