Reinventing Arthur Purnell's Power Station in Guangzhou

CHINESE IMMIGRATION MUSEUM
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Abstract

Chinese immigration has been a global phenomenon over the last two centuries and nowadays surpasses 50 million people settled outside mainland China. Regardless of the difficulties that migration involves, this diaspora have disseminated their culture around the world and have adapted themselves to a myriad of scenarios. This project is about the implementation of the Chinese Immigration Museum within an obsolete modernist Power Plant in Guangzhou by exploring the diaspora's history.

How the diaspora history and migrant’s stories can be embodied into the redesign of the existing building?
Chinese Diaspora Mapping

Chinese diaspora around the world

Historical Mapping

Silk Road
XIX Migration
Chinatowns
Introduction
The Guangdong overseas Chinese Affairs office has the aim to recover the partial infrastructure left by the formerly Power Station of Guangzhou (located on the north bank of the Pearl River, in the south area of the city centre) to be converted into the local Chinese Immigration Museum. The exhibitions will have as main objective to show migration’s history and personal stories of migrants to a local user and as secondary exhibition to show the history of the industrial building.
Nowadays China is immersed in a construction boom and the development of museums is a considerable part of it. Approximately one hundred museums are being built yearly across China since 2008, reaching an approximate inversion of 800 million dollars. The aim of the government is clear, (educate and inform people about history, art and global trends) converting China’s main developing metropolis into cultural metropolis. Additionally by doing this some of the cultural barriers between western world and eastern world could be diminished, taking the country to the current globalization era where we live on.
Unfortunately the large numbers of new built museums haven’t gone together with a large number of visitors, making Chinese museums a not-so-sustainable business than expected showing low attendance even with very low priced entrance tickets.
In the last fifteen years the design of museums and galleries have had a repetitive tendency purely focused to create iconic shapes, an example of this is the Bilbao’s Guggenheimer Museum designed by the architect Frank Gehry. This state-of-the-art building attracts the same or more quantity of visitors rather than the exhibitions even when there’s a lack of relation between the shape of the building and the thematic of the exhibitions. The ‘Bilbao Effect’ (as this phenomenon is known) probably could increase the number of visitors but can’t be the only architectural answer to the low attendance of people to museums in China. Unfortunately the large numbers of new built museums haven’t gone together with a large number of visitors, making Chinese museums a not-so-sustainable business than expected showing low attendance even with very low priced entrance tickets.

Since the immigration museum aim is to reminisce about the past and reflect on the future about serious issues such as immigration experiences, refugees’ stories, forced migration, social exclusion, etc., it’s sensible to suggest a design which engages with the concept of the museum besides to achieve a symbolic presence in the city.
Interpreting Migration
What are the implications of migrating? From demography’s perspective, Everett Lee’s push-pull theory shows the links of migrations between the origin and destination. In this theory only winding flows take place between two locations overcoming obstacles. Both the origin and the destination have pros and cons, reflecting the reality that all migrants have to consider considering the positive and negative to move, as well as the reverse.

The theory’s logic is that, if the pros (attraction) in the destination offset the pros of staying in the place of origin, then migration is more likely to occur. Merging this theory with the previously cited events about Chinese migration history can be interpreted that the action of migrate is composed by three spaces; an origin, a journey and a destination. These are the phases that will shape the logic of the new immigration museum.
Origin
Since China it’s the obvious origin of this diaspora a representative place was sought having found an example of an adaptive urban enclave full of graphic symbols and patterns which tries to emulate China; these enclaves are the Chinatowns around the world. They are an instance of the importance of symbolism for Chinese culture in urban spaces that were intended to be inhabited by the diaspora. That’s the reason why symbols, signs and colours can’t be left aside in the proposed building design; moreover they play a relevant role in achieving the user’s acceptance of the new commemorative building design. An architectural example of the application of physical symbolism is the National Museum of Australia located in Canberra and designed by ARM Architecture. This building is full of obvious and hidden signs and symbols, which are to be deciphered by the visitor. From words in Braille system to QR codes on the facades of the building, among other manifestations that seek to further inform about the history of Australia which is the subject of the main exhibitions. This metaphor gives a greater sense of meaning to the proposal and increases the engagement with (mainly young) its visitors.
On the other hand, with the purpose of transcend from the mere visual symbolism, the architect Peter Zumthor in his essays on phenomenology and architecture, invites to create atmospheres for the visitor by using the right materiality and by arranged them in space. In order to create spaces those touches people’s senses and evoke memories, past experiences, among other feelings which can enhanced the experienced of visit a museum.
Journey

From Marco Polo’s era, with the establishment of the Silk Road, until these days with a massive commercialization of all kinds of goods between the West and China, connections have suffered changes and a radical evolution. In order to analyse this growth and as a critical exercise a series of historical mapping were made showing the evolution of the routes between China and the West. The following figure displayed below shows three layers of routes; the first layer shows the jagged Silk roads used in ancient times as the only contact with Chinese lands being very well defined but lacking a quick and effective connection.

The second layer displays the large waves of migrants who travelled to the Americas and other parts of the world and, on the other way around the entry of the modernist movement to China prior to their communist state. Finally, the third layer, shows the connections in both directions to all the places that have a Chinatown established, this reflects the current globalization era, with instant connections (typical of the digital era). This has influenced the reduction of the cultural and ideological barriers between East and West.

These routes juxtaposition shows China’s reality today not only exporting but importing a big flow of ‘Westernism’ that is affecting the development of Chinese cities; this is evidenced in the current introduction of foreign architecture in China in most of the city-scale buildings. On the other hand, in architecture the journey idea has several associations with circulation in buildings and the movement of users through the same. The architect and theorist Juhani Pallasmaa, speaks about stairs as the spine of buildings and suggest that its function is overshadowed by its strong metaphorical, symbolic and conceptual content, that has been showed widely through history of architecture and art. Stairs (as an analogy to journey) have symbolised spiritual aspirations, hierarchies and classification, power and authority and even the reach of heaven.
Destination.
Clearly all migrations involve an objective, a point of arrival which is expected to give more rewards than the departure point. This idea will be shaped through a space highly traditional for the Chinese culture at the end of the ‘journey’ described above. The intention will be to mark the end of a story and open up the museum towards a reflection of the experimented in the building and the exhibits, as an escape to the reality of the city atmosphere. This manifestation is inspired in the traditional Chinese courtyard which belongs to the core of a building and surrounded by walls rather than be in contact with big natural spaces. The Chinese courtyards are generally set up to be discovered after passing through a long path, is because of this that in the current proposal this reflective space will be the end point of the visitor’s journey along the building.

Conclusion
Based on the examples and theories discussed above, the proposal wants to become an extension of future exhibitions (without interfering with the work of the curators) through the spatialization of the three moments of migration, origin, journey and destination. The origin includes the aesthetic evolution of the power plant and ground floor and public plaza to the building. Subsequently, the idea of travel will be reflected in an upward path through the museum exhibitions, taking the user to a hidden traditional Chinese courtyard as an unexpected destination.
Site’s Light Analysis

Light Intensity

Morning

Night
New vs. Old Elements

Corten Steel Top
Exhibition Ramps
Elevator Core
Theatre
Rooftop Garden

Steel Structure
Purnell’s heritage building Facades
Heritage Building Slabs
Old power plant’s walls
Basement Levels
Facades
Section X-X’
South West View
Cafe’s View / Exhibition Gates

Museum’s Main Entrance
Main Atrium
Temporary Gallery
Observation Deck / Workshops
Exhibition Space Top Level
Rooftop garden
Aerial night view
Aerial Night View
From South Bridge
Pearl River View
South East Perspective
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Marcelo Villacís 609946
Tutor: Dr. Derham Groves
ABPL90169 Design Thesis
MSD - Master of Architecture
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