Design strategies of the urban public space in the Franco-Chinese metropolitan cities of Paris and Dalian

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Abstract. The purpose of this research is based on the placement of two geographically opposed cities, but with similarities in their urban structure, Dalian and Paris. We study here the design strategies involved in the emergence of contemporary urban public spaces, in the metropolitan context, and in a globalized context of urban identity research. First, we compare the status of public space in the two different cultural and urban contexts of China and Europe. Then, we enter in the analysis of examples of two main elements of urban composition: the public square and the metropolitan axis. By the first, we put our analysis on the example of Zhongshan Square, a singular but not unique case in the Chinese city the most provided in places that is Dalian. Then, concerning the metropolitan axis, we focus our study on the Champs-Élysées, allowing us to reveal the great axis of Dalian constituted by the succession of broad streets between Qingniwa and the Donggang Center. We conclude our study of the Parisian examples of the Beaubourg plateau and Les Halles, which show both perspectives and models of conceptions of public spaces that follow and bring urban progress, in our contemporary and globalized cultural and historical context.

1. Introduction

Once his primary needs are met, human has become a city dweller developing design strategies to rethink the city structure. In Europe, the city’s archetypal develops radio concentrically around a central urban element: “a public square”.

This historical and cultural characteristic heritage of the Greek Agora and the Roman Forum, did not exist in China. These two previous examples were both “public places”, containing a council room. At the same time in China, this notion of public place was restricted to markets or public temples, self-same, parks were private, owned by the wealthiest. The planning of Beijing is centred around the private space of the Forbidden City, where, in front of which, the “Tian An Men” square, was private too. Despite its similarities with western cobbled squares, it has a “gateway” significance, it’s an entrance space dedicated to this political power venues of China. The private therefore takes precedence over public affairs in this distant period. Thus, the main inherited “visual identity” of the Chinese city, is represented by a private element, contrary to mainly European urban scheme.

Public space, by definition, is a space left free and open to the public, as opposed to private space which is left at the disposal of only one individual or group of individuals. Another important point we want to enlighten is the “interactive relationship” between public space and its city. Today’s most of Chinese squares are designed and built based on a Western cultural model, experiencing architectural and artistic evolutions. We will here see and study, through the concrete examples of Paris and Dalian, their public space strategies.
2. The public square: cultures of the public space

Public places enjoy a good reputation in the general opinion because they represent a common space, usable by all, designed for the good of all. When we are talking about public square, we often imagine a square or circle design, with a work of art in its centre such as a fountain or a statue. But it is not the case in all cultures. However, whatever the culture, we always have two types of place: the first represents the centre of the city, inherent to its representation, and the second represents the centre of a district, suitable for “domestic” use.

From one culture to another, the status of public space varies. If in Western culture, the economic prosperity of a city has pushed to expand the city and, at the same time, to enlarge or create public places, it is not the same in China, or at least not at the same pace. While the public square in Europe depended heavily on the economy, they were enlarged or restricted with the will of the public authorities who inject budgets, in China the dimensions depend only on the stars and spirits who inhabit the places.

In China, the notion of a classical public square does not exist as it is conceived in European culture. Some “public squares” have been settled during the period of concessions or colonization, such as Shanghai, Qingdao and Dalian. Until then, the “public squares” of the big cities in China resembled in every way those of the small villages. The revolution that set up Communism set up another system, and according to the policy, the cities turned to the West and began to reproduce the models of European public places. However, the Chinese tradition ends up taking precedence over foreign influences. It could be illustrating by the example of Dalian City. It also perfectly highlights the Chinese modernity that does not necessarily go through industrial progress but through the adoption of a specific architecture. The very structure of Dalian is very similar to that of Paris. It is actually an example of Western culture applied to a Chinese city during the period of colonization.

Dalian City is in Liaoning Province, north of China. The ancient structure of Dalian comes from the European model and was installed during the period of Russian and Japanese occupation (1898-1904, 1904-1945). One of the oldest squares in Dalian was built during the settlement period: Zhongshan Square during the Russian occupation.

Figure 1. Diagram modified by Zengrong Gao on the original version of the Dalny (Dalian) plan[1] Figure 1-1. Pierre-Charles L’Enfant, Plan of Washington, 1781 (transcript of 1887, redrawn in 1993)

In 1945, Japan surrendered Dalian to the People’s Republic of China and the Great Square was officially renamed “Zhongshan Square”. After the birth of the People’s Republic of China, several stages took place in the renovation of the city. Dalian authorities continued the transformation of Zhongshan, but for historical and cultural reasons, these transformations did not change the general style adopted before the Second World War.

The desire to keep this square (round circle) is distinguished by its star-shaped, which bears a symbolism in Chinese culture. The stars represent the light and the 10 branches the perfection. The number 10 represents what is closed because finished, perfect. Zhongshan Square also has another place in its centre, which reinforces its symbolic aspect. Chinese astrologers looked at the stars in the sky to know the future, destiny. The presence of a double star is therefore beneficial for the city.
This last transformation has resulted in a lot of equipment. But overall, the current Zhongshan Square has been maintained in traditional culture while being inspired by modern methods of spatial organization. The urban architects have set a large lawn (about 11 000m²) and have taken over the Chinese tradition of the culture of the “natural botanical garden”.

While China’s “culture of square” comes from abroad, the historical element left its mark on architectural design. The artistic element is always present and has accompanied the inhabitants through the historical events. Moreover, it would be wrong to believe that public spaces, after multiple stages of evolution, will no longer undergo changes today. Even if the pace has been drastically reduced in Europe, there are other constructions and public spaces in other latitudes that constitute so-called “prestige” projects, showcases of the know-how of their designers.

Thus, just as the “Place de l’Étoile” represents an image of the city of Paris, or even in the common imaginary that of France, for all Chinese, Zhongshan Square is reminiscent of the city of Dalian and therefore the coastal city for tourists. As such, each of these places allow the cities to which they belong to distinguish themselves on the international scene. They serve the “identity” of the city. Evidence of this is the recurrent images that exist in the common imaginary, based on squares, works or remarkable monuments such as the Eiffel Tower, the Champs de Mars, Times Square and Tian An Men. However, this quest for distinction, while still present, has evolved with societies resulting in different strategic approaches, design, beyond the mere aesthetic value.

3. The evolution of the urban axis from the ornamental perspective to a connection of strategic interest

In the book, Paris de la Préhistoire à nos jours, Marcel Le Clère gives us an image of Paris “in the fifteenth century, Paris still has few public places facilitating large gatherings; they are, in fact, intersections: Maubert, Les Halles, Place de Grève” [2]. Today, the Champs-Élysées are considered as the most famous avenue of Paris and its main historical axis. Dalian also has its own axis, in which the Zhongshan Square, presented previously, is a main element. However, the Champs-Élysées, as we will see, seems to be the ideal example to evoke the evolution of the urban axis that accompanied the modernization.

The Champs-Élysées are composed of the two words Champs and Élysées. The word Champs, from the Latin campus “plain, cultivated land”, open and flat space, and Élysées, “Who belongs to the Elysee, stay of the blessed in hell. Nature was beginning to reign over the Wood, whence the idea that it was the Elyos Garden of the Woman had flown away” (Proust).

Originally, the current land of the Avenue were uninhabited swamps. Marie de Medicis decided in 1616, to have a promenade along the Seine, consisting of a long tree-lined driveway and two alleyways to allow her to breathe the air of the countryside. Marie de Medicis christened her “Cours la Reine”, where the right side of this path represented “a large lot filled with paths of trees and greenery, where during Sundays and festivals, part of the people of Paris come to relax from the work of the week. This place is named Champs-Élysées”[3].

In 1710, the Duc d’Antin stretched the Avenue des Champs-Élysées to the “Place de L’Étoile”, after the creation of the Place Louis-XV (1755-1775, current Concorde) in the middle of the century, drawn by Ange-Jacques Gabriel. The Place of the Concorde represents the main square of Paris with a surface of 8, 64 hectares. After this addition the Avenue des Champs-Élysées became an even more important and frequented urban space, in particular by Parisian women.

During the Second Empire, Napoleon III ordered the expansion of Paris, the project lasted for about 17 years under the direction of Governor Baron Haussmann. This exceptional period of prosperity led to the appearance of other mansions, plenty of different shops and palaces along the Avenue. That’s one of the main reasons, that have led the Champs-Élysées to become the microcosm of elegance and the triumphant expression of France for all. It was at this time that the main and still current structure and urban planning of Paris were established.

With the advent of twenty-first century popular brands, mainly selling clothes and various goods, came to settle in the avenue which now frequented by a more social mixed public. After years of
transformation until today, we see the charming landscapes and beautiful architectures of the Avenue des Champs-Élysées.

Now let’s analyze the historical continuity of this masterful axis. We will focus more particularly on the different scales of the Champs-Élysées, from the Louvre to the Arc de Triomphe, as well as on who base these qualities and urban characteristics.

Champs-Élysées Avenue rises from Place de la Concorde in the East to Place Charles-de-Gaulle in the West. This avenue, which is in line with the main avenue of the Tuileries Garden, forms a magnificent perspective that admirably completes the Arc de Triomphe, and continues west to the Grande Arche de la Défense. The Grande Arche de la Défense is located at the end, west of theParisian axis and resembles a reflection of the Arc de Triomphe through time.

In the book *La Grande Arche sur l’axe historique* de Paris, the excerpts of the program of the competition announced that “of all these axes, none is more important, richer of historical symbols, dearer to the hearts of Parisians, more spectacular for the visitor, than the great west axis, born in the courtyard of the Louvre, extended by the Champs-Élysées and which ends at the Défense”[4]. This allows us to clearly distinguish the historic axis of Paris as a birth of ordered urban space with the Louvre which always serves as a starting point.

And this axis is inseparable from the history and identity of the city, which is why its evolution and continuity has integrated a logic of metropolitan co-visibilities and great metropolitan landscape. For the Parisians, the Champs-Élysées are a particularly legible and original structure with large straight avenues, planted trees, public monuments and its underground system. All these elements have contributed to make it the most famous avenue in the world and represents the historic urban space of Paris. Thus, the new landmarks should not have dismissed the first invariants dear to the collective imagination such as the Arc de Triomphe.

Extending since the 1960s with La Défense, a business district, the city is today characterized by the conquest of vertical space, having conquered horizontality, and spread. This new district was built on a hill that is now part of the Parisian landscape. It extends the historic axis of Paris by a large esplanade of one kilometre and a half, lined by buildings of amazing diversity. This part is undoubtedly the most beautiful contribution of the twentieth century. It highlights the principles established previously regarding the evolution of places by its multiple accessibility (metro, RER, train, bus, highway, etc.) and large public spaces reserved for pedestrians. Thus, the cars are relegated to the basement. The avenues have been arranged and aligned in the heart of the Defense to extend the look to the Arc de Triomphe and allow walks. On the slab, a completely artificial floor hosts fountains, sculptures, installations and artificial gardens suspended. These urban arts bring leisure and a possibility of appropriation of spaces by the public.

La Défense is also an exhibition space for young artists and venues for various events, a large museum of contemporary open-air art. These spaces are truly public because they are open and appropriate by athletes (rollerblades, cyclists, skaters, etc.) who can practice at leisure between the aisles. These spaces perfectly correspond to the criterion expressed by its designer: “That all men meet there in all freedom”. All these elements combined together make the Defense is both a business city but also a pleasant place to walk, an unusual sports field and an admirable extension of the historic axis of Paris. This overall composition has been developed in great detail and this is probably the reason why urban plans change according to the needs (but also depending on the political division of the government team) and bring the places to evolve, expand or, more rarely, to change shape.

Dalian has also developed an urban extension with the construction of a polder extending its coastal district and the historic urban axis now the “Qingniwa-Donggang Centre”. This large-scale transformation of the Dalian port and coastal area is a new “symbol” for the contemporary city. Thus, the Dalian axis as its Paris model “Louvre-la Defense” show that the issues of development of an urban axis called “prestige” have progressed following the evolution of societies. In the 21st century, they are integrating new functions and uses linked to mobility, tourism, retail and services, and where there is still the ambition of international influence and attraction.
4. Contemporary public space: a space in motion

Before, the city which wanted to be distinguishing from the others, was using the “beauty” as the main design element. This is no longer used as the only essential strategy to make and “decorate” the public space of the city. Today, design strategies give more importance to human scale, and to the ways of being “practical” in addition to serving beauty. He must participate in the life of the city in which he finds himself and form with it a coherent whole. The historical aspect still remains, but now there is a need to combine past and present. It is precisely this need that characterizes the places that exist today in our cities.

Let us take the example of the Center Pompidou to illustrate the new practices of the emerging public square in the second half of the 20th century. With regard to the urban integration of the “Piazza de Beaubourg”, Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers tell us: “to separate pedestrians from vehicles, we designed a pedestrian square at 3.20m below ground level, is a point of convergence below for the different pedestrian networks. Rue de la Reynie, dug on the same level, is an extension of the square”[5]. The square has been conceived and realized as a free and open space, which can be used for exhibitions and outdoor activities, organized by the museum or momentarily by the public. The square is lined with shops, cafes, and restaurants, which participate in its animation and is the backdrop. The “Beaubourg Plateau”, entirely pedestrian, is divided between streets and squares; the Piazza and Stravinsky Square, creating a diversity of spaces, while maintaining an overall coherence.

The simplicity of the “plateau de Beaubourg” works in concert with the Parisian architectural landscape. Faced with a building that displays the degree of mastery of construction techniques, the small square brings a touch of freedom to passers-by who has the opportunity to recompose space, re-stage, but in their own way, the art contemporary. There are all genres: music, painting, theatre, etc. which breathes a certain humanity into an immutable building. The Pompidou Center presents itself as an inert block while facing it, on its forecourt, we attend different centres of activities: here we juggle, here we pedal, there we meet in the round to sing some songs etc. Everything is scattered, moving and constantly moving. Art here is represented by the movements of groups of artists, passers-by. The other element that humanizes this public space is the Stravinsky fountain. The latter is considered by many to be a meeting square. The contemporary style sculptures “bathing” in them, colourful and moving, attract the eye, and their forms participate in “humanizing the space”, giving it a scale and a human presence. Passers-by will find their place of rest to observe the various activities that take place on the place and children can have fun with the water in the heart of Paris.

The spaces of the Centre Georges Pompidou allow us to discover how the squares and streets that surround this building compose with the existing urban fabric. Thus, the space of Beaubourg is a model, or urban “typology” of public space.

The place des Halles has been constantly subjected to a concern for improving space. Originally it was a market that was created in the twelfth century under the name “belly of Paris”. Current needs have changed today. This is also linked to the mobility that has led to the relocation of the bulk food to Rungis, on the outskirts of Paris, to evacuate delivery trucks from the centre of Paris. For years, the space remained “empty” from where the name given at this time of “trou des Halles”. This made it possible to create a connection between 3 Parisian stations, connections between the RER lines and other metro lines. This exchange platform hosting more than 750,000 passengers a day is now called “Châtelet-les-Halles”. This trade hub is the busiest in Europe. However, this very well-located place is poorly regarded by Parisians: an impression of chaos, saturated and gangrenous space.

In 2002, the City of Paris decided to undertake the renovation of the district of Les Halles, the architect David Mangin[6], was chosen for his desire to integrate Les Halles in a continuity of the Parisian centre. In addition, it maintains the existing hierarchy between underground spaces (shopping centre, swimming pool, RER, RATP, etc.) and integrates a large garden of four hectares with equipment on the surface. So, he imagined a vast central promenade 22 meters wide which is around the garden. Above the Forum, the course becomes a “gateway” of the 21st century to connect the Commerce Exchange, transformed into a place of fashion and culture exhibitions. Underneath, the Forum would become a well of natural light, which should also receive the light of day. The original
idea of David Mangin “Le Carreau” was replaced by a Canopy under the responsibility of the company Patrick Berger and Jacques Anziutti architects.

Two series of joint public surveys were conducted in mid-2009 and end-2009, bringing the details of the project to the attention of the population. And it is the largest underground public space operation ever undertaken in France to release so much space in the heart of Paris. The image of Les Halles is metamorphosed and conforms to a metropolitan ambition.

Indeed, the case of Les Halles, is characteristic of the transformation of urban public spaces to contemporary urban uses and modes of living. This type of place condenses and synthesizes multiple metropolitan issues. The vast public space of Les Halles is in fact an agglomeration of multiple public spaces with intricate interweaving and connections. The Halles testify to the aspects and evolutions specific to the metropolitan “hub”, forming a place that enhances and secures pedestrian access and movement, in correspondence with a public transport hub in the heart of the historic city. The project synthesizes flows, and activities, creating a point of convergence, between public spaces of mobility and those of commercial and leisure functions.

Beyond, Les Halles gives the passer-by and the inhabitant unprecedented functions that are: a green public space, occupying nearly 3/4 of the surface of the plateau des Halles, and a vast public space open and covered by the “Canopy”. The first shows, if not to contemplate the surrounding city, and the second is an “intermediary” public event space linking the historic city on the surface and the hub of underground mobility. There is also the issue of the return of “nature” in the city, demineralization and progressive depollution of urban space, streets and squares given back to pedestrians taken back to the car. Note that if we have a “green lung” on each side of Paris (Bois de Boulogne in the West and Bois de Vincennes in the East), there is still a lack of gardens in the heart of the city.

5. Conclusion

Thus, the constant mutation of the city and societies has led to changes in public spaces to meet the needs of residents. Formerly “utilitarian” and intended to bring more comfort and hygiene in the nineteenth century, they have become today a place of relaxation, meeting or even leisure, where you can admire works of art so less intimidating (popular) and more interactive than in a museum. Many spaces have evolved with society and respond to new uses that were not planned at the base but that make them today their strength. The children climb the works to be photographed (for example: the head of Muller at the foot of the Saint-Eustache church or the columns of Burens). Public spaces such as the forecourt of the Pompidou Center, previously designed to access equipment, becomes an open-air amphitheatre or a place where tired walkers sit. Thus, the new public space promotes a multifunctional urban space, multimodal and fundamentally pedestrian.

Multifunctional, by its ability to accommodate new and multiple uses: event, festive, installation of sports courses, market. We find different uses depending on the season or time of day[7]. The human flows that emerge are a temporal marker linked to public spaces and their spatial location in the city. Unusual activities like juggling, advertising, selling items or food (bubble tube, fan, miniature Eiffel tower, sweet potato or warm brown) dancing, sunbathing, fishing etc. The public space becomes an ephemeral concert hall (music festival) or street theater. There are also functions and uses related to the development of digital technologies that has caused the use of the phone and laptop in public places. We are now able to work outside from home or from the office.

Multimodal because public spaces are now serving urban spaces, especially via networks. For example, in Dalian the subway track follows the new Donggang district underground. As at the Défense, the motorways are separated from pedestrian spaces. That is to say that there is a mobility platform to clear polluting spaces (sound and environmental) including a search for comfort for users and allow ease in their travel.

There is also the issue of the return of nature to the city. It is linked to new environmental issues (adaptation to climate change) that enhance green spaces and water in the city, permeabilized surfaces, to refresh public spaces especially the most frequented areas (thermal comfort, heat island). A new look is also focused on rainwater: how best integrated into public spaces, store it or promote its
infiltration. It is often thought of in relation to the plant space in an environmental concern (temperature, pollution). However, these transformations depend on the will of the public authorities and the financing.

From Europe to China, public squares tend today to evolve towards the same standards. To find the Chinese style, you have to go back to private spaces. Only plans for the development of these spaces tell us about true Chinese art. Some cities such as Shanghai offer public spaces designed on the style of old Chinese squares to break with the modernity of neighbouring buildings, such as the square near the Pearl Tower, the downtown Shanghai. Finally, although the public space exists only very recently in China, it is clear that it is now well and truly Western influence.

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