

Transplants

The Challenge of Taiwanese Architecture Identity

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Photographer / Dooll Chao

This past October, Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in New York City hosted “Transplant,” a forum discussion focused on young Taiwanese architects working and studying in the United States. Organized by Dr. Charlin Chang, Director of the Education Division at TECO, to coincide with an exhibition of work by these same young architects, the event featured a panel discussion with several emerging Taiwanese architects and professors as well as a keynote lecture delivered by acclaimed Taiwanese architect Kris Yao. The event, like the exhibition, focused on the global nature of contemporary architecture practice and on the increasingly complicated matter of national cultural and architectural identity. What identifies an architect or a building today as Taiwanese? No one at the event had a definitive answer, but it was clear from the large turnout of Taiwanese architects and students, that it is a question very much on the minds of many.

One of the discussion panelists was architect Jimenez Lai, who was born in Taiwan, but who grew up in Canada. Lai discussed Taiwanese identity in relation to “Township of Domestic Parts: Made in Taiwan,” the pavilion he designed for the 2014 Venice Biennale, curated by Rem Koolhaas. One of the organizing assumptions of Koolhaas's exhibition is that modernization began to accelerate in 1914 with the beginning of the first world war and continued with increasing intensity over the next 100 years, pulverizing and absorbing national architecture identity and incorporating it into a thin paste of universal modern sameness that was spread over the surface of the earth like a layer of peanut butter on a slice of bread. National



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architecture identities were distinct and unique in 1914 and Koolhaas's exhibition asked whether or not those unique identities have today been reduced to the sameness of an abstract, “Universal Modern.”

Lai's pavilion, which focuses on the intimate scale of the Taiwanese home, suggests an alternative reading in which Taiwanese architecture identity is not singular and fixed, but is instead multiple and mutable. Lai is Canadian, but identifies very strongly with specific habits of Taiwanese domesticity like, for example, the practice of displaying models of ancestor's homes and tending them, during holidays, with food and offerings. Lai made reference to this practice in the show, but he also referenced residences designed by his architecture heroes, including Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye and the home of Charles and Ray Eames. Both Lai and Taiwanese-American architect Rosalyne Shieh, who was also a panelist, discussed how they were shaped as architects by their own domestic, Taiwanese experiences and by the experience of going to school, living and working in North America.

Kris Yao, among the most highly regarded architects in Taiwan and indeed, in the world, lectured on a number of his most recent projects, including the Wuzhen Theatre in Zhejiang, China, the Lanyang Museum, in Yilan, the Palace Museum Southern Branch in Chiayi, and the Water-Moon Monastery in



Taipei, all in Taiwan. Educated in Tunghai University in Taiwan and later at UC Berkeley, Yao returned home to lead a practice that has become the standard against which every Taiwanese architecture firm is measured. In his most recent works, Yao inflects the sophisticated modernist vocabulary that made him a recognizable figure around the world, to respond even more attentively to the landscape and environmental as well as the cultural conditions of his many projects in Taiwan and in China. Yao, who designed the Taiwan pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2003 and in 2008, is a global figure whose work and whose approach provides a definitive example of a Taiwanese architecture practice not reduced to the sameness of the “Universal Modern.”

“Transplants” was organized, however, to showcase the work of young Taiwanese architects and students working and studying in the United States.



The work exhibited was uniformly excellent and as sophisticated as any work being produced and exhibited anywhere in the world. Two students from Syracuse were exhibited as part of the show. Paoyi Chang, whose “Fast Airport Typology,” is a design for a new airport typology for secondary markets in China. Emily Huang’s “Taipei Train Depot” is an adaptive use design for a colonial-era Japanese train depot building that deals explicitly with issues of cultural, economic and urban identity. Like the work of almost all the other young architects on exhibit, however, it was not clear to me what made their work necessarily Taiwanese. Whether born in Taiwan or not, all of the participants were educated in US schools of architecture and their work seemed more influenced by those schools than anything one could identify as necessarily Taiwanese. Like all young architects, these architects are struggling to find their own unique design approach, their own voice as architects. As self-identified Taiwanese architects, they have the additional challenge of aligning that architectural voice with their national identity, and this, perhaps more than anything else, is what defines them as Taiwanese architects.

Or, perhaps they are not transplants after all. Unlike Yao, who has come to define a certain identity of the Taiwanese architect, or even unlike architects as young as Lai and Shieh, whose identities are multiple and mutable, these young architects are truly global architecture citizens whose identity as architects is

not defined by their national identity, at least not in obvious ways. Their work—the work exhibited—is not distinctively Taiwanese but is more like that of young architects from the Netherlands, Argentina or Vietnam. Perhaps Koolhaas is right to suggest that there exists today a kind of global vernacular. Perhaps he is right to say that today buildings and the cities that are defined by the quality of those buildings are generic, when seen in a global context. Could it be that these young architects are very much like Taiwan itself, which appears, on first blush, as generic as Koolhaas suggests. Indeed, it is this generic quality that has made Taiwan a favored urban location for film shoots precisely because it can be made “to look like” any large South Asian metropolis. To be generic is thus to be global. It is only when you experience the street, however, that the scooters, the small alleyways, the smells and sounds of the markets and the uncommonly friendly people you encounter there, come more fully into view. It is only at this granular level and not at the level of entire metropolis that the identity of Taiwan reveals itself. And so, too, it is with these students, whose design work is truly global and therefore indistinguishable from the work of other young architects. It is only when you meet them and discuss their cities, towns, friends and families, when you listen to them describe their interests and ambitions, as I did during the opening, that their identity as Taiwanese architects reveals itself. 罍