

Spring 2015, Advanced Studio VI. Jing Liu

The rapid rise of the Chinese economy over the past decades has triggered numerous unforeseen effects in the world. These consequences, such as the hybridization of hyper capitalism and one-party politics or the deprivation of natural resource coupled with environmental crises, frequent the front pages of western journals and newspapers, such as the Economist. At the same time, in every Chinese airport bookstore, shelves are populated with books on China's new strategic positioning in the world, its love-hate relationship with the US, and how old ideas such as Buddhism and Taoism can be compatible or even instrumental in the modern world.

When discussed on paper, these varying perspectives remain abstract and sometimes lead to misconceptions and alienation. In contrast, when confronted with in practice, through activities in our urban life, they might give rise to new typologies of interactions and cultural forms. Rapid imitations, misinterpreted intentions, social conservatism, vast consumer culture, and many other seemingly negative "China" phenomenon might be investigated beyond superficial commentary and turned into productive catalysts. What can be a more appropriate site for this investigation than Chinatown, a unique urban type found all around the world? These dusty mirrors of an old China are poised to be re-defined as an active participant, or even "interlocutor", or envoy, in the conversation between the new China and the rest of the world.

Chinatown, as it was, has often been passive. One can say, it is a relatively insular settlement of the Chinese diaspora within the Western world. It is nostalgic, or even naive. It is a walled city which sustains its own systems and logics - an exotic destination for tourists, and a haven for dissidents. For over a century, Chinatowns have quietly been observing the stark contrast with the world around itself, as well as witnessing the ups and downs of its motherland, never actively engaged with either. Nowadays, a new generation of Western bred and raised middle class Chinese descendants here no longer seeks a safe haven, but tries to savor its resemblance to a culture that they feel remotely affiliated with. At the same time, due to the often difficult ownership and rental inheritance conditions and a sub-standard building stock, profit-seeking Chinese developers and investors have so far shied away. For that reason, contemporary Chinatown is a potent yet undervalued urban site, ready for re-imagination by its own minds.

The studio will first investigate the current characteristics of this urban type. From its deep structure and formal languages to superfluous decorations. Through both analytical data and empirical research, the seemingly chaotic system can be made legible. Potential civic assets and cultural/economical fabric can be identified. A carefully designed physical model will make such information accessible to all. From there, each student will identify a project that 1) strengthens an existing civic, cultural or economical asset, 2) overcomes an existing urban condition that hinders future development, 3) inherits both the operative mode and formal language of contemporary China. The latest ambition is established with the understanding that the project is firmly rooted in the context of New York, and by stressing its affinity with China, this cross-fertilization will by default become a hybrid typology unique to Chinatown.

Through the architectural re-imagination of Chinatown, the complex web of influences contemporary China is asserting on the rest of the world can be made into a more tangible daily experience rather than newspaper headlines. Contentions between the US and China might be softened by a position 'in-between'. In New York, we will conduct interviews with residents, business owners, developers and institutional operators in Chinatown. In China, we will visit cultural institutions, business entrepreneurs as well as historical heritage sites. In both locations, we will have an ongoing conversation with Chinese artists to understand the cultural dimension of the largely economically driven phenomenon, and how it may be further investigated. Through this project, we might discover Chinatown's unique and powerful potential in creating the link between the two powerhouses, possessing a deep understanding of both.