

Tradition and Postmodernism: The Xihuan Plaza and the Ancient City Gate

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The 1960s' witnessed the emergence of the new movement – postmodernism. This movement influenced a wide range of fields, including literature, arts, music, and architecture. Postmodernism, as the term suggests, “is more strongly based on a negation of the modern” (Featherstone, 1991, p. 38). In every field, works which could be classified as postmodern have the common features that are totally opposite to the modern ones. Modernism is characterized as a cultural project. It struggles to find order, purpose, depth, and meaning. However, postmodernism, by contrast, stresses disjunctions, surface, eclecticism, chance, dispersal, exhaustion, irony, surface, and play. Take architecture for example, the modernists believe that space should be shaped for social purposes. Thus, simple, clean-lined International Style buildings with large capacity and multi-functions should be constructed. However, postmodernists see space as something independent, autonomous, to be shaped according to aesthetic aim and principles. Although postmodernists claimed that they were totally different from the modernist, the author still found some traditional traits in postmodern constructions.

In this paper, the author will focus on the field of architecture, and try to find the connection and similarities between the postmodern construction and the traditional Chinese constructions. In order to be specific and convincing, the author takes Xihuan Plaza in Beijing as the representative postmodern space and the ancient city gate in China as the example. The Xihuan Plaza has most features of postmodern space, and at the same time, it also contains the traditional trait which was well demonstrated by the Chinese ancient city gate. Therefore, the postmodern construction, Xihuan Plaza, is at the same time postmodern and traditional.

Literature Review

When talking about the postmodern space, there will be a long list of great names jumping into mind immediately, such as Lyotard, Derrida, Baudrillard, Jameson, Harvey and many other scholars in different fields. Although the author focuses on architecture only in this paper, there are still many points to be reviewed.

First of all, postmodernists' view on space is very different from that of the modernists'. Modernists believe that space should be shaped for social purposes; however, postmodernists see space as something independent and autonomous, to be shaped for aesthetic aims and principles (Harvey, 1994, p. 86). The modernist constructions were, most of the time, simple, clean-lined buildings with large capacities and multi-functions because they were built to meet the need of increasing population after World War II. Whereas the postmodernist constructions grounded in the patronage of multinational business, thus they were actually built for the rich rather than for the poor, and diversity, differentiation, ornamentation and decoration, collage and eclecticism became the major themes in urban design.

Second, postmodern architecture contains the features of postmodernism concepts, which are used in the wider sense, such as the schizophrenia, pastiche, self-referential, and reproduction. Schizophrenia is firstly used in psychology, meaning the disorder of the mind. When it is applied in the postmodernism, it offers a suggestive aesthetic model breaking down in the signifying chain, that is, the interlocking syntagmatic series of signifiers which constitutes an utterance or a meaning. The old signifying chain of signifier and signified is a one-to-one relationship between signifier and signified. However, in the postmodernist view, the old signifying chain is broken down and replaced by the meaning-effect relationship from signifier to signifier (Jameson, 1991, p. 114). Pastiche means the imitation of a peculiar or unique neutral practice of mimicry without any ulterior motives.

Last but not least, indeed different scholars have different concepts on what a postmodern architecture should be like. For example, Derrida believes that “collage” is the primary form of postmodern discourse. Both producers and consumers of the “texts” participate in the production of significations and meanings. Whereas Jameson’s concept on postmodernism is fully demonstrated in his analysis of the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles, where the reflective function of the glass skin represents “a certain aggressively toward and power over the Other” (Jameson, 1991).

In Chinese traditional philosophy, 虚/空 (emptiness) played an important role in forming traditional ideas. In *Lao Zi* there was a philosophical saying that substantiality was born in the emptiness; emptiness was the root and the substantiality was for usage (有生于无, 无是根, 有是用). The belief that emptiness was the root of everything could also play an important part in the whole theory of Daoism and Buddhism. This point of view is represented in many fields, such as Chinese painting, and traditional Chinese architecture. In traditional Chinese constructions, the architects always reserved some empty parts within or surround the buildings. However, the emptiness needs to be set off by the substantial buildings, and vice versa. Actually, 虚 (emptiness) and 实 (substantiality) are interdependent and can be showed in the traditional Chinese constructions, such as the pavilion and the ancient city gate. The relationship between 虚 (emptiness) and 实 (substantiality) can also be found in the analysis of the Xihuan Plaza and the ancient city gate.

In this paper, the author will mainly apply the method that Jameson used when he described the Bonaventure Hotel on one hand, and on the other hand, the author will try to find out the similarities between the postmodern construction and ancient city gate.

Xihuan Plaza

Xihuan Plaza was completed in 2005 and it was designed by the French APEP Design Company. This three-glass-tower building of complex is a typical postmodern construction, and at the same time, it contains Chinese traditional traits. Thus it is both postmodern and traditional. Xihuan Plaza is seated in the Xizhimen Gate, Beijing, and it includes three towers all with glass skin, a shopping center and the transferring station of city railway. And in 2010, the North Beijing Railway Station will open its starting station in the Xihuan Plaza, and by then it will become much more a full functioned complex.

The Postmodern Xihuan Plaza

The designers of the plaza said that the inspiration of this construction was from the ancient city gate. The outline of each glass tower of the Xihuan Plaza looks very much like the vaulted city gate in ancient China. And to be specific, the vaulted gate of Xizhimen in old Beijing gave the designers the idea. From the semiotic perspective, the vaulted city gate is the signified and each glass tower is the signifier. Thus we could have the one-to-one relation between the glass tower and the ancient city gate. Since there are three same glass towers, there are three pairs of such relation; however, the glass skin of each tower complicates this symbolic reading. That is to say, within each glass tower of Xihuan Plaza, there is both the glass tower itself and the reflection of another tower on its glass skin. In the traditional view, the signifier and signified should be distinct from each other, that is, the signifier and signified have a clear-cut distinction between them. By contrast, from the postmodernist perspective, the signifier and signified are within one and could not be distinguished from each other. In the case of Xihuan Plaza, the signifier (the glass tower) and the signified (the ancient city gate) could be seen within one signifier (the glass tower and its glass skin) because the reflective feature of the glass. The glass skin of each tower could reflect the immediate environment, so the three towers are self-referential signifiers, although each is supposed to refer to the ancient city gate; that is, the city gate buildings become three signifiers reflecting one another only, without their signifieds. These three glass towers thus become only three images, three simulacra. Therefore, the old one-to-one relationship between signifier and signified has been broken down. There are only three signifiers reflecting each other without the appearance of signified. Hence the self-referential glass towers of Xihuan Plaza are in accordance with the feature of schizophrenia in the postmodernist theory.

Besides the above feature of self-referentiality, the towers have another obvious characteristic. These three glass towers of Xihuan Plaza are of same height, same color, same size, and even the same material. Thus one tower looks exactly the copy of the other two. As Jameson put it, reproduction was an obvious feature of postmodernism. Hence these three self-referential glass towers, which are the copy of each other, are the reproduction of one design.

The Xihuan Plaza also includes a shopping center and a city railway station. These two parts are both in the annex construction of the plaza. Since the office buildings of Xihuan Plaza are high-end oriented and thus designed. The shopping center is also designed for the middle income consumers and the above, which means higher standard than the other shops in the same area. This design is a representation of the consumer culture, which emerged and explored after the 1980s' in the West. The other part of the complex is the city railway station. Before the completion of this city railway station, the transportation in Xizhimen Gate area was very bad because of the busy traffic and the inefficiently functioned crossroads there. In order to solve this problem, the Beijing government built the city railway to facilitate the heavy traffic condition in Beijing as well as in that area. Thus the annex part of Xihuan Plaza also functions as the transferring station between the subway and the city railway. Since the transferring station and the shopping center are in the same annex, there are several entrances between the two parts of the complex. Thus if people enter the door of the station, it is possible for him or her to visit the shops as well. And on the other hand, people can easily get

onto the city railway without going out of the complex of the buildings. On this basis, actually the plaza is connected with the whole city subway network and the city railway network. Thus the plaza can be regarded as an organic composition of the whole city traffic system. Therefore besides the common entrances of the glass towers, the other entrances in the shopping center and transferring station are also the gates to the whole complex. However, although these entrances can lead to the glass tower and the shopping center, they do not directly lead to the glass towers or the shopping center. Therefore, we could say that the entrances are only to the hall of the transferring railway station. In one words, the Xihuan Plaza is not only an office building, but also a place of consumption and an organic constitute of the whole urban traffic system.

To sum up, these three glass towers of Xihuan Plaza are self-referential signifiers, and the signifying chain between the signifier and the signified is broken down. The sameness of these three glass towers makes the three signifiers only three simulacra of the ancient city gate in China. The whole complex of buildings consists of several parts and functions accordingly. All those features make the Xihuan Plaza a typical postmodern construction as a whole.

Xihuan Plaza: The Image of Ancient City Gate

As mentioned in the above part, the glass towers of Xihuan Plaza resemble the ancient city gate. The ancient city gate in the past has several functions: first, it is the entrance to the city; second, it can separate the inside and outside of the ancient city; last but not least, it is viewed as a traditional symbol of the power emanating from inside (Hung, 2005). The arch gate also symbolizes the power of the emperor over the people. The first function of the ancient city gate is the entrance to the city. The complex of the Xihuan Plaza also has the function of being a gateway to the large transportation system of the whole city. People in the complex of the buildings and out of it both have choices to enter the plaza and then the city railway station.

In the ancient time, the city gate was the symbol to separate the inside and outside of the old city. As we mentioned above that each transparent glass tower is the signifier of the ancient city gate, hence the ancient city gate seemed to be transparent in the imaginary appearance. If the gate becomes transparent, the function of separating the inside and outside of the city is weakened. Thus the inside and outside is blurred.

The shape of each glass tower of Xihuan Plaza is very much like the arch gate of the old Xizhimen, and all the ancient city gates as well. The glass skin of Xihuan Plaza could reflect the immediate environment around it and it is higher than the surrounding buildings. If we can see the immediate environment on the glass skin and the glass tower altogether within the glass tower, we could conclude that this three-glass-tower plaza represents a kind of power over the other constructions in the same area. On the top floor of each glass tower, there is the total space without pillar or partition which has a vaulted transparent glass ceiling. This function of the space is flexible, that is, it could be designed as the CEO's office, exhibition center, or the fashion show center. The reason why people should choose this place is that in this place, people in this height and within such space could feel that they are more powerful than the others. In a word, the Xihuan Plaza not only resembles the shape of the ancient city gate, it also contains the symbolic meaning — the power over the Other — of the ancient city

gate. Also the boundary between inside and outside is blurred because of the connection between the transparent glass towers and the empty city gate.

虚 (Emptiness) and 实 (Substantiality): The Traditional Traits in Xihuan Plaza

In traditional Chinese techniques of architecture, 虚 (emptiness) and 实 (fullness/substantiality) are the two inseparable features. This concept is like *Yin* and *Yang* in Chinese philosophy. They are interdependent and reinforce each other. In the construction of the Xihuan Plaza, these three glass towers are substantial. But since their signified is the ancient city gate, and the gate is empty, the substantial-and-empty relationship between the glass tower and the ancient city gate is established. However, in order to form a whole image of 虚 (emptiness) and 实 (substantiality), we need the next step to replace the substantial glass tower with empty ancient city gate, and imagine the empty area around and above the glass tower as the substantial parts of the ancient city gate. In doing so, we could have a pair of 虚 (emptiness) and 实 (substantiality). And the effect of setting off by the contrast 虚 (emptiness) and 实 (substantiality) is definitely the traditional Chinese technique in architecture.

To be brief, by using our imaginations we could find the trait of traditional Chinese architectural technique with this postmodern construction, the Xihuan Plaza.

Conclusion

Based on a brief review on the theories of postmodernism, postmodern architecture, and traditional Chinese philosophy, the author first applies the similar method that Jameson once used to analyze the Xihuan Plaza, one outstanding complex of buildings in Beijing. With its unique shape of three glass towers and the multi-functions within the annex parts of the plaza, this construction can be characterized as self-referential simulacra, reproduction of the signifiers, and a postmodern space as a whole. However, the inspiration of the design comes from the ancient city gate. And have considered the connection between the Xihuan Plaza and the old Xizhimen Gate, the author finds out a whole picture of the relationship between 虚 and 实 (emptiness and substantiality) within the relationship between the Xihuan Plaza and the ancient city gate. Thus the Chinese traditional architectural concept is found in this postmodern construction. So in this case, both traditional trait and obvious postmodern features can be found in one construction.

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