'SANS FRONTIERES': IMMERSE, INFUSE, INSPIRE AND INFORM DESIGN STUDY OUTSIDE THE "WALLS"

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ABSTRACT:

This paper discusses architecture, environment and community in relation to design study. Articulating the 'no walls', 'no barriers' concept of '*Sans Frontieres*' and framing it into the discourses of Lefebvre's '*production of space*', Bourdieu's '*habitus*' and de Certeau's '*practice of everyday life*', this paper argues that design institution who set foot in local distinctive community would nurture learning from rich social culture and enable students to immerse, infuse, inspire and inform their design practices. Design education emphases creativity and innovation, looks beyond boundary and horizon to extend experience and vision. Presumably, the complexities in the surrounding environment, the richness of the activities and the distinctive culture in community are the essential elements to enrich learning experience. One of the art and design institutions in Hong Kong was selected as case study. Interviews with different stakeholders were conducted and followed by empirical photo-ethnographic study. Findings revealed that locating design institution in specific environment would expose students to rich culture and community interactions so as to ease barrier, enrich learning experience, expand vision in creativity and inform design practices. Findings also suggested that the design institution's distinctive location would enable a free flow of conversations between students and local community inside and outside the "walls" to generate culture infusion.

Keywords: Sans Frontieres, Environment, Architecture, Culture, Design Education

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education was once privilege for those who were rich, elite and of nobility. In those days, all the universities around the world, as we have known and seen, were built in the style of castles and separated themselves from the mass public behind the red brick walls. Chances were rare for the less privileged people to receive any forms of higher education in those universities. With the proclamation of equality and the rights for education, the concept of higher education has changed gradually over the centuries. Kwiek asserts that as higher education gradually began to pass from its elite to mass to its near-universal participation model, higher education institutions need to redefine their social role and

should look into what is going on in the public sphere in terms of political, social-economical and cultural dimensions (Kwiek,2001). Bachelard, in his 1964 classic "*The Poetics of Space*" suggests that space should not be looked at as primarily a container of three-dimensional objects; space should be studied as 'topoanalysis' to understand how it accommodates human consciousness to reveal the value of intimacy (Bachelard, cited in Ockman, 1998). Similarly, Bourdieu regards that architecture and objects can be understood as "objectivated cultural capital" and their cultural values are waiting to be revived, to be unlocked in order to establish new meanings (Bourdieu in Robbins, 2002). Furthermore, Bourdieu's concept of '*habitus'* suggests that one should carefully inspect the "material practices of everyday culture", as well the realms of the symbolic and the historical for an understanding of everyday life (Bourdieu, 1985 in Robbins, 2002). Michel de Certeau's '*practice of everyday life*' asserts that space is place made meaningful through contextualization; "space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programmes or contractual proximities….space is a practiced place" (de Certeau, 1984, cited in Leach, 2002, p.129). Apparently, the architecture, environments and local community surrounding the education institutions are media of intentions, passions and actions. Such places provide a forum and "a focus where we experience meaningful events of our existence … it is in this spatial and social ecology of work… in which organization and their members pursue their interests, accomplish their purpose, communicate, and operate practically" (Kupers, 2010, p.82, citing Norberg-Schulz, 1971, and Gorawara-Bhat, 2000). According to the above, nowadays, dialogues and interactions between the higher education institutions, students, the communities and the public to know/understand the cultures they are living with and be inspired are the prime issues.

2. ARCHITECTURE, ENVIRONMENT, COMMUNITY AND DESIGN STUDY

Frayling asserts that design practices are strongly situated and influenced by social, technological and cultural context (Frayling, 1993). Design as seen by Kress, is an "essential textual and pedagogic/political goal for periods characterized by intense and far-reaching changes….[it is] a metaphor for planning, organizing, and bringing to term a project realized within a set of revolving parameters…."(Kress, 2000, p.157). Doloughan states that design practices "emphasis on cultural context and subjective motivations" (Doloughan, 2002, p.60). Margloin claims that "design studies is an interpretive practice, rooted firmly in the techniques of humanities and the social science" (Margloin, 1989, p. 43 to 47) and opines that design should play a broad role in society; and it will "make a place for design discourse within the larger debates about social theory" (Margloin, 1989, p. 6) especially under the rapid societal changes. Prolong engagement to immerse in local community and culture and infuse with the '*material practices of everyday culture'* and '*practice of everyday life*' would provide "a deeper understanding of another society's beliefs and values" (Wasson, Stuhr and Petrovich-Mwaniki, 1990 as cited in Anderson, 1995, p.201). Looking at design on the process and application levels, Anderson draws designer's attention

to culture's different interpretations on artwork and reminds that share design and composition features may not bear the same universal meanings amongst cultures. He proposes a sequential model for the examination of cross-cultural artwork through the cycle of reaction, perceptual analysis and contextual examination followed by interpretations and synthesis to salient the hidden cultural meanings (Anderson, 1995). Anderson's suggestions salient the importance of inspiration to inform creativity and practicability in design study. In sum, design education emphases creativity and innovation, looks beyond boundary and horizon to extend experience and vision and specifically, a good understanding of culture. Articulating the aforementioned concepts of architecture, environment, community and design study in a spatial-social approach and framing them into the discourses of Lefebvre's 'production of space', Bachelard's 'the poetics of space, Bourdieu's '*habitus*' and de Certeau's 'practice of everyday life', it is assuming that synergies can be derived by locating the design institutions in the local communities in Hong Kong. Presumably, the distinctiveness of the architecture, the complexities in the surrounding environment, the richness of the activities and the distinctive culture in local community are the valuable experiences that would immerse, infuse, inspire and inform creativity and make design study meaningful.

3. '*SAN FRONTIERES*': TO IMMERSE, INFUSE, INSPIRE AND INFORM DESIGN STUDY

Immersing oneself into the richness of the activities and complexities of the surroundings in the neighborhood are amongst the things that make learning meaningful. The cultural interactions in the neighborhood reflect "social reality as constructed through actors' practical accomplishments and the meaning of social phenomenon as resulting from the actors' construction and negotiation of their interpretations" (Holy, 1987 as cited in Vertovec, 1999, p.24). These cultural interactions further infuse into the daily life of students and local community. Looking from this perspective, it is believed that the 'no walls', 'no barriers' concept of '*sans frontieres*' would mingle education institutions, students and the once segregated local neighbuorhoods for mutual benefits. It is through these interactions that students get inspirations to inform their practices. Following this vein, this paper argues that design institution that set foot in local community would nurture learning from specific culture and enable students to immerse, infuse, inspire and inform their design study.

4. RESEARCH METHOD, DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

One of the design institution located in Hong Kong was selected for case study. An American Art and Design University, the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD), resided in a former magistracy building in Sham Shui Po, North Kowloon was selected because of her distinctive backgrounds and geographical locations. Majority of the students in this institution are overseas international students and they are new to Hong Kong. One of the reasons that students prefer to study in Hong Kong roots in the exposure to local Hong Kong culture that would enrich their living and study experiences. The data of this study was collected from a variety of sources in a span of different stages. Literature, government policy documents, district and architectural planning materials were reviewed in the first

stage. This was followed by the interviews with different stakeholders (the senior management of the institution, the students) in the second stage for a better understanding of their views on how would design institutions set foot in local community nurture better design learning. Photo-ethnographic study of the location, the buildings of the institutions and the community were conducted in the third stage to observe the facilities and activities in the institution and the community. The photo-ethnographic method was chosen because ethnography requires field participation and engagement, using observation, in-depth interviews, documentation by written logs as well as visual media such as photographs and films (with sound recordings) to observe social patterns (Gummensson, 1991). Moustakas endorses this approach, claiming that it enables the researcher to identify the "essence" of human experiences concerning a phenomenon in a study, and to understand the "lived experiences" by studying a small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged engagement to see patterns and relationships of meaning (Moustakas, 1994 as quoted in Creswell, 2003 p.15). Collier and Collier (1986) advocate visual anthropology and suggest the use of photography for documentation during the research. Taking advantage of the visual methodologies and the rich data that can be captured by photographic imageries, photo-ethnography would be able to draw out behavioral patterns and themes for analysis. Collected data were used for social-spatial and qualitative analysis.

4.1. THE EMPIRICAL WORK

With a structured questionnaire, the researcher first conducted a one hour interview with the management of SCAD followed by a focus group interview with six students using a structured questionnaire in order to see their perceptions on how would they be benefited from interactions with the local community. Afterwards, a two hours' photo-ethnographic data collection were conducted in SCAD's building. In additional to the photo-ethnographic data collection in SCAD, the researcher spent another two hours in the neighbourhood to observe and took photographs for a social-spatial understanding of the community.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Response from the management of SCAD to the questionnaire's item *1) about the community and surroundings* revealed that the Sham Shui Po community in which SCAD located is a "densely populated district, surrounded with poor and migrant families and lesser social-economical status residents" but interestingly, the district "is famous for technological gadgets; it is the biggest computer outlet in Hong Kong". In a way, Sham Shui Po "is a well preserved community because of less tourism, not like areas such as Tsim Sha Tsui or Mong Kok; it is not new to hear that some say tourism is the best way to preserve culture, but in Sham Shui Po, it is different and all these made an interesting composition and unique culture of the district". The above suggests that the community where SCAD located is a densely populated community with distinctive culture and residents. A short walk and observation in the community further support the responses, as showed in (Figure 1), streets are crowded with residents and shoppers for electric and computer gadgets as well as street wanderers.

Figure 1. The Sham Shui Po community

Responses to the questionnaire's item *2) about the architecture* informed that the location of SCAD "is a historical building and in the 1960's it served as a court house as one of nine Kowloon districts and it is an iconic authority building" (Figure 2, 3).

Figure 2. The building of SCAD is a historical building and it served as the North Kowloon Magistracy in the 1960's.

Figure 3. SCAD Hong Kong

In 2005, under the Development Bureau Revitalization Scheme, the building was opened for leasing by inviting different parties to participate in the building's regeneration. The Hong Kong government decided that the building is best and appropriate for education purposes, of which SCAD as a university for its reputation in cultural and architecture preservation, won the competition. It was said that "it is coincident that one of SCAD's buildings in the States was a former armory military building, same as this North Kowloon Courthouse, the architecture also represents a once authoritative institute. It revealed that "architecture preserves memories, and when infuses with education, it passes on the culture and history to nurture the next generation". Responses also reflected that "in general, the community and the government are pleased with SCAD's management and maintenances of the building". SCAD have preserved one major courthouse, one jail cell as was together with all the historical elements and details of the buildings and they have "renovated the rest of the building and changes the functions of the rooms into classrooms, art studios and galleries for our teaching purposes (Figure 4, 5, 6, 7). The management of SCAD contended that "it is crucial to maintain the 'fabric' that contains the stories of the architecture, to promote interactions and mutual learning between and the community". It was told that SCAD is using the building as a platform to promote cultural interactions.
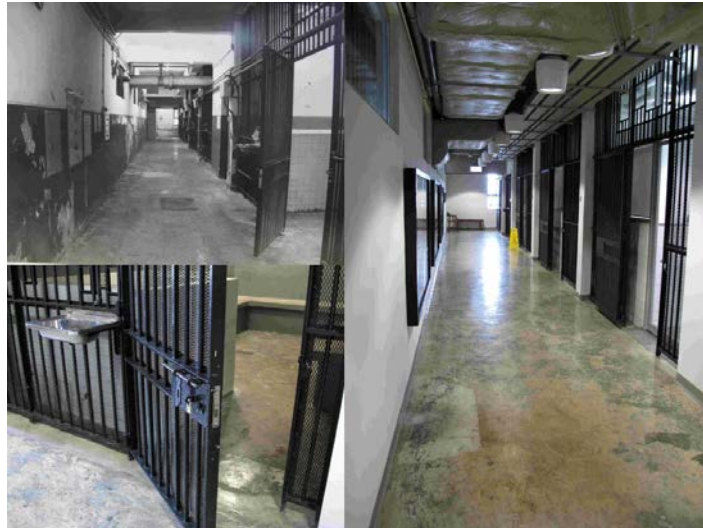
Figure 4. The jail cells are preserved.

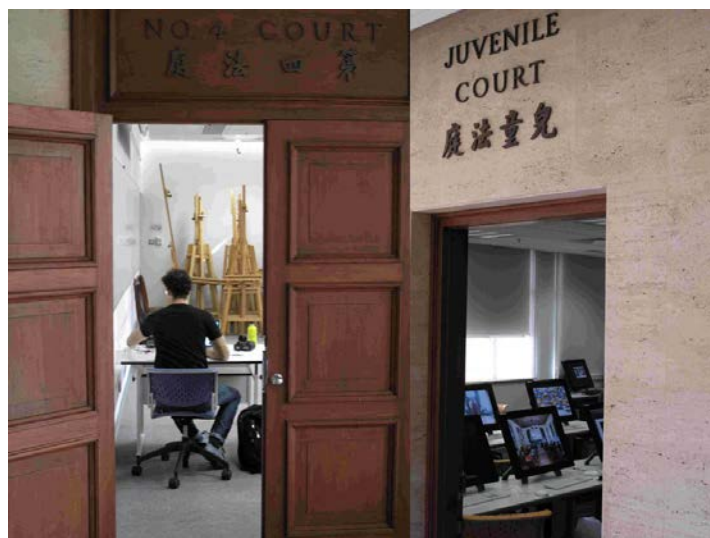Figure 5. The court houses are preserved and turned into lecture halls and studios.

Figure 6. The court houses are turned into lecture halls and studios.

Figure 7. The court houses are preserved and turned into lecture halls and studios.

In additional to the interview with the management, a focus group interview with six students was conducted using a structured questionnaire in order to see their perceptions of the architecture, its location and whether the interactions with the community benefit their design study. When asked the significance of this architecture, most of them responded that this is a famous architecture and they are proud to study in this building. One student said "it is a special building; the view is spectacular. The structure is impressive and amazed me during my interview". In general, most of them agreed that the building has a significant historical background and emotionally, it offers psychological and learning motivation and they feel comfortable to study here. When asked whether the institute's environment is able to nurture learning, most of them said the architecture projects a relaxing atmosphere with spacious structure and a lot of open space to rest and for discussions. Responses from the question: do you consider the institute a hub for you to know the community? They all agreed that they could experience the cultural interactions from the local community while one of them said "in certain way, yes but it is limited to art and design groups. The residents do not have special feelings to it because in this community, the people are of average education level, the exhibitions are too high soundings and difficult for them to join and enjoy". They suggested that "the institution should adopt an open door policy so that people can join more events such as shows and exhibitions. They thought the school should be responsible for the community but it really depends on the objectives of the school. Responses to how the local community inspires and informs design study, most of the students appreciated the "textures" and "fibers" (the visuals, the colours and typefaces in the signage together with the spatial arrangement of the streets and buildings in the local community) generated new ways of seeing and enabled them to compare, contrast, reflect and create design according to specific cultures.

Addressing whether the institution located in this community would enable them to immerse in cultural interactions to enrich learning, students believed that "interactions will generate learning community on different levels, for examples, talk to others or local people to get

their views" and "it is good cultural exchanges between different communities, districts, residents and stakeholders but it needs strategies to achieve the no barriers, no walls learning community because there may be misunderstandings, segregations, preconceptions between the stakeholders". For them, it was possible to use the architecture of the institute as a platform and synergies to nurture mutual interactions to achieve the effect of infusion. To achieve the mentioned, they thought it needed a lot of understanding and latitude/elasticity between the institution and community and residents to overcome the blind spots that create discrepancies so that we can accept each other to enable mutual infusion. In general, they contended that the surroundings in the neighbourhood benefited and inspired them to sharpen their observations and inform/stimulate their creativity.

The following noteworthy points were summarised from the collected data from the interviews and the photo-ethnographic study.

The 'no walls', 'no barriers' concept of 'sans frontieres' enables immersion and infusion into the local communities

The concept of 'no barriers' and 'no walls' is necessary and important to the learning process for it allows a free flow of conversations of what is inside and outside the "walls". It is realised that SCAD regards immersing in local communities is essential to their vision for "it is tied to its vision, using the locations as environment strategy and extra curriculum for the benefit of their students, it not only acts as a community university in the Hong Kong community but also prepares for the extensions in Asian cities, for examples, Shanghai, China and we definitely look outwards into the community and see what else can be done". In order to reach out to the communities, a variety of services have been provided to the public by the institution. It is told that SCAD's services are down to earth and work closely with district council to disseminate the message to the community. SCAD has public tour daily and special arranged tour one Saturday each month and the library and galleries are open to the community. Public lectures, fine arts exhibitions and symposiums to cater for broad-based visitors". In addition, spaces and facilities are open to different bodies, for example, the Sham Shui Po police force once used SCAD's facilities for training. The institution's management agreed that there were mutual benefits resulted from the interactions between the students and the residents and said that the infusion allowed "to break down barriers by exposing students and local residents to east and west culture. It also uplifts, aspires and inspires the community by infusing the students into the community. It is also a good experience for the international or local students to understand the specific culture through the interactions between the students and the locals, to generate insights and reflections".

The experiences and social practice of space inspires and informs design study

The findings further confirmed Lefebvre's concept of 'the production of space', Bachelard's 'the poetics of space, Bourdieu's '*habitus*' and de Certeau's 'practice of everyday life'. It is realised that SCAD used its buildings to act as platforms to promote interactions between the students and the local community. Responses from the interviews further revealed that the institution maintain open views on the usages of the buildings with a hope to utilise the

possibility of a free flow of conversations of what is inside and outside the "walls". With the constant immersion and infusion activities between SCAD and the community, an extended learning space for students is produced. The immersion and infusion activities further inspire creativity and inform design practices. Making references to local visual elements and needs, it was told that SCAD's students collaborated with the local restaurants to design English menu to accommodate their needs. It is also seen that the locals began to appreciate design. The bilingual English and Chinese types and visuals co-designed by the students, residents and shop owners are jut few of the examples of how immersion and infusion in local community inspires and informs design study.

6. LIMITATION AND CONCLUSION

The limitations of this study rest in the distinctive nature of the participated institution and her students. SCAD tends to be more proactive in local cultural exchanges with the community because she is an American university and most of her students are international students from overseas. The notion of 'going native' may apply to SCAD's eagerness to immerse and infuse into the local community. Further interviews with the district council and the community's residents shall be conducted for multi-perspectives analysis. To conclude, findings of this paper showed that design institution set foot in a local distinctive community would nurture learning from a rich social culture and enable students to immerse, infuse, inspire and inform their design practices. As design study stresses creativity and innovation by extending experience and vision, this study further put forward the view that the complexities in the design institution's surrounding environment, the distinctive culture in community and the richness of the interaction activities are the essential elements and experience to make design study meaningful.

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