

## Can't Push A River

The beginning of the year has seen two interesting architecture workshops dealing with urban river ecologies and environmental rehabilitation. Architect Ti-Nan Chi launched the latest edition of his **Urban Flashes** workshops in Mumbai India dealing with a chain of slums around a river bed and Tamkang University's architecture department held its annual International Workshop on the banks of the Danshui river in Zhuwei, Taipei.

Ti-Nan Chi and his Human Environment Group has organized the Urban Flashes since 1999. The first edition of these international gatherings of architects, environmentalists and other urban thinkers was held in Taipei and since that the circus has toured in Austria, England, Turkey, Norway and now in Mumbai, India.

Chi emphasizes his thinking of Micro Urbanism as some sort of urban acupuncture determining key locations in the cities where small scale interventions could have a big impact to the bigger city organism in general. In Mumbai he had chosen the Oshiwara river bed slums as the possible location for micro urban strategies. The Mumbai Urban Flashes was organized in co-operation with local Kamla Rajeha Institute of Architecture and had participating student groups from Taiwan (Tamkang University), Norway, South-Korea and India. The students were divided into groups and led by architects Sohn-Joo Minn from Korea, Marco Casagrande from Finland and Chi from Taiwan.

There is a great danger in this kind of a symposium or workshop to descent into bottomless academic architectural jargon and raising cocktails to people who raise cocktails to you. Obviously the Indian hosting institute had wanted to go this way but Chi hadn't fallen into the trap this time but instead wanted to push the workshop out of the institute and into the slums of Mumbai...into some of the very worst living conditions on Earth.

### Rich Kids Play Architects

For the most of the foreign students the Mumbai workshop was a shock. Normal living conditions without hot water caused problems in the beginning until the students were faced with the facts in the slums. No more talk about the hot water then. The hygienic conditions in the slums are extremely poor and most of the students fell ill due to various kinds of food poisonings and other stomach diseases. The workshop was just a little more than one week so for the most of the foreign students the time passed suffering physically in different ways or simply just being shocked to see what the dark side of India is really like. The most tolerant were the Norwegian students from Bergen School of Architecture who had spent in India a week before the workshop and suffered the stomach acclimatising then.

But still again the Korean, Taiwanese and Norwegian students formed the real working hard cores of the student groups – sick or not. The Indian students were either lazy or just not so interested of what is going on in the low life of the slums – with a couple of positive exceptions. It seemed that the university studying is more of a hobby for them than a passion and these kids come from the wealthiest families of India every day driven to and picked up from the school by personal car drivers. Every day around five in the evening the teaching stopped and the students gathered together into the inner courtyard to play games. No alcohol, cigarettes or meat was allowed inside the school. The official language in the school is English – not Hindu or other Indian languages.

When listening to the descriptions and briefings of the Indian students about the situation in the slum areas it came evident that the slums are not more than a strange layer in Auto Cad to be played with or erased – not really anything involving human life or at least life worth respecting. The Kamla Rajeha Institute is doing a hard work trying to raise up social issues and responsibilities to interest the students with private car drivers and safe life on the top of the cast –hierarchy. The students could answer to a question, why do the slums exist by saying the the slum people have chosen so – and this choice does not necessarily mean in this life. Being in the slum is destiny like being in the Brahman –cast is destiny and if you want to start changing this, you have to change a lot.

Most likely Chi did not necessarily want to change the fundamental facts of the Hindu religion but in any case he had found a theatre to operate through his micro-urbanism to actually deal with the whole Indian society.

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### Human Dump

The Mumbai slums are situated along river beds and streams which function in the bigger ecosystem as flood water relief channels - Mumbai is hit annually with heavy monsoons. Along these rivers are also situated the many buffalo sheds that provide milk to the surrounding city and buffalo dung as fuel for cooking food. The water buffaloes along the river sides is an old system and works pretty much in harmony with the nature – the buffaloes need the river and the river can handle the organic waste. Of course when the city has grown the amount of buffaloes has grown as well and so the river also functions as an open sewage for the buffalo care takers and that amount of the buffalo dung that they can not handle. So along these buffalo sheds rose the first temporary settlements of the buffalo people and their families that usually come from the poorest areas of India.

Today the city produces a lot of non organic waste and much of this waste is dumped into the slums around the original buffalo sheds. Attracted by the amount of not registered labour the illegal factories found their way to the slums as well and toxic waste of mainly chemical factories was introduced to the rivers which today are pretty much dead.

In fact the surrounding city needs the slums like before the ecosystem needed the rivers: the slums are treating the flood of waste. This may sound actually surprisingly ecological, the urban waste is treated and recycled in the city, but it is not – the waste treatment process has killed the rivers and is also killing the people of the slums doing the recycling manufacturing with poisonous chemicals and in all the ways dangerous working conditions. Besides these the river beds are partly overbuilt by residential areas and the rivers no longer can act as the flood water channels. When the floods come those who can afford will stay in their high rise buildings and many of the slums get simply washed away and many people will drown. People who are living in illegal slums and don't officially exist.

The slums are the end of the line of urban human exploitation.

### Urban Nomads

The Norwegian group with around 10 Indian students concentrated in opening up some view axis's from the Oshiwara river through the slums into the city. Normally the Mumbai citizens don't even see the rivers in their city and don't have to face the shameless ecological and humanitarian situation.

In the river ends of these axis's mainly the Norwegian students built piles of rocks to mark the ending points and then painted these piles orange – a favourite Hindu colour. They even had a Hindu priest blessing these piles, which was a mistake. The slum that they were working with was a fundamentalist Wahhabit Muslim neighbourhood with green flags on the roof tops and ladies walking in burkhas. Declaring the ground with the Hindu land marks was close to a declaration of war and the students had to face some serious hardship in explaining their work of art to the local residents. In the end the piles were accepted to stay.

Korean Sohn-Joo Minn took the experiences of the Seoul's Han river rehabilitation and especially the restoration of the Cheonggyecheon river as references for her group's Oshiwara work. Cheonggyecheon had originally acted the same way as Oshiwara as a flood water channel and then later on got covered completely with a highway. As part of the Seoul's Han –river restoration project the Cheonggyecheon highway deck was demolished and the river rehabilitated closer to her natural condition and is today a famous site for ecology-tourists and city people in large. Cheonggyecheon and the Han river restoration have risen to a state of national pride in Korea.

If a highway can become back to a river also the ecologically hazardous urban waste treatment in the slums can be dealt with and the river can become an honourable part of the Mumbai urban narrative. City must be a compost.

My own group – four Tamkang University's master's students and around ten Mumbai students were concentrating on the existing fact of the slums working as urban waste treatment zones but trying to find solutions how to make this manufacturing ecologically sustainable and reflecting in socially constructive ways to the slums and to the surrounding city.

The Oshiwara river bed slums is not a homogeneous urban fabric but in fact a chain of some 20 slum societies in different illegal – legal settlement stages and with various different ethnical and religious backgrounds. All the slums have their own landlord hierarchies, many work as voting banks for local politicians and so on. All and all the slums are not at all an anonymous layer in Auto Cad but are in fact linked to the society in many ways but

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somehow share the same global tragedy of urban dwellers exploiting the nomads and natives – people closer to nature and as in the classic industrial urban development nature being the great loser.

We proposed a series of high environmental technology MBT (Mechanical Biological Treatment) –units to be attached to the slum societies. Units effective enough to treat even the hazardous chemical wastes and to process the urban waste of Mumbai into top soil, clean water, natural gas and energy and piles of separated waste material ready for recycling. The top soil and the energy would stay in the slum as clean surface for urban agriculture and power supply. The river would no longer be loaded with waste that the nature can not handle. In our point of view the slum people, the urban nomads would have a lot to give to Mumbai.

As a small installation, a glimpse of possible future we placed a mirror floating in the toxic Oshiwara river mirroring the clean blue above and started the first farm together with a grandfather from the slums who originally had once been a farmer.

### CityZen Garden

After Mumbai it was quite a relief to co-operate with Tamkang University's architecture department to organize their annual International Workshop. Professor Haakon Rasmussen-Wiesener (3RW Architects) from the Bergen School of Architecture Norway teamed up with me to run a competition "Urban Acupuncture" to be followed with a one week workshop "CityZen Garden" in Zhuwei, by the Danshui river of Taipei.

The Urban Acupuncture competition entries were in generally speaking quite light weight graphical posters or expressions of more personal traumas, something that is often faced in the Taiwanese architecture schools where the computer skills are overtaking critical thinking and real problem solving. In most cases the students had been inventing problems later on to solve them instead of being confident enough to deal with everyday surrounding realities or questions of normal life.

This danger of design replacing reality or using art and architecture for therapy was avoided in the actual workshop where the students and the teachers were taken Zhuwei to work in 1:1 scale with limited time in real conditions.

Basically all the department was involved except the fifth class and the second class of master's students, who were engaged with their diploma works. Besides the staff professors of the university some 10 visiting scholars were invited to participate in leading the student groups. 180 students took part in the workshop.

The workshop was based on the theory of viewing the modern cities through the traditional Japanese art of Zen gardens. The Zen garden is a visual platform of environmental meditation linking the human nature as part of nature and furthermore to more cosmic entities.

On one hand one can see the Zen garden as a reflection of the surrounding environment scaling down the mountains into its stones or the movement of the ocean into the racking pattern of the gravel. Meditation can build connections and dynamics between the elements of the Zen garden and its surrounding nature. Meditation can also reveal tensions, balances and directions between the Zen garden elements themselves and help the viewer to erase the realities around the garden letting the mind travel in this highly controlled environment.

The paradox of the Zen garden is in its highly controlled nature as a platform of accident. It may be, that the form of the garden has remained the same for 500 years having the every element articulated into their exact position – the racking of the sand or gravel, the pattern of the growing or merely being of the tree, the color of the moss around the stone...nothing has changed but still one has to admit that the slightest breeze of the wind might turn one piece of the sand or fall down a leaf from the tree and the same gardening work has to be started again. This ultimate human control celebrates the superiority of the smallest of the environmental changes.

We try to control cities with millions of people. And we easily forget the nature. We are capable of creating surroundings where human nature is no longer part of nature.

Garden is a window of eternity.

### Urban Compost

If a Zen garden is trying to build a harmony between the natural elements, the human nature and the universe the city does not seem to have the time. And the time is in essence. To justify its being the modern city has

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created the artificial time and invented stress. After stressing for time and money death has become a defeat - a bankruptcy.

City must be a compost.

In nature death is the beginning of a new life. When a tree is growing, it is tender and pliant, but when it is dry and hard, it dies. Hardness and strength are death's companions. Pliancy and weakness are expressions of the freshness and being. When a man is just born, he is weak and flexible, when he dies he is hard and insensitive. Because what has hardened will never win.

We asked the students to think about the Zen garden and we asked them to think about the city to create a new Zen garden for the city, the CityZen Garden to help us to reach a level of post-urban meditation. The city of slowness, the urbanism of acupuncture, the new urban nomad – in a compost, as a garden.

The workshop was a big task of a creator. One had to be sensitive enough to look for the horizon and gifted enough to present the reflections of the future. The thinking and creations of the CityZen Gardens raised up questions of the urban development of the post industrial city, questions of taking the needed steps towards ecologically sustainable directions and questions about the role of an urban planner or architect in this development. The different interpretations of the CityZen Gardens were quite freely mixing the different disciplines or urban planning, architecture, landscape architecture and environmental planning and landing down to an open form.

### Open Form

Zhuwei proved to be an excellent place to realize the gardens. There already exists citizen gardens and community farms surrounded by the MRT –line and residential and commercial buildings. Danshui river plays the big sound of nature with its daily tidal rhythm of and axis towards the river mouth and the ocean horizon. Also the mountains to the West of the river are present, city feels quite temporary.

The students were divided in two sections: one half to work by the river and one half in the grasslands and bushes closer to the MRT –line. Both of these sections were divided into 9 groups. The 9 riverside groups were tasked to work attached to each other cultivating individually a 2,5 meters wide area starting from the upper bank of the river all the way down to the water. The key word for this big community garden of nine groups was the theory of "Open Form" where architectural elements and environmental manipulation is designed to invite other forms or reactions into the present situation.

The other 9 groups in the bushes near the MRT were let to go free and find themselves individual sites where they would like to build their gardens roughly the size of one car parking space 2,5 x 5 meters.

It did not take long until the conversations were deep in the subconscious and weird gardens started to happen. Where as the big garden by the river had to cope with the big scale of nature and with actual physical natural powers – such as the tide the smaller gardens were safe to become gateways or interfaces where to step into another consciousness. Many of the small gardens were highly narrative, physical forms of childhood memories or hiding places and some were taken form as driven by some uncontrollable powers into temporary collages of industrial waste framing or focusing the eternal circulation of nature. Quite normal was to hear a dialogue about "Death" and "Life" while students were placing a rock to sit on in a garden.

A lot of secrets and personal meditation spaces started to get realized as if the nature had given the students a possibility to relax and feel free to open themselves. All the material used was found on the site. Everything that was build was temporary reorganizing of found objects and reactions to site specific conditions.

The big garden was hard. One had to cope and negotiate with the neighbors and the area of the site was constantly changing according to the tide. The tide also destroyed day after day all the decorative constructions that did not understand its force. Nevertheless the students to whom the Danshui river had possibly been a questionable back yard of Taipei, something you really don't want to see were soon standing bare foot in the mud discussing the right angle to sit and contemplate the mountain. No matter of the aesthetics of the garden the Danshui river had become the dominating unquestionable real element of nature where the students felt performing at. Performing on the conditions of the river after realizing that there is no other way - nature don't need decoration and one can't push a river.

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Of course the big garden ended up happily to look more Dao than a Zen garden but still again something very touching seemed to have happened. Time had changed. Maybe the time or the rhythm of the river had gotten into the garden or maybe the amount of human energy had done it but anyhow the time in this garden was not city time but more like human time, or nature time, or just time.

Professor Bee's group used their time to dig up half a meter of the landfill soil in their area and cleaned away every man originated object of it and then put the top soil back. Of course this is a merely symbolic gesture towards the ecological rehabilitation that Taipei as well as the other Taiwanese cities are facing, but still honest, respectable and important. When Danshui river is back to its natural condition the conscious of Taipei is clean – now the river is a trauma. If architect is also a gardener, he is a constructor. If he is not a gardener, he can be a destructor – there is a danger.

We asked some 5-years old kids on the bicycle bridge just above the big garden by the river what do they think the people by the river bank are doing. "They are making traps for the crabs and then they will barbeque them."

### **Your Mother Does Not Live Here**

Based on the above described two international workshops and previous cases in Taiwan and abroad I feel the international workshops in the Taiwanese architecture schools are needed. The students should be send to abroad to work in unfamiliar conditions and comparing their working skills to the ones of the students from abroad. This will help them to value the working skill they have and also push them to the role of an experimental creator and taking risks. University is often a too safe place to play.

International scholars and student groups should be invited to Taiwan to contribute and challenge the Taiwanese students and schools. There is a great potential in the Taiwanese students what comes to computer skills and working discipline. What is lacking is down to earth touch to reality and bigger masses of people in society. For example in the student projects the city is often viewed as an amusement park and virtual or fictive realities seem to be an easy way to escape dealing with normal life question, not to mention taking social responsibility. In army the best thing is that you learn to clean when the Sergeant shouts: Your mother does not live here!

Taiwan is economically and in democracy in many ways the most advanced nation in the Asia Pacific excluded Japan and should be the one taking the most challenging steps what comes to sustainable architecture or urban ecology. There is a lot to deal with inside the country from the heritage of the hyper industrialization period. The lack of confidence and identity has left the students in the cross fire of copying western architecture, being silently admiring the Japanese solutions not even to mention the cultural burden of China. In many ways all of this is fictive and can opened up and dealt with through the work – if the tasks are the right in university and in working life. For this it is helpful to have international scholars visiting the country and making the students to face the Taiwanese realities as an outsider sees them. It is also helpful to take the students to work abroad to value their home country from another experience and perspective.

Nobody is a prophet in his own land, the saying goes. External observations are needed, one gets easily blindfolded for the real realities around the everyday life. Taiwan should also take a more responsible role in helping the surrounding countries in dealing with the heavy industrialization and urbanization after dealing with its own cities. To prepare for this role the architecture students should get familiar with working more internationally and facing real time the environmental problems back home. Through this the Taiwanese architecture can become valuable, even important – at least healthy.

### **Urban Flashes Mumbai**

Urban development symposium and workshop in Mumbai India 3.-8.1. 2006 organized by Human Environment Group / Taiwan and Kamla Raheja Memorial Lecture Series.

Speakers and workshop leaders: Shirish Beri (Architect, Nagpur, India), Ravi Sundaram (Urban Theorist, Delhi, India), Madhushree Dutta (Film-maker, India), Rupali Gupte (Architect, India), Sudhir Patwardhan (Artist, India), K. T. Ravindran (Architect and Planner, Delhi, India), Anirudh Paul (Architect, Mumbai, India), Ti Nan Chi (Architect, Taiwan), Sohn-Joo Minn (Architect, Korea), Marco Casagrande (Architect, Finland).

Participating universities: Kamla Raheja Institute of Architecture (Mumbai, India), Tamkang University Department of Architecture (Taipei, Taiwan), Yonsei University School of Architectural & Urban Engineering (Seoul, Korea), Bergen School of Architecture (Bergen, Norway).

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### **CityZen Garden**

International Workshop of Tamkang University Department of Architecture in Zhuwei Taipei 21.-27.2.2006.

Workshop leaders: Marco Casagrande (Architect, Finland) and Haakon Rasmussen-Wiesener (Architect, Norway).