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Design of Family Space in the Reform-era Chinese Cities

Yun Gao

Abstract

This study investigates how architectural and interior design practice for residential properties in China changed significantly as the result of the policy of increasing private ownership in the 1980s. Before the reform policies (which commenced in 1978), residential houses had been owned and managed by work units. They were designed and constructed with the principal aims of being economical and functional. In 1984, new regulations allowed housing to be exchanged as a commodity on the market. This new policy provided householders with greater freedom and opportunities to make decisions about their own family space. This in turn encouraged the rapid development of design and construction companies working on private houses. This paper explores people's decisions concerning the design of their family space that connects to both the traditional beliefs and contemporary values. The study is in the form of in-depth unstructured interviews of eight householders from different generations who designed their family space in the Southwest of China.

In history, the architectural design and practice for commissioning and construction of private houses in China has been significantly different from those in the West. In pre-modern China society, the designers and constructors of the houses were craftsmen, and it was their expertise to make sure that not only the building was safely constructed and fit for use, but also the forms and the spatial layout were set up to represent the owners' social status. But the craftsmen were not recognized as "designers" or "architects" as these professions are understood in the present day because they did not give 'meanings' to the houses. For the wealthy family in the past, their house was not complete until it had been properly decorated according to social norms, and most importantly, named by literati to embed meanings into the buildings. Throughout Chinese history, famous buildings and houses were remembered by their names and literary forms rather than the physical architectural features or their designers. The literary forms very often recorded the reflection of everyday life in these houses that were part of the social society but also the attempt to be separated from social reality.

During the state socialist era from the 1950s and the 1970s, the predominant form of residential dwellings was that of six to seven storey multi-apartment houses. These housing units were designed and built by professional engineers and construction teams to act as homes for the work units. The forms and layouts of the apartment houses were often uniform. The unit buildings were named according to the titles of the work units or the name of the area where the buildings were situated. Within the

residential compound, each flat was named by the number of the rows and lines of the building block and the floor it situated. The simplified number system intended to represent the equalized relationships between workers within a work unit rather than to acknowledge the richness of an individual's everyday life. The main aims for the design of housing blocks were economy, function and safety for those living in them.

After the 1980s, China shifted to the reform era with a greater focus on commercial activities and private family life. In 1984 a set of new regulations specified that housing could be exchanged as a commodity in the property market. The shift immediately led to new forms of design and construction methods, and new form of property management companies. When the majority of houses or apartments were constructed for the property market, they did not have finishes or facilities when sold new. The owners of those properties needed not only to install facilities and furnishes, but also to define the internal space by adding or deleting partition walls. As there were few professional design and construction teams working for private clients in the 1990s, very often the property owners made their own decisions based on the design books sold in their local market.

With increasing demand from the private sector however, decoration companies developed rapidly. By 2010, the interior design and construction companies for private properties formed a well-developed marketing force with the involvement of professional designers and constructors. The concept of the term "design" as known in other parts of the world, was eventually recognized. The requirements for the family space today are aesthetics, comfort, health and functionality. Many of the design decisions undertaken by the householders demonstrated the influence of the new policies, market forces, and occupants' ideas, sensations, emotions and physical needs. This study therefore investigates how architectural practice became part of everyday life and how the roles of architects and designers inherited attributes from those in the pre-modern period in China, and how they have developed in a different direction from those in the West.

Existing research into the cultural, political and economic aspects of Chinese architectural tends to develop in two directions. For public buildings, the research on the political and economic influence focuses on social changes from the traditional to modern societies. From this perspective, architectural history has been divided into a linear trajectory linking a traditional era, a socialist era, and a modern era with significant influence of market forces after the 1980s. The role of building designers, from this perspective, was transferred from the craftsmen in pre-modern history, through the civil engineers in the socialist era and to modern architectural designers who have been significantly influenced by western design concepts.

Private houses in China, on the other hand, are primarily studied from the cultural perspective that focuses on regional or vernacular identities. However, the aim to explore locally appropriate terms in different regions tends to simplify the study of the regional identities as the exploration of traditional forms and spatial layout in traditional buildings. This method may inadvertently weaken the socio-political dimensions of the debate of modernization.

The development of residential housing in the reform-era presented a picture of complexity and dynamics rather than a clear division between the cultural study and the political and economic study. For example, in practice, two main themes of “traditional Chinese styles” and “Oriental European styles” were widely explored as the marketing strategies in the residential property development between 2000 and 2005. Accordingly the architecture and interior design of private properties has been developed into Chinese or Western styles with corresponding finishes and furniture. In this research, the interviews recorded with the householders, demonstrated that the process of design and execution of the interior design of the houses was formed through people’s experiences in their everyday lives. The role of architects in this process is far removed from those in Western countries who often work as more elite professional designers.

The study therefore explores the architectural practice and the role of the architect in private residential properties in China, and the differences between the concepts of design and the architect in China and the West. Based on the theories of everyday life, it argues that architecture can be studied beyond the hierarchies and contradictions of professionally designed architecture and routine spatial schemes; traditional and modern architecture; or Chinese and Western architecture; because in everyday life the ordinary and extraordinary are inseparable aspects of experience.