

(Re)constructing communities

design participation in the face of change

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IDENTITY POLITICS AND COMMUNITY ARTIVISM A Strategic Arts Project of Cultural Landscape Conservation at Treasure Hill, Taipei

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ABSTRACT

Artivism is a conscious combination of art and activism, and is adopted to demonstrate a more radical approach and value-loaded attitude to engage in social-spatial issues through arts projects. Artivism is also an intentional attempt to bring about the community and environmental concerns and collaborate with the participant subjects to precipitate the transformation of certain social meaning. In the case of the Treasure Hill settlement in Taipei, a series of planned community artists projects (GAPP, Global Artists Participation Projects) were strategically initiated to confront difficult urban planning and cultural landscape conservation issues. This paper will review the processes and outcomes of GAPP from both the project director's insider perspective and from the community's evaluation of how individual daily-lives in a pre-modern, pre-planned setting are inevitably influenced by waves of artists movement. From rags to tags, from squatter movement to institutionalized artists-in-residency program, will Treasure Hill evolve into an obsolescent urban settlement of organic nature or a progressive urban planning model of creative sustainability? This paper will not only be a case study on artivism, but also an interface of more dynamic discussions on an on-going process of landscape conservation which will eventually affect the future of many residents of a marginal, heterogeneous community.

THE FLUIDITY OF PLACE IDENTITY

Place identity refers to two different but interrelated concepts. It reflects certain distinguishable, self-manifested idiosyncrasies of a place in terms of its spatial form; yet it also implies how cultural subjects identify with a particular place through daily practices or committed discourses. The recognizable spatial features connect directly with the collective memory and the cognitive maps of the cultural subjects; while their identifications

with a place further inscribe meanings to and reinforce personal attachments with the cultural landscapes and spatial narratives of the place. The place-bound identity varies in scales: it can be as expansive as a country (which is oftentimes imagined), or as intimate as a store (a gay bookstore is a reincarnation of a social subgroup's collective identifications and a corner grocery store may represent a locus of tacit identifications of a neighborhood). It can strengthen the internal cohesion of a finite area or converge the intercommunication network of a dispersive social community into a symbolic place as a substantial support of identity politics (Calhoun, 1994; Pile & Thrift, 1995; Keith & Pile, 1993).

The significance of place identity of the local is stressed in many theories and discourses of planning, architecture, human geography, and landscape studies, especially those which follow the phenomenological approaches (Relph, 1976; Seamon, 1979; Warf, 1986) and Heidegger's philosophy of place and dwelling (*domus*) (Norberg-Schulz, 1988). Place identity, accordingly, is expected to counter the place-annihilating forces of industrial modernism and the transnational flow of capitalism. The processes of rapid urbanization and homogenizing globalization are criticized as unyielding threats to the meaningful local and its associated values, while place identity indicates a type of resistance against such threats through conscious community empowerment, re-established grassroots confidence, and conservation of the vernacular authenticity.

The Heideggerian discourses of place identity meet serious backfire from the post-structuralist dialectics on differences, complexity, urbanity, and mimesis (Jacobs, 2002; Jameson, 1994; Girard, 1995). Heidegger's personal association with the Nazi identity and place aesthetics exposes a moral doctrine veiled under the façade of strong place identity, which is also exclusive, defensive, anachronistically nostalgic, and static (Leach, 2002). On the other hand, the romanticized images of the vernacular can be quickly subsumed by the post-modern kitsch and the culture industry to manipulate a sense of historical and local legitimacy (Ellin, 1995). Place identity sometimes becomes a cultural tool of capitalist leisure consumption, penduluming between its original strategic position of resistance and a new recreational potential of middle-class aesthetics. The uprising community empowerment voices echo the political call of place identity, yet the pervasive flow of tourism easily offsets the grassroots struggle for autonomy and, in the milieu of complex urbanity, the emphasis on a community's common consensus can lead to a bumptious tribalism if the concomitant individual differences and diversity of urban living are overlooked. The city, in a crude way, challenges exactly the necessity of place identity since the anonymous freedom of individual citizens (therefore, dissolving identity rather than forging identity) is regarded as an indispensable urban psyche.

The argument of identity through consumption and mimesis, instead of articulate place narrative and meaning interpretation, augments another debatable dimension to the discourse of place identity. The studies of mass culture, urban culture, and cult, heavily influenced by the Baudrillardian analysis of consumption and not restrained by the Marxist moralistic ideologies, confront different realities of identity tempered by cultural propaganda, image anesthetics, media network, internet communication, gender politics, material desire and fetishism (Baudrillard, 1994; Butler, 1997). These types of identity induced by mimesis and image industry weaken the bond of place identity, but re-affirm the positive draw of a global city (still an identifiable 'place'). Magnified by the critical issues of identity politics and the ambiguous sense of constantly changing urban reality, place identity no longer serves the static purpose of dichotomizing place from placelessness (of modern urban landscape); rather, it's a dynamic and shifting concept which contextualizes cultural subjects' physical/psychological experiences and imagination with particular places.

The recognizable traits of place identity often symbolize collective rootedness; however, the internal nuances within bounded cultural subjects or between sub-divided places, or certain individuals' up-root/rootless intentions in a cultural group, perform subtler patterns of distinction among the identified commonness. *Differences* and *others* thereby mirror the frailty of place identity from a critical distance (Nancy, 1991). For example, a marginal squatter settlement of heterogeneous minorities located at the edge of a city, disempowered and chaotic at first glance, exhibits an unapologetic defiance against the place identity of the city as a whole as well as against the concept of an allied community. Such a place of disregard can simply be itself or be turned into a place of resistance. Yet, resistance itself does not necessarily lead to an organized community or a better place identity since, essentially, the squatter settlement has never been the outcome of a conscious plan or act. It is thus debatable that fostering place identity in a place like this should aspire to upgrading its organic charm or maintaining its critical stance.

Castells (1997) suggests to divide the form of identity into three categories: *legitimizing identity* forged by dominant social institutions; *resistance identity* fending from an oppressed position to counter the domination logic; and *project identity* - through which cultural subjects re-establish their social position to strive for a reform of social structure. Place identity operates across all three types, but is more critical of the ideological manipulation of *legitimizing identity* and of the reactionary tribalism of *resistance identity*. Place identity is doubtless territorial, but it goes further to summon "a progressive sense of place" (as a repudiation to a nostalgic sense of place, Massey, 1993) with an emphasis on the formation of subjects and project identity. However correct and appealing it seems,

a place-project identity still appears elusive and jargonized if not realized in reality. As an agent to activate this concept, community activism comes to the fore.

THE POLEMICS OF COMMUNITY ARTIVISM

Artivism is a conscious combination of art and activism, and is adopted to demonstrate a more radical approach and value-loaded attitude to engage in social-spatial issues through art projects. *Artivism* is also an intentional attempt to bring about the community and environmental concerns and collaborate with the participant subjects to precipitate the transformation of certain social meaning. Artivism, from this regard, seems to be a creative and constructive tool to serve the social purposes of activism or to build place identity from the bottom up. Yet artivism is also self-reflexive and disinclined to take things for granted. The place-specific artivism project can, therefore, problematize the legitimacy of punctuating fixed place identity and initiate a critical dialogue between art, activism, place, community, and cultural subjects.

The polemics of involving direct community participation in the process of making public art seem particularly acute while art confronting the organic (or unorganized) grassroots community. Whether art uses the community as the backdrop or as indispensable subjects; or whether community participation enhances or diminishes the autonomy of art often triggers vehement debates on both sides of community empowerment and public art; and the skeptics might as well question the necessity of art in a perceived mundane community on such a basis. Yet the effect of art in strengthening community identity and inducing creative social transformation is relatively palpable, compared with public discussions and calculated actions. Art, if not deliberately offensive, can also be liberating and fun to motivate a greater variety of community members who are otherwise perceived apathetic and voiceless by the power representatives. Community is, after all, not an undifferentiated mass of people; and art should not be expected to simply tend the need of an institutionalized whole.

Art can take many forms; while the aesthetic quality, refined craftsmanship, and creative expressions of art are commonly appreciated, the other aspects of art (particularly modern art) its independent nature, unrestrained freedom, personal opinions, and critical thinking, to name a few are understated, controversial, or even considered defiant and detrimental to a coherent society. The liberal spirit of art does not follow traditional values and morals stereotypically associated with grassroots communities. The outsider artists sometimes set back a necessary distance from the community to secure a broader perspective while representing the community through their works. The double-edged blade of art in a community thus cuts both sides: it is a creative force to inspire, and in the

