

Chinese PlaceMaking 2013

international investigations into relationships with public space

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"We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

T. S. Eliot (lines from Little Gidding)

Current Practice

My recent work has focused on producing a tool kit of objects and events for facilitating interactions in cities. These aim to provide opportunities for improving relationships with and in urban environments. Workshops and public participation projects based in and around Manchester have resulted in a series of images documenting communication of different perceptions and dialogues from a range of communities.

PlaceMaking Project Development

WHAT DID I SET OUT TO ACHIEVE?

- Physical and conceptual expansion of existing *PlaceMaking* project (more practical work and further research)
- New contributions that were not repetitive (e.g. not just more variations of existing responses)
- Utilisation of contrasts in cultural approaches to use of public, urban spaces to learn more about those in the UK
- Increased momentum for further work following on from, or with outcomes of this research

Why China?

My teaching and artistic practices are so closely linked as to have blurred edges and China is currently very interested in UK educational practices. From what I can gather, it is looking to prevent further economic slowdown by addressing certain issues including what it perceives to be weaknesses in its creative sector (e.g. it has strong skills in manufacturing products from other countries, but is not as successful in designing its own exports) and communication skills (lack of English language) in the population at large but especially in young people and those likely to become engaged in international business opportunities.

From opportunities that have arisen through teaching work to engage with partner colleges in China, I have recognised the potential to enrich my own creative practice through these contacts and conversations. It was especially appropriate for me to pursue these opportunities with Chinese links because I recognised that authentic exposure to the marked distinctions between European and Asian cultures would provide me with experience from which to make more informed analysis of approaches to city life in the UK. Additionally, China is in a period of rapid economic and cultural change which also makes it a very fertile place for creative exploration and networking.

Project Outcomes

In The UK

- Photos from workshops in Manchester, York and London with visiting Chinese lecturers and students (age 16-18)
- These reflected immediate environmental observations (this is a busy place/I saw a double decker bus for the first time) as well as responses comparing spaces to previous experience in other countries or suggesting general improvements to the area.



In China



- Photos from workshops in Dalian with English Language summer school students (age 5 – 12)
- These demonstrated local civic pride, immediate environmental observations, reflections on the condition of the space before recent construction works and specific aspirations for improved local facilities.

What factors might have influenced the outcomes?

- Is lack of time in sessions a problem or of benefit? While time restrictions do mean there is less opportunity for more considered responses, the fact that it often becomes a 'first thing to come to mind' statement might result in gathering perspectives of the most pressing factors. There was not really any more restriction on time in China or with Chinese participants than UK equivalents so this shouldn't affect comparisons between responses.
- Wording on boards does direct what gets written on them. Is this a limiting or necessary restriction? The sentences do direct responses to be reflective, responsive or aspirational though people can of course choose which of these to use. Though it could be argued that this introduces an element of bias, people do tend to need some direction as a starting point. Simply asking people to 'make a statement about his place' might leave a lot of participants lost for ideas and disengaged. Again, there is no difference here between Chinese and UK workshops so it wouldn't affect comparisons.
- Most significantly, language barriers mean I was able to engage less with Chinese participants at the outset though an interpreter was available in both instances and people were given the opportunity to ask questions. There did not appear to be any confusion with regards to the activity. The main area in which this would have any affect is in my understanding of side comments and surrounding conversation inspired by the activity so I cannot assess or compare this aspect of the workshop.

Reflection

All the groups I worked with demonstrated enjoyment of the activity by the manner in which they completed the task asked of them. There was enthusiasm around writing on the boards and in playfully using them to look through before committing thoughts to the camera, which clearly showed excitement (especially from younger participants). This was especially useful to see where language barriers meant I could not elicit the same depth of verbal feedback from Chinese participants as from the English speakers. I had been concerned that different perspectives on the nature of art might cause problems, in that Chinese participants might not fully understand the intended purpose or be as open to recognise it as 'art', however this was apparently not at all an issue and there were no questions in this area. This goes further to demonstrate the importance of testing inevitably biased assumptions with regards to alternative cultural perspectives, despite efforts to remain neutral.

Comparing Chinese and British Responses to the Northern Quarter (UK)

How do local/foreign perspectives on a place compare?

- Foreign perspectives tend to be more responsive. They record an immediate reaction to new environmental experiences and make more factual statements. Where they do indicate aspiration, perhaps they can help us to identify areas for improvement that we might consider trivial, or otherwise oversee.
- Local responses tend to reference pleasurable or negative experiences on a personal level rather than looking at wider social/environmental observations or opportunities.

What can we learn from the comparison?

Having built a relationship with an area over time is obviously critical in how we relate to a place and it is clear that this must be taken into account when addressing perceptions. An afternoon's workshop cannot change opinions that have been formed over a lifetime, though it can offer an opportunity to think about it outside of the everyday experience. This is a key area of value in the PlaceMaking project work. Utilising the 'fresh perspective' characteristic of those new to an area might be an alternative angle to give the workshops purpose in researching and proposing development opportunities.



I remember a double decker bus

(after seeing one for the first time)

Chinese Visitor



I remember too many times just missing the bus and waiting freezing, hungry and tired

UK Resident



I hope to see a clear night sky.

UK Resident



I hope to see a beautiful house in the blue sky and fresh air.

Chinese Visitor



This place is food, a place I can eat a treasure at a price and soup, only soup, soup, soup, NO GLUTEN!

UK Resident



I remember there was similar café; I used to kill my time in Sydney in 2010.

Chinese Visitor

How do perspectives on local areas compare in different places?

- When working with groups of younger people in the UK there was no evidence of civic or local pride on the same scale or with the same degree of passion.
- In Chinese responses from the same age group there appear to be less 'fantastical' suggestions for improvements and more practical or realistic ideas (e.g. I Hope To See 'more libraries' not 'rockets instead of buses').
- It should be recognised that a much smaller group of young people in China have participated than in the UK so sample sizes are not comparable.

What can we learn from the comparison?

Despite the differences, there were in fact more *similarities* identified between the groups' responses. It seems many young people, regardless of their location or cultural backgrounds place value on natural interventions in cities (such as parks and wildlife) and generally all enjoy engaging with sports and leisure activities in a shared environment. This is a promising finding; to recognise commonalities has always been stated as an aim of this project in local terms and perhaps it may now be possible to demonstrate some of these on a global scale. That this is in spite of an intention to root out differences suggests the PlaceMaking project functions well in achieving this other aim.



I hope to see a swimming pool.

Bolton, UK



I hope to see a waterpark.

Dalian, PRC



I hope there are flowers and trees.

Dalian I love you!

Dalian, PRC



I hope to see more grass and flowers.

Bolton, UK



I want to see a bird house!

Hulme, UK



I hope to see many birds!

Dalian, PRC

Other Observations and Experiences

The main related observation that I made during my time in China was that use of public space is a very much more intrinsic habit in Chinese than in British life. Streets and parks are used daily by old and young alike to meet, eat, exercise, share participation in sports and cultural activities and even to rest (it is not uncommon to see people sleeping on benches in the heat of the afternoon). I believe this to be symptomatic of a generally much more sharing culture; for example it is uncommon to have your own separate meal, dishes are shared out onto individual's plates and meal times are much more communal. In the summer, cafés and restaurants prepare food in the street and chairs and tables are pitched in the gutter for groups to sit at. Entire roads become eating halls (though this is in spite of, not instead of the heavy traffic!) and that most houses do not have much in the way of a kitchen (countertop cooking facilities only) indicates that eating out of the private home environment is the norm.

I was initially delighted by, and envious of, a culture where parks and streets are so much an integrated part of community exchange, however after some time I began to observe certain behaviours in a slightly different light. I did not recognise much obvious enthusiasm from those engaging in activities in the parks; that is not to say people seemed reticent or forced, simply that they were not giving it any thought or showing any obvious signs of particularly enjoying it. Their demeanour suggested to me a state of being on 'auto pilot'. This is supported by a conversation I had with one resident who told me that his mum went to the park regularly to dance and sing. I asked how the members of the groups knew the



tune, words and steps as there appeared to be no 'leader'. He told me that it was because they perform exactly the same songs and dances every day.

From this I compare my observations of UK parks and their use; they are less busy without a doubt, but most of those who you do see using them appear to display enjoyment more clearly. Their activities are less frequent but also less repetitive, for example a game of football once a week is less predictable than the steps of a formal fan dance carried out every day. Is a reduction in the demonstration of pleasure perhaps inevitable when such activities become so much a part of the norm, simply a case of the novelty wearing off?

During my visit to Beijing, I visited an artists' collective and spoke with director Max Gerthel, who lives in China but is also originally from Europe. I discussed these observations with him and he expressed this view; that use of parks and public spaces is such a part of everyday life that there is less need for the act to be identified as so distinctive and then becomes much less performative.

This observation led me on to question the relationship between communal approaches to living and the expression of individual opinion and identity. Do an increased sense of individuality and the freedom to express this, naturally lead us to be less inclined to share certain aspects of daily life as we become more self-aware, and possibly even more selfish? Does the prioritisation of shared space and living compromise expression of individuality? Another observation I made about Chinese Parks is that the ones I saw were all fenced off to indicate areas where walking and other activities were permitted and it was not possible to simply wander on to the grass. The space felt shared but also controlled. This may of course be very necessary when such large volumes of people are using a facility but it did seem to hinder a certain degree of spontaneity. Can the states of individuality and communality fully coexist or do they necessarily compromise one another? Are self-expression and communal living two extremes of a sliding scale and if so, how do we find the 'centre of gravity' that may be considered as an ideal to aim for?

Of course these very personal perspectives are by nature culturally biased and it is impossible to comment with any deep understanding on the activities of a society from which you do not come, a city in which you do not reside and a country whose language you do not speak. Despite this, some of my observations do link back to original investigations into self-expression and control in city spaces while I have also gained useful new angles to bring to the PlaceMaking work.

Conversations at the Institute for Provocation

At the end of my time in China, I flew back to the UK from Beijing. Knowing that capital cities tend to be an easy place to find an arts scene, I had hoped to use this as an opportunity speak with some Chinese artists to gain feedback and insight to my recent work. Though I had very limited time in the city and was not in the end able to arrange a meeting with Chinese artists, I did manage to visit to the Institute for Provocation. The IFP is an initiative which aims to provide a physical and conceptual opportunity for sharing ideas and questioning the boundaries between different art forms. Primarily a research project at this stage, the Institute hopes to set up a free local workspace and that through making opportunities for conversations between artists, creatives and local self-employed people it will be possible to find common ground from which to recognise differences in cultural backgrounds. These differences and exchanges can then, it is hoped, be utilised in order to 'provoke' personal creative changes, reflections and responses.

I shared my recent work with the director, Max, as well as current residency artists Maja Bekan and Angela Serino, and spoke about contemporary art in Beijing; there is currently a small but dynamic creative community but this does have a clear western influence due to visiting and local artists who have lived, travelled or studied outside of China. Smaller artists' communities in the suburbs have a more traditional Chinese leaning. As well as talking about my work and use of public spaces, we contextualised this by discussing the differences between Chinese approaches to art as a craft, the concept of making copies in order to achieve perfection of trade, and Contemporary Western perspectives where unique outcomes tend to be more highly valued. The former is of course not a uniquely Chinese perspective and we came dangerously close to falling into the age old 'What is Art?' debate but it was interesting to come at this discussion from a different angle.

Maja and Angela have not been in their posts long and so it was difficult for them to give much insight into Chinese practices. We discussed facilitating a creative practice in China as a foreign artist; how I had gone about arranging the workshop opportunities and negotiating language barriers as well as cultural differences in interaction during this process. We agreed that it was necessary to adopt a more flexible approach to this than one might be used to at home in order to allow for these differences.

As I dashed off to the airport, Max gave something of an unapologetic explanation of his sudden activity moving various random items in to the studio courtyard, stating that they had recently moved the residency artists' accommodation from one space to another and that they were in a transitional state. He quickly followed this up with the observation that this applied to China generally and I took this to be true on several levels; culturally, politically, financially, environmentally. For a country with such a long history it's hard to imagine how it could be hurtling with any more speed towards whatever future awaits it in its brave new world. This transitional state should, from my perspective at least be viewed as more than a means to an end, but like the best creative practices, considered as a journey whose value is in the experience rather than the completion. Just as my travels were not about the conclusion of arriving back in Manchester (though this act came to be strangely more significant than I had anticipated), the journey of any creatively evolving entity, be this a person, a nation or an artistic practice, is one to be valued, considered, utilised and shared in order to derive maximum momentum from it. I count myself fortunate to have had the opportunity to share in the experience of China's journey and fully recognise the part this has played in discovering and enriching my own personal and creative perspectives.



Were Project Aims Met?

The 'Physical and conceptual expansion of the specific PlaceMaking project' was successfully facilitated. I have generated two new series of images that clearly relate to and develop previous work, enabling analysis of existing images from a new perspective while pushing the project forward in a consistent direction. The exhibition of these at an internationally recognised gallery is also an important development in the legitimacy of the work and my professional practice.

Project work has generated 'New contributions that were not simply repetitions'. Though there was more repetition than I expected in the content of responses, this was in itself an interesting factor. Utilisation of locations outside of the UK automatically injected some visual novelty into the documentation, especially where city landscapes are obviously foreign. Equally, involving Chinese text into the images was a necessary development that naturally sets the new work aside from previous outcomes.

'Utilisation of contrasts in cultural approaches to use of public, urban spaces to learn more about those in the UK' was partially achieved, though this might be as much through observation as through analysis of workshop responses. In fact, in many cases it was identified that Chinese workshop responses had more similarities to British responses than differences. This demonstrated that the wider project aims of identifying commonality were successfully realised and that the sessions continue to function as a useful tool for achieving this.

Project Development

The final aim of this work was to provide 'Potential fuel for further work following on from or with outcomes of this research'. The success of this can only really be assessed after further work has developed, however, I have already been in discussion with another studio in Beijing with regards to the possibility of a residency placement and have opened up some potential new directions in which to move the project.

During discussion of the work at the IFP, I was asked if there was a way of involving the viewer more spatially in the work during exhibition of documentary photographs, or of leaving a 'trace' in the referenced environment. I found this question interesting as it encouraged me to consider the fact that I actually have two audiences to the work; the participants and those who view the resulting photographs. The relationship between these audiences could be recognised by developing the exhibition of the documentary to fulfil the role of conduit between them. This could be by either facilitating opportunities for the viewer to record their own responses to the original participant's, or generating a version of the workshop that by leaving an environmental trace immediately places the observer of the document in a more spatially and environmentally engaged position.

In addition to these new ideas, it could also be possible to expand the facility of the project to demonstrate global commonality by setting up an opportunity for virtual exchange, most likely utilising internet based tools and resources (such as the online gallery). A display of comparable images similar to the pairings made in this document that have either been deliberately generated by participants or identified upon workshop completion would certainly illustrate the achievement of this aim as well as providing scope for a new work to be generated.

Finally, utilising the observation that the fresh perspective of those new to an area might be a method for giving the workshops purpose in researching and proposing development opportunities could offer a new direction of specific interest to development agencies or those involved in urban regeneration. Whilst the perspectives of local communities are crucial, sometimes the most exciting potential is identified by those one step removed from an issue and it might be possible to use this 'locational novelty' as a spring board for creativity and discussion in certain projects.