

Network-Popular Architecture: its Production in Network Media and its Influence on Concrete

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Abstract

In the past 10 years, the Internet has completely redefined the Chinese society at an unstoppable scale and rate. The term Network-popular architecture, born in the Internet era, has aroused increasing discussion in the Chinese architecture discourse. Defined by web impact rather than professional evaluation, the Network-popular architecture goes far beyond the pure architectural circle. However, this situation has not been fully realized in the profession.

How these architectures are produced in Network media? What influence they have on the concrete world? First, this paper will give a brief overview of the Network-popular architecture and explore this phenomenon in Chinese context. Then three cases will be introduced: MulanWeichang visitor center, Seaside library in Aranya, and a Housing renovation in Jingyang Hutong, which would focus on how it gains public attention in social media and what it offers in its specific field. By studying these three Network-popular architectures, this paper will draw a conclusion that some of Network-popular architecture's characteristics such as social issues project type, symbolic form and special space atmosphere are related to the design process which help the production of this architecture in the media. It proposes that Network-popular architecture has ability to activate concrete space, even drive the overall development of the area and arouse public attention of urban issue. Understanding the internal causes and

production logic of it may help the architects utilize the media involvement, control the balance and keep discourse power in the changeable internet era.

1. Introduction

1.1 An architecture defined by web impact

From the early “most beautiful bookstore” Zhongshu Ge, to the 2017 MulanWeichang library which realized the miracle of mass communication through the WeChat and Weibo, the term “Network-popular architecture”, unique in the Internet era, has saw an increasing discussion in the Chinese architectural context.

Compared with the term “star architecture” which is still mainly inside the profession, the Network-popular architecture has gone far beyond the circle. So far, there have not been a clear definition of this newly minted expression. For example, “Instafamous architecture” (Yu 2018) and “Internet-celebrity architecture” (Y. Zhang 2018) are used to describe the architecture having achieved a measure of fame in the social media as well. In the essay “Four Phenomena of Chinese Architectural Media”, the author defined the network-popular architecture as “a project which receives the general attention of the public beyond the profession circle and creates a huge search quantity on the Internet due to some factors inside or outside the profession”. (Fan 2019) Since the key of this architecture is to gain public attention in network media, this paper will use the term “Network-popular architecture” to emphasize two main actors-the public and the network mass media in this phenomenon.

1.2 An inevitable product of the Internet age

In Chinese context, the public tend to regard architecture as a specific object or commodity. Therefore, it is instinctively considered that they have voice and even dominate the conversation on it. (Fan 2019) Before the Internet era, architectural culture was communicated mainly through professional magazines inside the circle. The comment from public were few and unable to influence so much. However, entering the Internet era, the interaction of the Network media changes the situation. The portal sites such as “Gooood” and “Iarch” establish online discussion system where public can make a comment and even communicate with the designers directly. Meanwhile, through cultural industries such as “Youfang Travel” and variety shows such as “Pretty House”, the architectural culture is showed to the public in a more diverse and simple way. Then with the help of the social media like “weibo” and “wechat”, the barrier between the public and architecture are totally broken, and universal participation of the public has become possible, which provides prerequisites for the Network-popular architecture.

David Shane once pointed that the core of Tele City is image-space. (Shane 2015) However, with the development of the Internet and the spread of the architectural culture on the Internet, this stage-like space is further abstracted. People are becoming more accustomed to knowing architecture from the media rather than experiencing it for themselves. (Hua 2013) Since it is generally regards as a commodity, the architecture now goes into a more virtual consumption space where the evaluation system in the concrete world is invalid but the web impact brought by forwarding and likes becomes the criterion. The public immersed in the Internet can satisfy themselves with a few images of architectural forms and the illusion produced from them. And then individual satisfaction through social media can emerge into a carnival for the whole society with unique autonomy and feedback cycle of the Internet and with no need for leaders. (Johnson 2002)

2. Empirical discussion

As an inevitable product of the Internet era, the network-popular architecture has already influence the architecture (its design process and final outcomes). And the situation is still not fully realized in the professional field. However,

when the web impact as a criterion, architects in new era would better ask a question: whether the Network-popular architecture could help the concrete world and whether the architects could control or even utilize the phenomenon.

The following page will introduce three cases. Although these cases are all popular on the Internet, the situation they deal with and the media involvement is quite different: such the architect of the seashore library didn't intend to promote the project in the social media at the first place. However, even though it is post-rational in some cases, the paper will still focus on how the architecture is produced to gain the fame and how it influences the specific real world.

2.1 MulanWeichang visitor center in Mulan Weichang

Mulan Weichang is located in Chengde Weichang Manchu and Mongolian Autonomous County in Hebei Province, which is an only Manchurian-Mongolian autonomous county in China and a state-level poverty county. Located in the prairie of Inner Mongolia, it has a grassland full of aquatic plants and animals. And in 2003, Weichang County decided to vigorously develop rural tourism relied on the resource. (Yang 2016) However, due to single structure and strong seasonality, its tourism products have not only caused the loss of tourists in recent years, but have also damaged the grassland ecosystem and local culture.

In 2017, Zhejiang Satellite TV program “Pretty House” was launched where stars will experience and join four building construction. As one of the four projects, MulanWeichang visitor center has responded appropriately to the agenda of the show “return to nature”. With the celebrity effect and the following awards of RIBA, the projects aroused a huge discussion through the media propaganda with stunt that a project which had the celebrity joined won a big prize. And then the public visited the house on the spot and lead to a second transmission in the social media like “wechat” and “weibo”. Eventually the project received a phenomenon-level attention.

As one of very few architects who has already realized the media effect, the architect Zhang Haiao of the project contributed a lot to its media fame, although the program didn't show much:

- (1) The selection of the site is extremely

superior. With the mountains as the background and the grasslands as the scenery, the theme of the program is perfectly responded to, which makes people yearn for it. (2) The whole design used the traditional building Yurt as the prototype. Although this “form-leading approach” (Yu 2018) invites some criticism, this symbolic form was accepted and welcomed by the local immediately after final completion and then spread easily in the social media since a simple picture of a modern yurt is enough to arouse curiosity of people. (figure 1)

The project, as the architects said, “is a quite small house on the open prairie but it affects the whole area gradually.” (H. Zhang 2018) It not only incorporates itself into the grassland but also reconstructs the ideal scenery. With Wulan Weichang coming back to public vision and the visitor coming here, it can be a vehicle for the following development.

2.2 Seaside library in Aranya

Aranya Gold Coast Community is a full-source coastal tourism resort complex. Located in the hinterland of Qinhuangdao Changli Golden Beach, Aranya becomes an idea destination for Beijing's middle class due to 3 km of private beaches away from the hustle and bustle. Different from ordinary holiday real estate development, the founder Ma Yin defines Aranya as a soul home or a “community” (Good 2019) where people sharing the same spiritual desire will live together. Consider this concept “community”, a series of public supporting facilities were needed. And Seaside library was the first project of them.

With Ma Yin’s vision “Reading facing the sea”, the architect Dong Gong has already considered the library as “a lonely stone growing out of the sea” (Good 2019) from the very beginning. (figure 2) So, the building was designed as a concrete box which can’t be fully read from outside: (1) There is a 20m horizontal window on the east façade open directly to the sea and a curved roof rises from the west wall and stretches to the east to emphasize this relation. (2) The reading area is step-like to make sure that everyone has a fair opportunity to enjoy the sea. (3) All the light is carefully canalized by structures like holes in the roof and grooves in folded plate to create a quiet and mysterious atmosphere. (LIU & DONG, 2015) (figure 3) Although, the founder and the architect both claimed that they didn’t consider the following

promotion deliberately, the ideas such as loneliness, poetic flavor and distant sea which impress the public later have already rooted deeply in the project.

In May 2015, a short video named “The loneliest library in China” aroused hot discussion among professional circle and public overnight through the social media “Wechat”. A majority of urban citizens are touched and attracted by the lonely library near the sea. Although the library is designed for the whole community and the public at the first place, the reality is quite beyond the expectation. The lonely library seems no longer lonely: people come here not only to read or see the sea but also shoot, hold musical concerts and etc. “The event of the library actually reveals the possibility of deep interaction between the architectural space and the public in this rapidly changing era” (Liu & Dong 2015).

The fame of Seashore house has added value for the tourism, but more importantly, the project becomes a truly common memory for the wider area beyond the Aranya. Later, a series of spiritual landmarks such as a church and an art gallery are built by the sea. They and the seashore library are chained together forming a seaside spiritual axis for the community and the wider public.

2.3 Housing renovation in Jingyang Hutong

In 2014, the first season of Shanghai Satellite TV program "Dream Transformer" was on the air. The show mainly focused on families with housing problems, and commissioned well-known designers to use limited funds for space renovation in a limited time. In August 2015, Shuhei Aoyama showed up in the second season as the first foreign designer. The task he faced was a renovation for two families in one courtyard of Jingyang Hutong: the bigger one have 5 people living in 35qm crowded house; and the smaller one has two rooms with 3.1qm and 3.7 separately for one young couple who prepare it for their daughter due to the location near the educational facilities.

Under this extremely limited condition, the designer explored the maximum potential of the original space by (1) transforming the wall as storage cabinets, (2) creating changeable furniture for multi-use such turning the dining table over and using it as a bed and (3) extending



Figure 1: Mulan Weichang visitor center in the wide prairie, Source: Shengliang SU, Archdaily.cn



Figure 2: Lonely Seashore library, Source: Gooood.cn



Figure 3: Internal space of Seashore library, Source: Gooood.cn



Figure 4: Changeable furniture in the smallest school district housing, Source: Zhihu.com

space through vertical-horizontal variability and scalability. (figure 4) Back to 2015, the topic of Hutong renovation has not gotten so much attention as nowadays. The genius transformation went on the Weibo hot search list as soon as the show named “The smallest housing near the school district” was on the air. Meanwhile, the designer himself, a kind and handsome Japanese designer with good Chinese communication skills seems to get more fame than the project itself and thus became one of the first-generation network-popular architects, which is we didn’t see in other two cases.

As one of the early stage network-popular architects, Shuhei Aoyama, his project and the TV show faced space scarcity challenge in old town and provided a potential of the transformation. And more importantly, they arouse public discussion and attention on the topic of renovation. (Pan, Cao & Zhao 2018)

3. Conclusion

Having analyzed three cases, the paper collected different situation which nevertheless share certain characteristics. First, seeing from the mass media, some of these characteristics which really help the production of network-popular architecture is related to the process of the design: (1) a project type that directly address social issues (e.g. bad housing condition in old town and desire to be away from the city) can create a hot topic. (2) A symbolic form (e.g. a yurt and a stone) eliminate cognitive depth and thus the project can be easily spread on the Internet. (3) A special space atmosphere (e.g. lonely reading space and small home in the wide prairie) can impress the public, attract them to the site and thus create a second propagation in the social media which will emerge into a carnival for the whole society later. Second, these three network-popular architectures did benefit the concrete world and the benefit is far more than activating space and extends into a wider area such as economical devolvement and urban issues. (e.g. drive overall development of Mulan Weichang, share the Aranya idea “community” to the wider public and arouse the public concern on urban renewal.)

As an inevitable product of the Internet era, the network-popular architecture will definitely have a continuing impact on professional circle. This paper didn’t include the bad effect of this phenomenon but showed the good side despite unwilling acceptance of some professionals.

Here, the paper tried to propose that in the new Internet era, an architect must fully realize the impact of media network, and understanding the internal causes and production logic of network-popular architecture may help the architects utilize the media involvement, control the balance and keep our discourse power in the changeable internet era.

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