

Curatorial Studies on the Edge: The Bi-city Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture in Nantou, Shenzhen

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Abstract: Most researchers usually pay much attention to the 'northern' Biennale centered on the west, such as the Venice Biennale. But the 'marginal' biennale culture that is called the Global South has relatively less research and attention. Taking the 7th exhibition theme 'Cities, Growing in Difference' held by Shenzhen/Hong Kong Urbanism\Architecture Bi-city Biennale (UABB) in Nantou old town, Shenzhen as an example, this essay reviews the historical development of UABB, Nantou old town 'urban villages' characteristics, and analyses the curators' views and vision for the exhibition. From the perspective of the global south, this essay analyses the advantages, some curatorial limitations, and potential problems after the closing of the exhibition.

1. Introduction

Since 1990, the third-wave Biennale has gradually shifted its focus from the regional north to the global, and lead people to rethink the historical development of the Biennale in the Global South.

^[1]Anthony Gardner, Charles Green and John Clark have discussed the historical development of the southern Biennale on the edge and Asian art respectively. However, most researchers may have not paid much attention to the curation of the Asian Biennale about 'Urban Architecture'. Taking the theme 'Cities, Growing in Difference' of the 7th Shenzhen/Hong Kong Urbanism\Architecture Bi-city Biennale (UABB) in 2017 as case study, this essay aims to study exhibition culture on the edge, analyse the main features and potential issues of curating the UABB, and explore whether the views and visions of UABB can be realised under the background of urban village in China and the perspective of the global south.

Starting from the historical context of the Biennale of the South, the first part of this essay will review the rise of the architectural Biennale and the origin of UABB. The second part will further explain the uniqueness of 'urban villages' in Shenzhen, China, the site selection of 'Urban Village', and how the curatorial concepts of Hou Hanru, the exhibition curator, respond to the trend of the 'Third World' and 'Global South'. Then, by analysing the section 'Art, Making Cities' of UABB in Nantou Old Town, Shenzhen, the third part will discuss the curatorial characteristics and practical modes. The fourth part will evaluate the limitation of the exhibition and review the homogenisation of previous exhibitions of UABB.

2. The Origin of the UABB

Since the 1980s, the development of Biennale has entered the Third Wave, so-called Global Era.^[2-3]

Chinese artists frequently participate in international biennales.^[4]In 1992, Guangzhou opened the first biennale in China. The first international, contemporary and academic Biennale sponsored by

the government was held in Shanghai in 2000. In the following years, biennales were held in various regions of China, gradually forming the phenomenon of biennial boom.

Around the world, biennales of 'Urban, Architecture' and other related contents, before 1980, have often become art's accessories, which were usually displayed as a part of visual art without much more attention. Until 1980, Venice Biennale was the first to integrate 'Urban/ Architecture' into the exhibition, which also marked that 'Architecture' became the theme of the Biennale.^[4] Since then, similar architecture biennales have appeared all over the world, such as Chicago Architecture Biennale, Rotterdam International Biennale, etc. Meanwhile, the representative of Architecture Biennale in China is the UABB since 2005.

The origin of UABB can be traced back to the 'cultural policy' of Shenzhen in 2003. Shenzhen Municipal Government (SMG), in 2003, put forward the concept of 'cultural economy' in its strategy of 'Making Shenzhen A City of Culture' to build Shenzhen into a high-grade cultural and ecological city.⁰ The UABB, founded by the SMG in 2005, aims to provide an exchange platform for the theme 'Architecture, Urban and Art' between Shenzhen and Hong Kong, and to explore the relationship between architecture and urbanisation in China and all around the world.

UABB is an exhibition led by the government strategy, which reflects the combination of power and capital. Its organisational structure has 'Chinese characteristics'. The organizing committee of the 'UABB', composed of the Shenzhen Municipal Commission of urban planning and land resource, is the decision-making body of the whole exhibition.^[6] The committee, the organisers and the capital sponsors constitute the organisational structure of UABB. They are responsible for the organisation, funding, preparation and coordinating operations of UABB, and have the right to decide the related matters, verify and approve the plan and the fund use of the exhibition. With the support of administrative power, 'UABB', as an art platform, has gradually defined itself as an international exhibition under the theme of 'Urban/Architecture'.^[7] UABB reflects the change of the government policy on the urban village: from the tough 'government decreed demolition' towards the encouraging and driving the transformation of the urban villages through the biennales. ⁰

In the past, the exhibitions of the previous six UABBs mainly explored the fields of urbanisation, urban villages, urban architectural space, etc. For example, the first 2005 UABB was opened in OCT-LOFT Contemporary Art Terminal (OCAT) with the theme 'City, Open the Door', which highlighted the phenomenon of urban villages in Shenzhen urbanisation and focused on the culture of the old buildings and ancient architecture.⁰ In 2015, the sixth UABB of 'Re-Living the City' in DaCheng Flour Factory and NO.8 Warehouse in Shekou, aimed to promote the future development of urban space.⁰ They all set up the main venue in the local art institutions, construction factories, etc. In 2017, the main curatorial venue of the 7th UABB 'Cities, Grow in Difference', for the first time, was located in the urban village, Nantou Old Town, in Shenzhen. In addition, 'art' was introduced as an independent and practical exhibition section. The 2017 UABB paid more attention on the research in the development of the urban-rural city through more innovative methods.

3. Urban Village and Global South

The urban village of Nantou old town, literally the junction of 'city and countryside', is a hybrid place of buildings and population, located in Nanshan District of Shenzhen city. With the rapid changes in contemporary politics, the designation of special economic zones since the 1990s has made Shenzhen develop from a 'small fishing village' to an economic metropolis in just 30 years.⁰ Different from other areas of the city, the urban village is a typical product of urban-rural dual structure in the urbanisation process. ⁰ Similarly, in Nantou old town, there are new buildings and villages under construction, abandoned factories, demolished houses, old and new apartments, narrow streets, and even Bao De Ancestral Hall, which is an ancient county government left over from the Jin Dynasty to the Qing Dynasties. The Nantou old town is featured by the hybridity of historical signs in different times, and the architectural space with disordered house heights. At the same time, Nantou urban village is composed of different people, communities and social classes. There are a large number of local residents and immigrants from all over the country such as migrant workers, local villagers, relocated households, individual investors, students, etc. Different dimensions of

space, time and communities constitute such an urban village in Nantou old town with mixed and varied architecture and population.

The site selection of the urban village and the concepts of the 'World South' and 'Urban Village' in the exhibition of UABB not only raise the consciousness of 'third world / Global South', but also can trace back to internationalism.

The term 'South' refers more to the third world countries that recognise the historical context of colonialism, that is, Southern and Central America, Africa and southeast Asia. Nowadays, they are no longer the poor or underdeveloped countries under the racist ideologies in the first world, but a horizontal community of so called 'non-aligned' countries formed from opposing the Russian-American binary opposition to supporting internationalism.⁰ Since the reform and opening-up, China has been promoting its national spirit and culture to the world so as to boost the development of economy and urbanisation. As a cultural industry with globality, the Biennale is the best way to connect the geopolitical characteristics of Shenzhen with the world. In terms of the curatorial methodologies of 'the mid-ground' in Europe, 'the third world' and 'the South', Hou Hanru's curatorial concept is to deconstruct the dualism in the context of contemporary art, and shifts from the East-West binary opposition to a broader south-south relationship and the geopolitics to think about population mobility and urban transformation.⁰ E.g. the exhibition section of 'World South' in UABB reviewed the history, promotion and influence of the modern civilisation dominated by the North since the colonial history, and focused on the urbanisation development of the 'South' in the process of decolonisation, such as the modernisation of South America, the urbanisation and colonisation of Africa, etc. The southern countries publicised the spirit of nationalism in the process of anti-colonization.

The theme 'Cities, Growing in Difference', from the starting point of the 'living space' in urban village, discusses how the 'villages' coexist with 'cities', rather than a binary opposition. It also reflects the continuation of the socialist ideal. The "Urban | villages" exhibition section aims to reflect on Chinese urban development mode in the context of globalisation, and put forward the visions and possibilities of future cities. 'Urban Village', as the 'transition' zone of urban fringe, is often the 'foothold', where most floating population choose to survive and gather. For instance, migrants, such as migrant workers and students, etc. find 'survival' accommodation after they come to find opportunities in the city. It generates an interesting dynamic space, which is more diversified and varied than other areas of the city. According to the level of income, education and sociality, other areas of the city are more and more divided into isolated social groups. In Nantou, there is an interesting landscape with different people gathering, living and mixing together in this transitional space, which can produce folk wisdom, creativity and vitality. This transitional space can provide 'grassroots' and 'bottom-up' approaches to the consideration of urban transformation. These are also the source of inspiration for many innovative projects in UABB.

4. Curatorial practices of 'Art, Making Cities' in Nantou

Like most architectural biennales, such as Venice biennale, UABB displays the designs of future city and architectural models indoors. For example, 'DenCity, a visible Utopia in Shenzhen' shows a high-density urban research project of URBANUS Program Research Design.⁰ However, different from many northern biennales, the UABB exhibition of 'Cities, Growing in Difference' is located in the 'on-site' Urban Village in Nantou Old Town.

Hou Hanru curated the exhibition section of 'Art, Making Cities' to combine the local features with artistic action and practice. Art and design were practiced in both traditional and industrial buildings so as to deliver art and innovation into the corner of the urban system, and open up the possibility of interaction between residents, architecture and space.⁰ More than 200 visitors from more than 25 countries around the world created works and performed, and more than 200 academic forums, performances and workshops gave visitors varied experiences.⁰ UABB tries to open the public space that would be filled with historical, cultural, economic and social meanings.

The exhibition emphasises the 'bottom-up' dynamic process of urban villages, which allows

spontaneous growth and preserves the regional characteristics of Shenzhen in the urbanization. The opening ceremony was held in the 'Bao De Square' in Nantou old town. The public drama, the chorus of all beings, directed by Li Ning uses the walls, windows and roofs of urban villages as the performance space. Local residents participated in the performance, and more residents gathered to watch the show, responding to the theme of the exhibition to get art involved in ordinary life and have more interactions with local residents.

The exhibition section is performed on site of the urban village, such as installation art, reconstruction of ancient buildings, factory renewal, live events, etc. It reshapes the urban public space of Nantou old town and creates the 'on-site' contingency and interaction. In the interview, in response to the 'live' way of curation, Hou Hanru believes that in the 'Art, Making Cities' section, it is an open scene, where everyone not only can participate, but also bring their own experience to the interpretation. That is different from the exhibition space of the white cube, which relocates artworks in a new context by separating and isolating them from the outside world. The exhibition section 'Art, Making Cities' is completely open and closely connected with real life in the urban village.

The on-site practice of UABB encourages residents to pay more attention to these buildings and the urban space itself. The wall painting of Balance on the white wall of the building created by Boa Mistura who is a street art group from Madrid has two huge Chinese fonts, 'Tradition' and 'Development', two of which are overlapped and interweaved with three vivid colors of red, yellow and green. The building used to be a manufacturing factory used by local residents to make a fortune in the old industrial area. It is not only the language power of dialogue, but also reflects a resonance of history and times experienced by the generations in the second half of the twentieth century. In the lanes of Nantou old-town, artist Lin Yilin encouraged the participants to lie down to form A 300 Meter 'Commodity Chain', performing art with their bodies. The body and the 'Commodity Chain' are linked together to form a 'symbiotic' relationship of the community. Through watching, lying down and communicating, local residents could rethink about their connection with the community and space.

Critically, the curatorial practice might not really achieve the connection between art and the grassroots. The exhibition could have reflected the diversification of urban space, but lack of response to the specific survival problems in urban village. 'Live' activities serve the interests of the young generations and visitors from the outside of the urban village to experience the sense of art and technology instead of attracting the grass-roots residents in the village. If its purpose is to stimulate multiple social classes to rethink the development of urban villages, it is doubtful whether the 'white cube' or the 'live' events can actually inspire the audience to seriously think and immerse themselves. For example, the colorful WEGO installation made by MVRDV and The Why Factory, who is an avant-garde architectural team in the Netherlands, has attracted many people to watch. However, most of the visitors came to take photos, which might not really reflect on the social issues meant to be solved by this exhibition. Moreover, the video animation 'Game City' made by Pisan who is a Chinese animation director to display in the Bao De square did not really show the 'coexistence' and 'grassroots' of urban villages. The cartoon games could only represent the memories of the post-80s and post-90s youth instead of arousing the collective memories of other local residents.

5. Limitation of the curatorial concepts of UABB

The so-called 'Art Intervene the City' and 'Bottom Up' concepts in the 'Cities, Growing in Difference' theme of 2017 UABB may be considered as a romantic imagination of urban village. It tried to construct an imagined multicultural urban space of semi-utopia and semi-realism. In fact, the government, the estate developers, artists and architects have the dominant voice of the transformation and development of Nantou old town. The residents may not have cultural identity to the urban village after the 'art' transformation by the Biennale, while the government, the Biennale and the capital are fighting for their own interests.

The concept of UABB is based on the differences and diversity in urban development. However, the alliance among the government, developers and builders and the drive of economic interests

inevitably accelerate the local commercialisation, resulting in the gradual narrowing of the space for differences and the risk of 'gentrification'.⁰Also, this phenomenon increased the survival pressure of local residents. In the post exhibition period of Nantou old town, this pattern has begun to sprout: on the one hand, the exhibition has temporarily created a false appearance of prosperity and high-end, raised the landlords' expectation of land appreciation, and prompted them to increase rent, making the original tenants overburdened and choose to leave; on the other hand, some landlords began to cooperate with more powerful capital. Behind the transformation of the old town is still the government's invisible expulsion of the 'relocated households', even if it is not the compulsory means of administrative orders. The result of using capital and economic logic to upgrade the space is still the expulsion of the original residents. If the original living conditions of the residents could not be guaranteed due to the reconstruction of the old town, the artistic practice would finally deviate from its original claimed goals. The old-town transformation of Nantou aimed to take the opportunity of the combination of government, art and capital, but in the end, because of the high governance costs and unsustainability, no one has made a profit.

From a broader perspective and global dimension, the southern discourse power, as the edge of the world, to a certain extent, rewrites the history of the Biennale. The Biennale in the Global South has aroused more discussion, especially about the challenge to the concepts of the peripheral and the central of globalisation. For hundreds of years, the spread of modern civilisation led by the North pushed forward to the south in the ways of war, colonisation, trade, etc. In fact, although the globalisation is centered in the north, the southern countries continue to combine the global culture with the local culture in the process of decolonisation and economic development. Taking 'Cities, Growing in Difference' as an example, the UABB reflects the geopolitical characteristics of urbanisation in Shenzhen and the Pearl River Delta. This also reflects that the phenomenon of 'village city' has universality and difference in the urbanisation development of third world countries.

According to Gardner and Green, the heritage of most southern biennales is unstable, and although they are tempting to find inspiration in historical exhibitions to rearrange and textualise contemporary biennales, they are likely to be homogenised because of their ubiquity.⁰The legacy of the UABB may not be stable. The UABB exhibitions aimed to protect the historical buildings and continue the historical context. However, the renovation of exhibition buildings may not be able to resist the process of urban renewal in Shenzhen. Due to the continuous development of urbanisation, the village in the city has always been a transitional zone in the development of the city, and the exhibition space could not keep its permanence. In the later period of previous UABB exhibitions, the historical buildings faded out of people's vision, which interrupted the historical and cultural inheritance expected by the exhibition.

Similar to most southern biennales, UABB seeks a feasible internationalism model and emphasises the interaction between local regions.⁰But the same homogenisation phenomenon in the exhibition and the pursuit of local regional economic development are obtained from the cost of local residents' interests, to a certain extent.

6. Conclusion

The uniqueness of the theme of 'Cities, Growing in Difference' of UABB in 2017 is the first time that the main exhibition venue has been set up in Nantou Old Town, an urban village, making it more representative and innovative compared with previous UABB exhibitions. Based on the social context of the urban village and the perspective of the global south, this essay discussed whether the views and visions of the Biennale can be realised.

This essay first reviewed the origin and development of Architecture Biennale and UABB. Based on the interpretation of the curatorial concepts of Hou Hanru, the second part pointed out the relationship between the Biennale and the third world and the global south, as well as the special geopolitical characteristics of Shenzhen. Then, by analysing the theme of 'Cities, Growing in Difference' and the location of Nantou old town, it discussed how the exhibition emphasises the relationship between urban villages and the global south. The third part, through the combination of curating concepts and on-site practices, analysed the effectiveness of the ideas of 'Art Involved in the

City’ and ‘Bottom-Up’ in the exhibition section of ‘Art, Making cities’. However, there are contradictions and limitations in the curatorial concepts and realistic results of this exhibition, including the deviation of the theme of ‘symbiosis’, the potential gentrification and growing pursuit of profit result from the combination of art and politics and business, and the survival pressure of local ‘grassroots’ residents. From the perspective of globalisation and the development of the Biennale in the Global South, the final part also analysed the instability and homogenisation of its heritage.

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