

Study on the Reshaping Form and Function of Urban Culture to Modern Urban Space

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Abstract: Cities play an important role in public life. Due to historical and location conditions, different forms of urban culture have shaped the urban public space. The way urban forms of contemporary culture attempt to rebuild cities is reshaping urban land, redistributing resources and developing new urban activities. This paper analyzes the three forms of urban culture, such as guerrilla gardening, occupation movement and Chinese square dance. In addition, it aims to show how citizens can seek civil rights through a wider range of direct democracy projects and re-create the city into a real public place.

1. Introduction

The city is playing a more significant role in public life. Historically, the contemporary time is the first time in history that most of the population live in the urban space, so the role of the city is at a peak. However, the relationship between many cities and the citizens is not positive, because the authorities or capitalists have deprived the citizens of their right to create and develop. Ordinary citizens, who become victims of urban plans of the state or capital experts, cannot resist through officially recognised legal procedures. Therefore, there are different forms of urban cultures to reclaim the urban public space. This essay would claim three forms of urban cultures: guerrilla gardening, occupy movement and Chinese Square dance. Besides, ways of those contemporary forms of urban cultures to attempt to reclaim the city are reshaping the urban land, redistributing resources and developing new urban activities. This essay intends to demonstrate how citizens are fighting for the civil rights with a broader range of direct democratic projects and reclaim the city into a truly public place.

Additionally, there are four parts of this essay. In the first part, this essay would analyse the key reason why it is necessary to reclaim the city. Secondly, this essay will use worldwide Guerilla Gardening to show how citizens reclaim the city through reshaping the land. Next, there are examples of the occupy movement in Manchester and Guangzhou China to demonstrate the reclaiming of resources distribution in the city. Moreover, this essay would use the example of 'Square dance' in China to show how citizens are redefining the function of urban spaces. Lastly, there is the conclusion to summarise ideas and compare and contrast these three ways.

2. Reclaiming the city: Reclaiming citizens' right

Before exploring ways to reclaim the city, it is helpful to analyse why there is a necessity to reclaim the city; actually, there is an issue about the relationship between citizens and the public life in the city, and reclaiming the city is to relink citizens with their power and rights in public life. According to Sennett (2017), the public space has become meaningless because citizens lost their self-consciousness as the agent and have become public. In the meantime, in the process of capital or political power deprived of the meaning of public space, consumerism and social structure results citizens have a more uniform dress and behaviour standards in the city, as well as a more passive behaviour and social(Sennett ,1992). In short, citizens have lost their interaction with the urban spaces.

Moreover, with collecting capital and political power, capitalists and governments have built up many shopping malls and office buildings in the name of growing the economy to 'clean' urban areas. This management operated by the state or capital experts do not belong to the public and causes a city become an oligopoly city where the demand of the citizens outstrips the supply of the city (Lefebvre, Castells, and Harvey, 1998). Citizens would lack the sense of belonging and security in that oligopoly city. For example, in 2017, there was an official campaign against 'illegal structures' that house millions of migrant workers regarded as 'Low-end population' in Beijing China (Haas, 2017). This example demonstrates that in an autocratic country, such as the one-party dictatorship China, while the development of infrastructure and economy of the city have been rapid, needs of citizens are very likely to make sacrifices when that are contrary to the political policies. It is because people have little interaction with public space, so it is difficult to express their opinions and intervene in urban planning. Therefore, to overcome that, the significance of the city as a public space needs to be re-picked.

Regarding the way to help the city re-acquire the meaning as a public space, there are two essential elements: collective citizens and practical project. Firstly, citizens' collective behaviour producing positive and practical effects in the daily life of the city is essential. It is mainly because "The right to the city is [...] a collective rather than an individual right, since reinventing the city inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power over the processes of urbanisation (Harvey, 2012, p4)". Next, to find a project that represents the collective right, need and profit of the citizens, the project should be democratic and be directly controlled by them. Three main ways that contain collective behaviours and direct participation in a project are reshaping, occupying and reinventing urban spaces.

3. Reshaping the land: Case study of Guerrilla Gardening

Guerrilla gardening is widely happening worldwide; there are documents of that in over 30 countries (Reynolds, 2008). Guerrilla gardening refers to gardening on urban land that is not legally owned by the gardeners, and Figure 1 (TEDx Talks, 2014) is one example. Besides, Guerrilla gardening mostly concentrates on food crops to eat and flowers to beautify the urban environment. The food produced usually belongs to the gardeners, and in some cases, such as achievements of famous food activism, Pam Warhurst, it belongs to the citizens of the whole town (Warhurst, 2014). In other words, every citizen can pick up the crops from the guerrilla gardening. Also, the garden is free management. Usually, as shown in Figure 2, after planting the seeds, the gardener will leave a message to invite the passersby to water the seed and grow the plant together (TEDx Talks, 2014). Moreover, guerrilla gardening is also frequently linked with protest. Figure 3 (TEDx Talks, 2014) is an example: a guerrilla gardener revised the horticultural logo placed in front of a Mercedes store as a peace sign.



Figure.1 Urban land before and after guerrilla gardening (TEDx Talks, 2014)



Figure.2 Notes from guerrilla gardener (TEDx Talks, 2014)



Figure.3 before and after guerrilla gardener change logo of Mercedes (TEDx Talks, 2014)

Next, guerrilla gardening is not only a reflection of the urban residents' yearning for pastoral life, from the perspective of how guerrilla gardening uses the land, but also citizen's fight for the ownership of urban land. One key to guerrilla gardening is to use the urban land without asking official permission. The land that guerrilla gardeners use is usually abandoned or ignored by the legitimate owner or the authority, but in specific examples, the land can be in a state of strict jurisdiction. Also, specific gardening behaviours can be illegal. For example, two guerrilla gardeners threw seed bombs in Tate Modern's vast Turbine Hall in London in 2009. According to their record (The Guerrilla Gardener, 2009), they encountered with three levels of Tate security staff to inquire and supervise their activities. Moreover, many city officials are uncomfortable with this behaviour for it is a technically illegal activity. The conflicts between guerrilla gardeners and the police are frequent, such as the case that six policemen nearly arrested Richard Reynolds, who is the famous guerrilla gardener in London, for his planting flowers in the centre of the London, (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008). Those conflicts and issues claim why the guerrilla gardening arises: the official believes that the city land should belong to the government while the citizens trust that the public people are the real owner of that.

Thus, the practice of guerrilla gardening has an impact on the issue of land-ownership and land-reform. That promotes the reconsideration of ownership of the urban land considered to be neglected or abused. Moreover, this practice breaks the boundaries that the city planner set. Rather than sacrificing real needs, guerrilla gardening overlooks the boundaries and permissions of structures of the city. It is mainly because that guerrilla gardeners believe that the public land belongs to the citizens living in the public spaces and they have the right to take care of and decide on the city landscape as a part of their public life. With the accumulation of this activity, more citizens worldwide realise and participate in this resistance of urban spaces. Therefore, the idea that citizens can interact with the urban environment can invite more citizens to interact with that and even make a possibility of more social interaction among citizens. With the promotion of interaction in the city, the city can become meaningful as a public space.

The right of a city is the right of a citizen to manage the urban space directly. Thus, guerrilla gardening can be regarded as a situation that people directly change, control and shape the city landscape to meet their human needs. It is also the direct interaction and intervention of the urban planning by the citizens. This activity also changes the relationship between citizens and the authority and the economy in the market. This direct control of shaping the urban land can impact official spending on urban gardening and the demand for food and flowers in supermarkets and markets. That is not only the right to request the urban land to meet the material needs of the human beings but also requires the city to embody spiritual needs of its residents, that is, the interaction of citizens penetrates into every field of urban space. Therefore, the way that reshaping urban land is an efficacious way to reclaim the city through breaking the boundaries that capitalists and state actors set.

4. Occupying resources of the other: needs of marginalised citizens

Comparing to the universal needs that span ages, races, sexes, and classes, the specific needs of marginalised groups, are more natural to be ignored and more laborious to realise. In fact, it results from the hegemony of political and capital as well. Marginalised groups have less interaction with cities due to different hierarchies of capital and political power.

Firstly, from the perspective of distributions of genders, females are the omitted subjects in much city planning. As Sassen (2016) argues, "Urban planning is not gender neutral". In the urban spaces, more social norms physically bind women. In the summer of China, it is very reasonable for men to roll up their clothes and make their belly naked in the public sphere, while women in cities need to be subjected to violence and harassment (Piechule, 2010). Next, In cities, women are facing many issues about the use of time and space. In the daytime, public space is more likely to be used by women, but in the night, potential violence makes women have less interaction with urban space than men. According to reports, 60% of women feel unsecured about violence in the city (Falu and Sassen, 2018). Therefore, the space and time of the city are mainly designed for the needs of men. The city's planning embodies the 'citizen' that it serves: young and productive men. Therefore, resources for genders in space and time in the city are unequal. Moreover, the inequality of urban resources reflects the power of politics and capital is higher than the power of citizens. Unreasonable urban resource allocation leads to specific groups have less interaction with the city in time and space. In other words, it prevents them from entering the city, entering public life and becoming citizens who can express themselves.

Female citizens are making efforts to reclaim the city as a place which is more friendly to females and more balanced in disturbing resources for genders in the city. It is widely happening that females need more time in the toilette; thus, There are often long queues in the women's toilets when the men's toilets are empty. In 2012, several female students in Guangzhou China staged an "Occupy Men's Toilet" behaviour art in public toilets. They hoped to arouse the attention of the government and the society on the imbalance in the public resources for men and women's toilettes and to eliminate the inconvenience of women in public places. The female students also sent a letter of appeal to the public, hoping to increase the number of females' toilettes by legislation to make the number of female's toilets and male's toilets reach 2:1 and establishing asexual and barrier-free toilets. It is mainly because they believe that in the toilets of urban public space, equality between men and women should be equal to the equal waiting time rather than a merely equal area of space (Telegraph, 2012).

Moreover, gender is not binary, nor is the society. Thus, other occupying activities that are similar to the disequilibrium of public resources are also happening. A similar situation happened in Manchester. An empty office building was occupied by the housing rights activists and redesigned to accommodate homeless people (Hibbert, 2015). They tried to reclaim rights of the homeless people under squatter's rights because the council chose to leave certain public resources unused rather allocating to the tramps.

According to two examples above, they show that direct occupying the resources of the city is the way for the citizens to reclaim their needs. Moreover, occupying resources that do not initially

belong to the group is a kind of resistance and direct democratic behaviour for urban planning policy. It directly expresses the needs of people and the negligence of city managers on the marginalised groups in the distribution of urban resources. The few resources belonging to the marginal group are because the urban planners intentionally or unintentionally exclude the marginal group from the definition of 'citizen' and 'public'. The occupy movement advocates the right of the marginalised group to enter the public life. When the definition of citizens includes various groups and individuals, when the right of citizens includes all citizens' right and when the resources of the city include resources belonging to specific groups and individuals, the city can have the meaning of public space. Occupy movement is an efficient way for marginalised groups to reclaim the city when the government does not have enough energy or economic conditions to take care of the marginalised groups.

5. Reinventing space: the case study of Square Dance in China

As mentioned above, many cities are facing the issue that cannot meet the demand for space and time in the city; thus, there are technically illegal activities to reclaim the city, such as the guerrilla gardening and occupy movements. However, there are also gentle and legal behaviours that citizens attempt to resist that and reclaim the city. The Square dance in China, or in another name: Plaza dance, is an excellent example of that. The Square dance in China refers to the group dance in the public space of the city, from square and park to parking lot and even the expressway (Tong, 2013). Its main participants were retired middle-aged and senior female citizens, and the primary time is from evening to the night. It has become an essential way for Chinese seniors, especially women, to exercise and socialise in the city.

From the perspective of the location and participants, there can find the unreasonable part of China's urban planning. First, business hours of discos and nightclubs are not suitable for the timetable of the elderly, and they also do not accept senior citizens. At the same time, it shows that there are not enough free public places for sports in the city. In China, business and industry rank priority to the city planning. Meanwhile, to alleviate the housing demand and increase the density of urban population, housing is most from horizontal level to a vertical high-rise apartment. Urban roads have also been expanded to adapt to traffic, which has led to many activities that cannot be carried out. Next, nowadays, the Chinese senior citizens who dance the square dance have experienced the era of the 'Great Leap Forward' advocated by the Communist Party of China in their youth. In that era, all activities were collective and should happen in public places (Tong, 2013). Therefore, regardless of that whether the idea in 'the Great Leap Forward' era was correct or not, the behaviour of square dancing is to reclaim the city as the city that senior citizens are familiar with their memories of youth.

Square dance is a temporary occupation of public space. This public activity is the redefinition and expansion of urban space function within the legal scope. That is the spontaneous creation of urban space by citizens. Moreover, square dance not only reflects the control of citizens' right to urban space and their close interaction with cities but also legally loosen the obstacles of capital and political power to the setting up of urban space and marginalised groups. As Tong argues:

As square dancing continues to flourish in the urban environment, the dancing activity happening on found and loosened space (urban public space temporarily appropriated by residents to meet their needs) reveals the tension between how the modern city is imagined and constructed, and how the real city is remade and lived in by common people, especially our elderly square dancers (2013.p34).

Although the Chinese government has done many measures to prevent square dance reclaiming the city, such as the invention and publicise fixed square dance steps and the condemnation to occupying public space in the mainstream media, they have little effect. It is mainly because the collective activities of the senior citizens have been widespread throughout the country, and they believe that they are doing legitimate behaviour and represent the basic needs of themselves. That represents the success of democratic collective behaviour in reclaiming the city. Therefore, the whole world can draw lessons from square dance-a legal reinventing activity of urban space and

resources.

6. Conclusion

Above all, the city needs to be returned to the citizens. When the rights and interests of the city are the rights and interests of the citizens, there is a public space in the city. The above uses three forms of urban cultures to state three ways how citizens reclaim the city from the political and capital forces. First, the guerrilla gardening has occupied and reshaped the public land to advocate that urban land belongs to the public rather than the state or private. Next, occupy movement for marginalised groups won resources from the vested interests when there is a surplus of urban resources. The situation of oversupply reflects the lack of publicity in the city, while occupy movements call for the city to recognise that marginalised groups are also members of the public. Lastly, creating new urban activity such as square dance in China is another efficient way. The success of square dance is the success of collective behaviours. It has loosened the boundaries of public facilities and buildings and met citizens' needs and rights in the existing urban environment.

These three ways mentioned above, which are reshaping the land, occupying the resources and developing activities, attempt to solve the problem of the lack of interaction between the citizens and the city from the root. Ways to reclaim the city need the power of collective behaviours of citizens and projects that can be directly controlled, and these two elements assemble the three ways. Reclaiming the city by these three ways, the modern city can be close to the 'urban society' where the purpose is not the economic accumulation but the free development of every citizen (Lefebvre, 2003), just as New England town and Paris Commune. In short, the city should be the city produced and managed by citizens and the public opinions. With the awakening of citizens' consciousness of freedom and dissatisfaction with consumerism and totalitarianism, there will be more ways to reclaim cities in the world.

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