

Jiejie in Limited Spaces and Small Speaks for Magnificent: Research on the Architectural Philosophy and Practice of Xiaodong Lee

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Abstract—The architectural thoughts and practices of Li Xiaodong present his commensuration design philosophy of the Chinese and western as well as the ancient and modern architectures. His unique design methods including “reserving common points and removing difference, stressing on the field and interface, rendering the simplest conception, moderating the dimension, and weakening the form” contribute to his own design philosophy that “distributing the field and gathering the aura, getting the appearance and describing the connotation, and pursuing the details and staying simple”. He establishes a series of cultural field with clear characteristics and modern Chinese style, which provides great enlightenment for the modern Chinese architects.

Keywords—Li Xiaodong; design philosophy; concentrating on the detail; stressing on the field and interface

I. INTRODUCTION

At the time being the transformation of Chinese architectural design is facing a dilemma, namely on the one hand it is under great impact by modern architecture in which the Western context has played a dominant role, and on the other hand it calls for expression from the connotation for the cultural genes of its own and thereby the terms Chinese Expression and Localized Expression have been heatedly discussed in the industry. Under such circumstances, a number of small buildings, such as the Liyuanshuwu in Huairou, Beijing, Qiaoshangshuwu in Fujian, Yuhuanxiao and Miaolu in Lijiang, Yunnan etc., like a breeze sneaking in, emerge in the remote villages. With the messages of “being ordinary, humble, tranquil, calm, invisible, freehand, and pragmatic for the people”, the young architect, Xiaodong Lee, has eventually moved the whole international architectural community, becoming the first person with a minimum of works to win the most international awards so far in China. With multiple awards in hand, he still leads an easy manner as a scholar devoting into his architectural undertaking and education for the coming generation.

With introspection Xiaodong Lee has explored and achieved the intuitive design philosophy which combines China Image and modern technology, fulfilling the theory of Regionalism of Introspection rich in Chinese cultural feelings. The Small Buildings of him have conveyed the overall artistic conception of the kind going far beyond the previous concept of Space and the corresponding extended connotation. In addition to Space, Xiaodong Lee often

employs an energy-based charisma overwhelming in the buildings invisibly yet difficult to describe. Therefore, the author can only use the concept of Jiejie to reveal the artistic conception and features of the creations by Xiaodong Lee.

Jiejie, a term borrowed from the Chinese traditional religions, means a special space fostered by a kind of supernatural power. In this paper, Jiejie refers to a characteristic energy zone created by certain space and material means; and the methods and strategies adopted to create such a zone. Through analyzing the concept of Jiejie in Xiaodong Lee’s architectural philosophy and practice, this paper summarizes several properties, including space, field, enclosure, character and energy, which usually serve as complement for each other and thereby foster a personalized distinct temperament.

II. SMALL SPEAKS FOR MAGNIFICENT

The design of Xiaodong Lee always turns out to be simple, rustic and weakened with a sense of localism, together bringing in the explicit style of Small Buildings for Magnificent Field. As for the reasons, he modestly explains as the follows: “to work for the designs in villages enables the architect to be free from the constraints imposed by the regulations and mechanisms and parties involved in the city, while he can better manage the whole process from site planning, financing, construction content, design, material processing to construction. In this way, the buildings either from the form or the content have better demonstrated the design intent of the architect.” These words can be employed to explore the nature and significance of architecture within the range of control.

In fact, by his own he has designed and invested RMB1.05 million in 2011 to build the Liyuanshuwu, which is located in border village of Huairou in Beijing. In 2004, he worked for free for the design of Yuhuanxiao in Lijiang, Yunnan, for which he personally invested RMB 80,000, and designed and constructed for the Qiaoshangshuwu in Pinghe, Fujian in 2008. Most of the projects have been completed by funds raised by him and are used for the public good without a penny paid for his design.

A. Magnificent Field in Small Buildings

The works of Xiaodong Lee are often located in a unique environment, in the presence of which he is able to find a charisma that can integrate, reconcile, activate and purify the soul and grasp the proper balance in the traditions and modernism, single and multiple facets, and closeness and

openness by virtue of such humble and powerful attitude and simple explorations.

Liyuanshuwu (See Figure 1), located in a wasteland in the outskirts of Beijing where there is fronting water and with hill on the back, is a steel glass cube measured 30 meters long, 4.3 meters wide and 6.3 meters high enclosed by the fences obtained locally, thus becoming invisible in the nature. Based on a thorough understanding on a combination of factors in terms of project site, materials, and forms and the like, Xiaodong Lee aims to integrate the human-made environment into the natural environment to achieve a spiritual charisma and heavenly harmonious coexistence between man and nature. Variegated shades are projected onto the interior space as the sunlight passes through the firewood fences and start a graceful dancing as the breeze sneaks in. With such changing scenery out of walking it reflects a contemporary interpretation on the traditions.

Yuhuwanxiao (See Figure 2) is located at the foot of Lijiang Snow Mountain in the Naxi village, the world cultural heritage protection base. From environmental, cultural, economic and natural resources, the architect well blends the natural materials and details, the architectural space and the natural landscape, the traditional technology and modernism, and contemporary life and local scenes, to provide a profound interpretation of the rustic Naxi culture which takes mountains as the backbone and water as the soul, and the extra poetic sentiments.

Miaolu (See Figure 3), situated at a spacious open slope at the foot of the Yulong Snow Mountain, faces a vast plain in front of it combining the Yuhu Reservoir and surrounding mountains and beautiful scenery. The buildings integrate with the landscapes to virtually become part of it. With a courtyard-style layout of a meditation atmosphere and calm and reserved exterior, it is separated from the "outside world" through stone walls, ponds and other design elements, while visually opens to the outside environment. In this way, the charisma is maintained as well as the wind and water, creating everything by virtue of the scenery and geographic advantages.



Figure 1. Liyuanshuwu



Figure 2. Yuhuwanxiao



Figure 3. Miaolu



Figure 4. Qiaoshangshuwu

B. Great Ideas in Small Buildings

Xiaodong Lee has deeply reflected over the Chinese Manner, Regional Orientation, Modernism and Individualism of architecture and further integrates the four aspects to provide clear creation orientation, value judgments, navigation mechanisms and procedure paradigms and other working approaches for his design philosophy of "Great Ideas in Small Buildings". Each piece of work rich in connotation is embodied his painstaking efforts, whether from the grasp of the scale and the scrutiny on the proportion to the persistence on the basic standards, or from respecting local culture and climate to the use of local materials, carrying forward the traditions, reducing the volume and dissolving the interfaces, etc. among which there have been

extraordinary great ideas and more abundant extended expressions.

In the opinions of Xiaodong Lee, it is the responsibility of an architect to more than just achieving a small building for a single function, but to address a broader range of issues through the small buildings and take such influences to arouse concern among the people. Take the Qiaoshangshuwu located across a stream between two earth buildings of the Kejia Nationality in Fujian for instance. Due to the particular historic origins, the Kejia buildings are greatly defensive and enclosed in an implicit manner. By virtue of a small "acupuncture" bridge, the design enables a grand narrative connecting the past, present and the future, stimulates a community and activate the entire space of the village; while expresses the major idea that it brings the contemporary generation of Chinese architects to focus on such matters, the vulnerable groups and current architectural creation in China at large.

1) Chinese manner and regional orientation:

With a systematic educational background of Western Architecture and a doctorate, Xiaodong Lee understands well the reasons for the difference between the Oriental and Western cultures and grasps clearly the picture of the local cultures and the status quo in China. All the time he has been committed to exploring to break the barriers between the Chinese and Western architectural cultures, to carry out a dialogue with the West based on contemporary culture and social reality, to probe into the architectural logic and the concept of space combining the Chinese contemporary life, and to discover the contemporary and regional characteristics suitable for the Chinese buildings.

In addition, inspired by the ideology of Baibi in Book of Changes which emphasizes rustic, innate, simple and natural beauty, Xiaodong Lee has developed the design philosophy of "charisma out of layout, freehand works on the scenes and embracing simplicity" and in a pioneering manner made an integration of the features of the form of space---seeing being simple as splendid and respecting being quiet and tranquil---which are commonly valued both in Eastern and Western cultures, to shape the core values of architectural theory and design of his own. Besides, he wisely makes use of the approaches e.g. keeping the sameness and removing the differences, and vague definitions to achieve commensuration between ancient and modern buildings in the West and China. Rather than adopting the traditional Chinese architectural pragmatism of symbols, he through the way of abstract refinement, honestly advocates the spatial images promoted by ancient literati and further purifies, renders and emphasizes back and forth, which actually in practice inspires the kind of Chinese Manner recognized in the industry in the most intuitive and simplest way.

2) Modernism and sense of localism:

Xiaodong Lee has been also committed to exploring a modern vocabulary to interpret the local architectures. For example, Yuhuanxiao is based on where the world cultural heritage is located and is close to the historic buildings. In this sense, the design not only serves to meet the functions and echoes with the historical and cultural contexts as well

as integrating limited resources, but also is required to blend the modern architectural language into architectural creation in an organic and natural manner to show the space images and the spirit of place specific to the region, and to emphasize the creation of images in the expression of space and ideology. Details of all traditional decorations are simplified, e.g. the traditional curved roof is made straight, and the decorations on the gable are simplified as wooden grille, which are further expressed in the forms and space. The gray tile bricks are reserved to divide the interior space by traditional positive bay, thus blending the buildings into the natural environment of farmland and historic buildings surrounded.

3) Individualism:

Without exception the works of Xiaodong Lee turn out to be succinct from the surface. He has always been not deliberately making use of the regional symbols. Instead he employs an abstract generalization of contemporary language other than proper modern architectural language to illustrate the local traditional spaces, which provides a realistic model for other fellow projects that regardless of the noisy and unsettled environment, the building shall provide a quiet and pure space for people to find the self.

Buildings like Yuhuanxiao and Miaolu are made of traditional local materials like wood, stone and others combining the modern materials and technology e.g. large coverage of glass and steel columns. In Miaolu, the steel node at the junction of the outer gallery and the wooden floor, the connection between the wooden beams and the extremely smooth surface of water all accurately give an expression of modernity. While the rock walls and stone paved ground embody a deep sense of traditional crafts. With such distinctive features every building becomes the one unique.

III. CONCERNS FOR SUSTAINABLE BUILDINGS

A. Selection of Local Materials

Xiaodong Lee has been focusing on the combination of local material resources and humane and cultural traditions. For example, in Yuhuanxiao, a great number of white limestone and pebble, cheap resources of abundant supply in the region, are used to construct the white external walls, which not only exist in harmony with local conditions but also can effectively resist against the cold wind for its thickness. Pines, the kind of material the local artisans are most familiar with, are mostly used in the framework of local residential houses. Therefore, the dimensions of pines determine the size of the bay and further define the basic scale of residential houses. While the lime mortar, plaster, wood and stones are used in accordance with traditional practice, thus achieving a perfect combination of design and actual construction experience.

B. Application of Local Accommodating Technologies

Local technologies are adopted to make full use of local resources to adapt to regional natural environment in terms of local resources, materials and simplicity. Local construction techniques are transformed and improved to

refine the elements in the local techniques that are still applicable to date. The accommodating technologies formed out of the harmonious existence turn out to be a choice of dialectics and wisdom.

At the beginning of the design for Liyuanshuwu, he intends to building intervention which is very light and simple to dismantle and replace other than being permanent. As without supply of electricity locally, it relies fully on the design to realize the effects of coolness in summer and warmth in winter. A simple glass box, made of small steel interface to maximize the glass surface, is used to store energy and heat for winter, which requires fewer efforts to select the materials and the least time spent on construction. The plank outdoor is designed with a height as low as to nearly parallel to the water surface to bring the cool wind from the water surface into the interior to carry out direct heat exchanging with the natural world.

C. Inspiration from Acupuncture Therapy

The acupuncture therapy combines Chinese medicine theory and architectural design. Chinese medicine emphasizes systematic treatment and sees a person as a system to achieve the overall repair and balance through addressing a single acupuncture point after a cure found according to the causes. Prior to the construction of Qiaoshangshuwu (See Figure4), the problem of Xiashi Village in Pinghe, Fujian lies in the shortage of public space for the community. With the buildings as the starting point, the design is geared to adjust and solve the practical problems in the region. The design personally selects the site and makes use of modern language to rearrange the new and old buildings in the light of space and solve the problems combining the geographical features. By virtue of such point-wise intervention of acupuncture theory, all bridges, schools and public space become part of a building, bringing solid benefits to local people. The new buildings, in the bold and timely design language, have altered the local lifestyle and behavior and activated the life context of such an ancient village, thus granting the whole community with rebirth vitality.

IV. CONCLUSION

Based on the study and analysis on the architectural theory of Xiaodong Lee and the amateur unconventional construction, it can be seen that Xiaodong Lee has broken the shackles within the system with his root-like passion and responsibility, and opened up a new territory for his own to construct the personalized new realm of fantasyland. In such an enormous common stream of Chinese contemporary architecture, it is the only way home to lead a rebelling attitude, and it is still a long way to go.

In the future the architect Xiaodong Lee, with the philosophical state of mind---inaction of Chinese Taoism in the architectural creation philosophy of minimalist space, original raw materials, micro scale and slightness of expression, naturally conveys his inner state as the essence of Bai Bi in Chinese ancient freehand landscape, he shall feel the ultimate loneliness.

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