

Charlottesville vs. Chengdu: Is It Possible to Engage the Community and Fight Back Unsustainable Urban Retail Models?

NAN LIANG

University of Michigan

ANA MORCILLO PALLARES

University of Michigan

Keywords: adaptive reuse, community localism, Chengdu Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li, Downtown Charlottesville, pedestrian shopping mall

“Shopping is arguably the last remaining form of public activity.”¹ Rem Koolhaas stated twenty years ago. Through increasingly predatory forms, shopping has infiltrated and colonized urban life. From the explosion of suburban shopping centers in the mid-20th century to today’s specialized big-box stores with highly computerized goods-tracking systems, this paper calls for a reformulation of alternative models of retailing. One that engages the community and challenges citizens’ demands. How to fight back unsustainable urban retail models and have the shopping center be a balanced urban ecosystem becomes a crucial question to answer now. From this approach, the research discusses a comparison between two examples: Downtown Charlottesville in Virginia by Anna and Lawrence Halprin (1976) and the Chengdu Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li by Oval Partnership (2014). Although these two projects are nearly four decades apart and have very different socio-cultural and political backgrounds, both align the formula of the shopping street as an antidote to the current unsustainable urban mechanisms that perpetuate inequality.

INTRODUCTION

Drawing a parallelism with the explosion of suburban shopping mall in the United States and China, this paper defines the term of adaptive reuse in two very different moments of recent urban history: the American mid-20th century and the beginning of the Asian millennium. Today, the increasing decline of the shopping mall in North America contrasts with the rapid development of Asian cities which has brought back, once again, the shopping center as an emerging trend. A phenomenon which raises important questions of how to fight back unsustainable urban retail models and have the shopping center be a balanced urban ecosystem. In this paper, two examples interrogate the viability of the pedestrian street mall under the formula of community inclusion, historic reuse, small scale, and program diversification by which the traditional rules of the vast shopping mall typology are voluntary interchanged: Charlottesville Mall, Virginia in the United States and Chengdu’s Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li in China.

In United States, in the 1960s and 1970s, as a response to the suburban expansion and the migration of white population to the outskirts of the cities, several urban renewal strategies to bring economic development back to the core of the city took place. Suburban shopping malls were becoming popular and drawing shoppers out of the downtown area. To draw them back, planners embarked on the experiment of the so-called American pedestrian mall. Although this formula introduced new fresh ideas into the city, very few of them had success. Only 11 percent of the 200 pedestrian malls, which were created during that time, survived.² An alarming figure which showcased not the mistakes but the assets behind the success of these early attempts on pedestrian shopping streets. Among the ones which did survive, Charlottesville’s pedestrian mall made a significant contribution for not only its subtle and innovative public space but also for incorporating community workshops into the design process itself. “A shift away from a demolition-oriented program known as urban renewal to a more socially conscious, preservation-oriented form of planning.”³

Unfortunately, this small-scale and community approach was not the one that the United States exported to the world. After China entered the WTO (World Trade Organization) in 2001, the increasing level of consumption of its population facilitated the adoption of the suburban shopping mall. From the early 2000s, Chinese cities built many comprehensive shopping malls and big-box supermarkets following outdated urban planning guidelines, at the time that this process took place with Internet development and the widespread use of online shopping platforms. Since 2010, the newly constructed and diversified shopping malls rapidly negatively affected old shopping districts while virtual shopping expansion captured the opportunity to popularize and exponentially grow during the covid-19 pandemic. A reality which raises questions about how to imagine alternative paths of shopping while making possible a true urban balance in the city. From this approach and transforming the prototype of traditional Sichuan regional dwellings, the paper explores Taikoo Li takes the Daci temple from Tang Dynasty and six well-preserved private dwellings as the foundation of urban renewal and site regeneration in the city heart.⁴

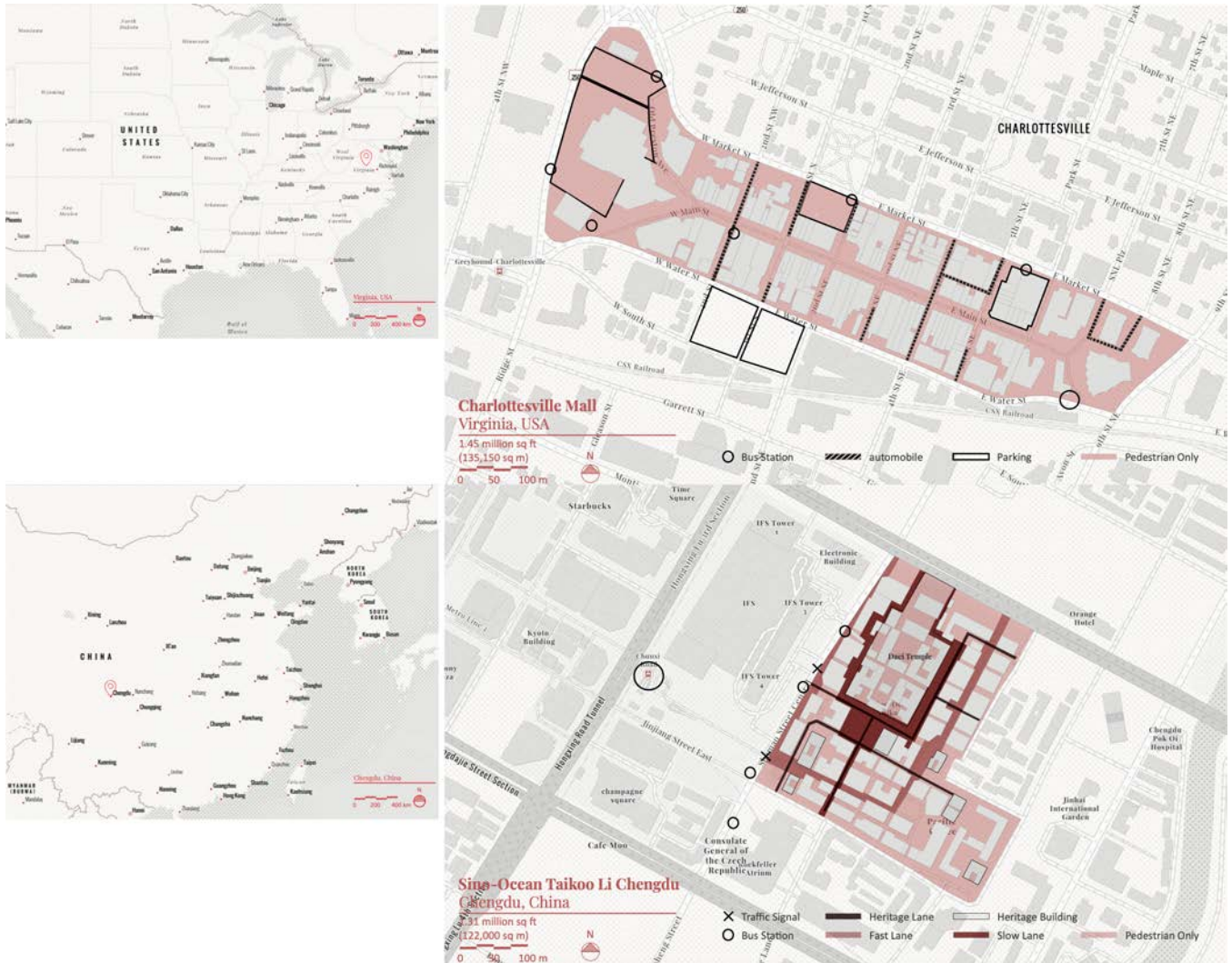


Figure 1. Geographical location and site feature for Charlottesville Mall and Chengdu Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li.

Charlottesville and Taikoo Li, unlike many other cultural-commercial mixed-use or historic preservation projects that mimic historical typologies or migrate the heritage to suburb areas, both approach adaptive reuse innovatively. An array of two vibrant public spaces which, engage the user in an inclusive environment to strengthen social networks, cultural atmosphere, and local daily experience. A comparative analysis of two examples of working with the community that, although separated more than four decades, provide references for innovation in real estate development, urban planning, and historic preservation. In essence, this paper hopes to explore adaptable and sustainable community localism to satisfy the daily experience and social interaction of residents and potential routes to inherit urban history and culture.

CHARLOTTESVILLE MALL AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION, CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA, USA

In the United States, the shopping mall was the one formula of

successful land use, real estate, and retail business concept of the 20th century.⁵ The large centers not only served as shopping destinations, but also offered a wide range of dining, entertainment, and recreation experiences. However, their success contributed to the urgency of doing something with the emptying of the city centers. In the 1960's, Downtown Charlottesville in Virginia was not an exception to this rule. "We could see for ourselves downtown Charlottesville was dying," explained Charles Barbour, the City's first black Councilor and Mayor. "There were empty buildings and closed up businesses. The question was what to do about it."⁶ At this point, the prestigious couple of landscape architects, Lawrence and Anna Halprin were invited to propose an idea for the site. An example of a vision of a bustling public space, which represents an anomaly in North American collective space: the pedestrian shopping street.

Although the urban concept of a slow pedestrian street for shopping was simple, a set of circumstances embodied a change of

an urban trend from the mid-20th century to the late 20th century. The successful pedestrian street malls were those ones in areas with populations under 100,000; were near a major anchor of activities; were designed to be a relatively short numbers of blocks; hosted a varied mix of activities and uses, had efficient public transportation together with an extensive nearby parking; had strong anchors, including a retail component at the time that had a continuous maintenance. Lawrence Halprin was aware of this but beyond these factors, he launched community workshop as part of the design and creative process.

From this approach, Halprin spent an entire weekend with a business group of thirty-two people who were invited to participate in exercises which showed the difficulties of people living in the central area of the city. As an example of this, the exercises included attempts to try to buy food with one dollar with no grocery nearby. "We were forced to look at things we'd seen for years but looked at in different ways,"⁷ said George Gilliam, City Council in 1972. From this approach, the Halprin's proposal was significant not only for its subtle and innovative design solutions, but also for becoming Charlottesville's public living room, after incorporating community workshops into the design process itself. A design strategy for an eight-block-long by 60-foot-wide street corridor, which brought back to the city a lively space scattered by willow oak bosques, brick floor, and populated with significant outdoor seating with moveable furniture. For the Halprin's couple, the stability of the space would depend on the degree of its complexity and diversity. Complexity, they would argue, is a biological and psychological necessity for people. In Charlottesville, theaters, restaurants, shops, and apartments sum up as a mix ecosystem. "All natural communities move from a state of simplicity to a state of complexity. So does the evolutionary process by which organisms themselves have evolved: from uni-celled organisms to complex aggregations."⁸

According to Allison Hirsch, "the Halprin's Process was a unique outgrowth of his own circumstances- a response to both the historical moment in which he was practicing and to the idiosyncrasies of his own life and career. The Halprins' experiments in participatory approaches were a natural part of the revolutionary landscape of the 1960s Bay Area. (...) On Halprin-designed, students at the University of California at Berkeley initiated the Free Speech Movement, demanding the right to public gathering and political organization. Nationally, the struggle for civil rights, women's liberation, the protest of the war in Vietnam, and reaction to urban renewal policies, aggressively challenged the long-established power structure that dictated how one was to perform in society."⁹

However, Halprin's idea was beyond the pedestrian street mall but to "tie the downtown area back to the city and repair the clearing of urban renewal". An urban renewal which affected the nearby African American community of Vinegar Hill, including housing on Vinegar Hill and housing and light industry on the adjacencies of Garrett Street. "A network of intensely programmed streets

and landscape connections, so that the mall would reach out in all directions."¹⁰ Halprin created a process he called Take Part Workshops to encourage citizen participation. The workshops involved a series of choreographed activities, a community participation technique Halprin had developed with his wife, Anna, who was a dancer. "The goal was to see the community in a new way and to have a common language to talk about the city and its potentials,"¹¹ said Nathan Foley, a landscape architecture and urban and environmental planning graduate student who was the design historian on the 2010's exhibition *More Than Just Bricks: A Social and Design History of the Charlottesville Mall/ Lawrence Halprin Associates 1973-1976*. "This was pivotal for the City of Charlottesville and the firm. It was a transition for the city of how they could embrace public participation, and for the firm, it was the first time they employed the whole range of their services on one project. The designers did a good job, but also benefited from the stewardship of the community leaders, and not every landscape has that."¹²

SINO-OCEAN TAIKOO LI AND HISTORIC INTEGRATION, CHENGDU, CHINA

As Charlottesville Mall innovated with community participation, Chengdu Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li offers a new shopping approach to an historic site while respecting the local spirit and existing urban fabric. Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province, is a famous historical and cultural city in China, well-known as the "Land of Abundance" since ancient times.¹³ The importance of its heritage is reflected in its urban renewal process, where developments considerably respect its cultural and historic context as seen in Jinjiang District, a commercial area which includes Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li Chengdu, the ancient Daci Temple and Chunxi Road blasted with commerce. Nearly a century, Chunxi Road has been continuously updated as a pedestrian street containing shopping malls, shops, supermarkets, cafes, and public squares, while maintaining its character and historic significance. Taikoo Li, the most recent urban intervention in this site, matches the Chunxi Road atmosphere -- injecting vitality into the historical impression while delivering an enjoyable and leisurely urban experience for the entire city.¹⁴

Taikoo Li design approaches a low-rise, open-plan, cultural-commercial and mixed-use masterplan designed by Oval Partnership firm. In response to today's lifestyle-and-leisure-conscious consumers and the urban vision for preserving the heritage and the local spirit (*Genius Loci*), Oval Partnership proposes a design strategy that stretches from modern times to the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907) surrounding the well-preserved Daci Temple in the city's heart.¹⁵ The Taikoo Li building complex draws inspiration from the traditional commercial streets and housing fabric represented in the ancient *Qingming Scroll*¹⁶, an adaptive reuse of old residential dwellings which provides a continuation of Sichuan province folk architecture. By unifying details, tectonics and materials, and grey pitched roofs that span the entire district, Taikoo Li portrays the folk of traditional Chinese city. A spatial / visual distance but coexistence in concord with the Daci

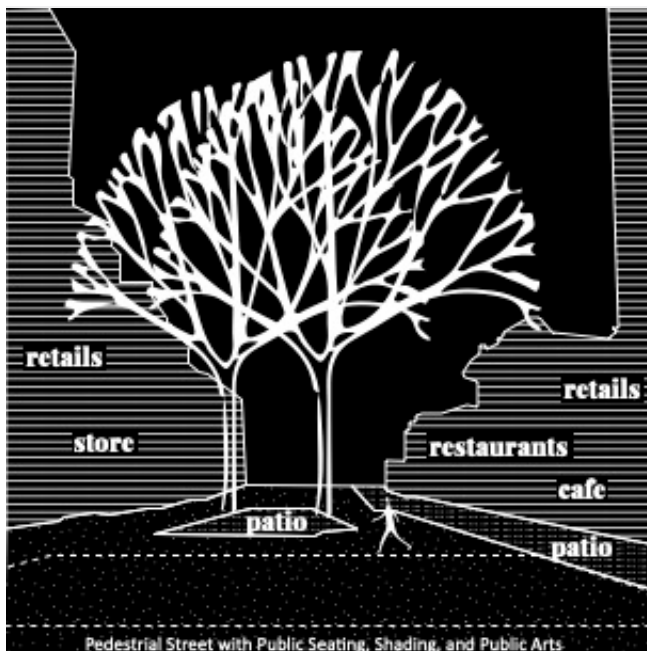


Figure 2. Programs in Charlottesville Mall cross-section.

Temple, as described by Christopher Law, the director of the project, which highlights the following motto: “we weren’t looking at the individual buildings. It is the whole district here that is the architecture. The important thing is for the new district to work as a center.”¹⁷

Unlike many cultural-commercial, mixed-use, or historic preservation proposals that mimic historical form to construct new volumes or migrate the heritage to low-value-land suburb areas, Taikoo Li highlights another judgement. Through collaborating with the custodians to restore the Daci Temple and attempting to enhance the historical sensitivity of tenants and clients, Taikoo Li has visions, in the long run, to satisfy the social, economic, and other public benefits of the relevant stakeholders.¹⁸ From this approach and translating the historic street pattern, Taikoo Li applies the concepts of *fast lane* and *slow lane* to combine high-end commerce with the regional historical environment. While the fast lane contains the commerce, the slow lane provides restaurants, cafes, outdoor seating, introducing a human-scale and open-air entertainment atmosphere in the high-density urban center.¹⁹ The inspiration of combining commerce, recreation, art, and history not only invigorates Taikoo Li and the surrounded contexts but also avoids the formula of a single commercial/catering cluster or a single type of user. The crisscrossing of lanes throughout the building complex adequately represents the traditional cultural complexity of Sichuan Province. A sense of urban history and vibrant experience of a public space, which reinforces Taikoo Li as a strong destination beyond the online shopping platforms, which contrasts with the uniform high-rise typology and western-oriented buildings but the contemporary local historical and cultural environments.²⁰

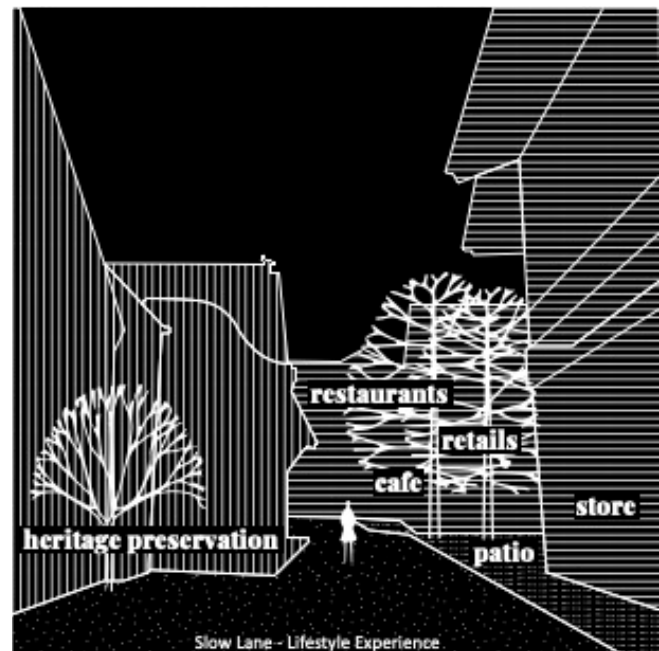


Figure 3. Programs in Chengdu Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li cross-section.

CHARLOTTESVILLE MALL VS. CHENGDU TAIKOO LI

Charlottesville Mall in Virginia and Chengdu Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li, although separated more than four decades and having very distinct historical, social, and cultural backgrounds, both propose design strategies through which a socially engaged architecture generate standing physical atmospheres. Public spaces which transcend the domain of authorless processes, online platforms, and ad hoc artifacts but reinforce local characteristics of the existing communities in the urban process. Vibrant pedestrian shopping districts to support daily shopping and leisure activities which share five similarities in their design approach: context sensibility, small scale, multi-functionality, connectivity, and participation inclusion.

1. Context Sensibility

Both Charlottesville mall and Chengdu Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li faced improper management, and underutilization of land value before their site interventions. In both process, designers chose to respect residents’ behaviors and the historic street fabric. While Anna and Lawrence Halprin applied collective creativity to the community, launching a survey to improve the walkability as one main factor of regeneration; Oval Partnership worked with scholars to explore the relationship between traditional Chinese historic streets and dwellings in a contemporary context. Both proposals started from the transformation of the street block into the revitalization of the urban fabric while designing a community/urban public space parallel to both the cultural characteristics of each region.



Figure 4. Charlottesville vs. Chengdu

low-density open space design approach, which especially during the pandemic, both proposals can help us to better understand the multifaceted, global, and unequal cycles of consumption that continue to shape our shared environments and lives. An analysis which makes us reflect on the fact that today, not everybody in the city shares a sense of belonging to public amenities. The formulas of production, revitalization, and commodification of common spaces need to leave room for true inclusivity of the agents who are behind the decision-making, the planning, the imagination, and the representation of a collective realm for all. On the contrary, how is it possible to engage everybody if not everybody is included in the process?

ENDNOTES

1. Rem Koolhaas, "Project on the City II: The Harvard Guide to Shopping." (2001)
2. Cole E. Judge, "The Experiment of American Pedestrian Malls: Trends Analysis, Necessary Indicators for Success and Recommendations for Fresno's Fulton Mall." Strong Cities, Strong Communities Downtown Fresno Partnership, November, 2013.
3. Sarita Herman. "A Pedestrian Mall Born Out of Urban Renewal." Albemarle County History (2010).
4. "The Oval Partnership: Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li Chengdu," the Oval Partnership (the Oval Partnership, 2014). Link: <https://www.ovalpartnership.com/en/work/project/Sino-Ocean-Taikoo-Li-Chengdu>, accessed October 2021.
5. Maria Ana Vitorino, *Empirical Entry Games with Complementarities: An Application to the Shopping Center Industry*, Journal of Marketing Research, Vol. 49, No. 2 (April 2012), pp. 175-191.
6. Lisa Provence, "Downtown Mall at 40: Is innovation still around?" *C-ville Weekly*, November 29, 2016. <https://www.c-ville.com/downtown-mall-40-innovation-still-around/#.WEBQtoVWAg>. 2016, accessed October 2021.
7. Ibid.
8. Lawrence and Anna Halprin. New York, *New York: a study of the quality, character, and meaning of open space in urban design*. (New York: Seymour B. Durst Old York Library, 1968), pp. 107.
9. Alison B. Hirsch, Scoring the Participatory City: Lawrence (& Anna) Halprin's Take Part of Architectural Education, March 2011, Vol. 64, No. 2, Beyond Precedent (March 2011), pp. 127-140.
10. Jane Ford, "History of Charlottesville's Downtown Mall the Subject of Two Exhibits," UVA Today, March 31, 2010. <https://news.virginia.edu/content/history-charlottesvilles-downtown-mall-subject-two-exhibits>, accessed October 2021.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Chengdu Local Chronicles Compilation Committee, Institute of Historical Geography, Sichuan University, "Chengdu Jiu Zhi," in *Chengdu Jiu Zhi* (Chengdu: Chengdu Times Press, 2007).
14. "About Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li Chengdu," Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li Chengdu (Swire Properties Limited, 2015), <http://www.soltklcd.com/en/AboutUs/ProjectSummary>.
15. Guy Bradley, "Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li Chengdu. The Story of an Original Development," August 8, 2017, pp. 10.
16. Guy Bradley, pp. 40. Note: Taikoo Li development provides a similar volume and characteristics of the six well-preserved residential buildings from the Ming, Qing, and Republican eras.
17. Ibid.
18. Ester van Stekelenburg, "Placemaking in the Historic Heart of Chengdu," *The City at Eye Level* (STIPO, November 4, 2020), <https://thecityateyelevel.com/stories/placemaking-in-the-historic-heart-of-chengdu/>, accessed October 2021.
19. Ibid.
20. Events, Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li Chengdu (Swire Properties Limited, 2015), <http://www.soltklcd.com/en/ActivityPage/Events>, accessed October 2021.
21. Alison B. Hirsch, *Scoring the Participatory City: Lawrence (& Anna) Halprin's Take Part of Architectural Education*, March 2011, Vol. 64, No. 2, Beyond Precedent (March 2011), pp. 127-140.
22. Conversation by Ester van Stekelenburg with Christopher Law from Oval Partnership. "The Oval Partnership: Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li Chengdu," the Oval Partnership (the Oval Partnership, 2014). Link: <https://www.ovalpartnership.com/en/work/project/Sino-Ocean-Taikoo-Li-Chengdu>, accessed October 2021.
23. Ibid.