

Book Review

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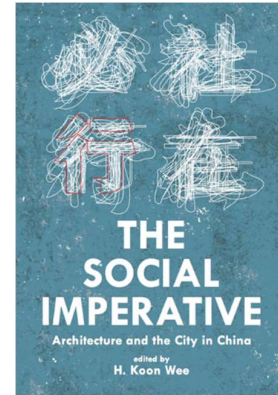
The Social Imperative: Architecture and the City in China

Edited By Koon Wee

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The Social Imperative: Architecture and the City in China is a collection of critical essays and manifestos aimed at enhancing the discourse on contemporary Chinese architecture and urbanism. In particular, it is crucial that the voices of the Chinese architects, urbanists and intellectuals are themselves central to this discourse. On one hand, it is important for the readers to gain access to the original writings, often written in the Chinese language, and on the other hand, it is imperative for these intellectuals to express themselves freely, as they wrestle the discourse from state-led narratives. As the editor of *The Social Imperative*, Wee steers the intellectual direction of the book through his introductory chapter entitled “Spatial Limits of Socialist China.” He argues that the authors presented in the book are still leveraging the social and humanist ideals from the past socialist era in a positive fashion, in order to work constructively oppose the onslaught of building and urbanization in the capitalist era. Wee introduces architects, urbanists and intellectuals at the forefront of reforming, rethinking and even revolutionizing contemporary Chinese society. Beneath the surface of a flourishing China, a quiet self-correction or non-violent revolution is taking place in the fields of architecture and urbanism.

Apart from the introductory chapter, there are five to six essays in each of the remaining eight chapters. With a total of fifty-five authors, this volume is advocating new design tactics, new pedagogies, and new areas of research. Accordingly, the wide range of emergent sites, case studies and theories discussed show that China possesses the capacity to reshape the dominant trajectory of architecture made in the image of capitalism. Leaning on the histories of social reform and revolution, Wee organizes the chapters around the norms of social control, social mobility, rationalism, resistance, labor relations, networked spaces among others.

The graphic design in the book, especially the front cover, echoes the revolutionary undertones – from the abstracted protest and propaganda banners in the table of contents, to

the gray-blue color of the military uniforms adorned by Communist cadres in China. On the book cover, the red outline over the word “action” (translated from the Chinese “xing”) is a call to arms against social inequality. The gray patchy texture superimposed over the gray-blue cover comes from calligraphy prints made from traditional carved block stone. Taken together, the book puts the social agendas of architects, urbanists, theorists and academics squarely back into the practice of architecture and city-making in China, urging for a greater range of ideas and methods to counteract urbanization that has been dominated by market forces and profit-driven models.

Wee argues that China ought to have a very different outcome in the incomplete history of capitalism given its distinctive roots in communism and socialism. Because of the closed nature of the Chinese society during the Cold War, and the level of censorship exerted over the production of national scholarship, it is not surprising that Chinese architects and scholars have not documented, discussed or critiqued the histories and theories behind their experimental and canonical works as well as they could have. Therefore, it is important to focus on Chinese contemporary architecture not based only on the visual aspects of exemplary works in China, but also to introduce to the readers the unsanitized debates, manifestos and original theories of the Chinese intelligentsia.

This book reveals a connection with the theory and practice of Ekistics, as the text itself is a pedagogical experiment. Invariably, many of the authors are reinvigorating the humanist tradition that is rooted in the “systems”: nature, anthropos, society, shells (architecture) and networks, following the five Ekistics elements. The strongest illustration of this is in the culminating discussions of a study in Beijing, where Wee brought together Tsinghua Professor and centenarian Wu Liangyong, and the late architect and theorist William S.W. Lim to discuss the humanist and cultural foundations of Chinese architecture and urbanism. This dialogue was

attended by small number of Tsinghua professors, PhD students, and AA Asia participants. As the founder of the Science of Human Settlements in the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Wu is a leading proponent of an applied form of Ekistics, arguing for the need for a scientific and holistic application of Ekistics values to achieve a harmonious and sustainable human settlement for China. Wu (2002) closely follows the five Ekistics disciplines, and describes them as the five principles of ecology, economy, technology, society, and culture and art.

In this volume, Wu contributes an essay entitled “Aesthetics Culture and Habitation,” while Lim pens the foreword to this book. Lim (1974) and Wu (1987) were both early Asian contributors to the Ekistics journal. Lim sparked an internal debate with Constantinos Doxiadis when the former’s 1974 Ekistics contribution on shopping typologies was misconstrued as weakening “human values” in architecture (Theodosis, 2015, p. 209), when Lim was in fact pursuing typologies of affordable shopping as new forms of civic spaces in Asia. (Wee, 2020b) This episode did not negatively impact Lim’s relationship with Ekistics editors Jaqueline Tyrwhitt and Gwen Bell, however, as they continued to promote Asian architecture and planning expertise in the journal. Wu was the former president of the World Society of Ekistics from 1985. As leaders in their respective cities, these debates of Asian cultural contexts led by Lim and Wu were carefully recorded by Catharine Huws Nagashima (1985) in her account entitled “Architectural Identity in the Cultural Context: Reporting on a UNU/APAC Meeting in Japan, 1985 – A Tribute,” published in the 1985 Ekistics issue in Jaqueline Tyrwhitt’s memory.

The foundational link of this volume to Ekistics and Tyrwhitt is worth analyzing. As Tyrwhitt’s student at Harvard in the mid-1950s, it was Lim who took up the interdisciplinary mantle in Asia. Having worked with Lim for other research and advocacy projects, Wee came full circle to reconnect and joined the new Ekistics editorial board in 2019. As Lim had been contributing to Ekistics since the 1970s, he also formed the Asian Planning and Architectural Collaboration (APAC) with other prominent Ekistics contributors such as Fumihiko Maki, Koichi Nagashima, Tao Ho, Sumet Jumsai and Charles Correa. They were unified in their efforts to demonstrate that planning expertise can reside within the realm of Asian professionals, and to compete against solutions dominated by the West. Maki recalls that this mandate to form the “Team 10 of Asia” came from Tyrwhitt (Wee, 2020a). By the 1990s, this APAC identity and cultural project gave way to the formation of AA Asia, which started out as a graduate association of architects from the Architectural Association in London, and quickly became a postcolonial project that included Asian architects from throughout Asia. Mark Wigley (2001) describes the interdisciplinary quality of Ekistics as a “network fever,” along with the interconnected community around the Ekistics method. This aptly captures the interdisciplinary expertise surrounding this volume. In pursuing an Asian identity project, Lim founded one such “networked” group called AA Asia to promote specific discourses in architecture originating from Asia, on the terms of its own intelligentsia.

The originality of this volume thus comes from the representative voices of the Chinese intelligentsia for an

English language readership. It marks the culmination of a multi-year study of social issues in the architecture and cities of China. This study found support from AA Asia because they share the same interest in field-based inquiry, as this volume relies heavily on interlocutors from outside of China interacting with architects, urbanists and theorists working within China. Since the 1990s, AA Asia remains one of a few highly independent think tanks committed to the study and advocacy of new architecture and urban conditions in Asia. AA Asia supported this book with a grant, where members from across Asia, including China, came together to undertake three major study trips led by Wee to Shanghai, Shenzhen, Guangzhou and Beijing between 2010 and 2015. Contributing authors embraced field-based learning and teaching, networking and interdisciplinarity throughout the seminars, panel discussions, forums and debates. As a pedagogical platform with strong practice-based roots, the editor and authors of this volume continue to bridge the differences across various postcolonial and Asian contexts, in an effort to reestablish the social role of architecture in a technocratic and scientific era dominated by the global economy.

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