

UNDERSTANDING PARISIANS*

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Abstract: The urban physical environment results not only from functional requirements of urban life, but also from the very cultural background and social relationships. After examining the relationships between the architecture and the cultural contexts in Paris, the author presents and argues a belief that the architectural characteristics in Paris can be better explained by understanding the Parisian ways of urban life.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1997, the French President, J. Chirac, initiated in Shanghai a "50 Chinese Architects in France" programme, under which 50 Chinese architects were invited to visit France in the subsequent three years. As one of the first four invitees during the period from September to November, 1998, I visited many relevant ministries, architectural schools, design studios, urban planning institutes and public organisations. My impressions from the visits led me to examine the powerful impact of French culture and styles on French architecture and urban planning.

AN OLD STORY

A boy was born in a rich family. The parents were so happy that they invited all talented persons in the town for a celebration. Required as a mark of courtesy, they stood in front of the door and were waiting for visitors. "Your son will be very rich", the first visitor offered greetings. The parents were smiling and introduced him to the feast. "Your son will be very intelligent", the second visitor followed and was led to a big table. The last visitor, regarded as the most intelligent person in the town, was a scholar. He was mostly expected by the parents to tell the truth about their son's future. After what the

scholar said was clearly heard, he was not allowed to enter. What did he say? He said: "I believe your son will surely die, sooner or later".

TRUTH VERSUS CONTEXT

That is the story told sometimes in many Chinese universities. It is intended to help students understand the truth assertion and objectiveness in the scientific world. The scholar in the story is regarded as a truth-teller and an objective philosopher, although he was not accepted by the inviters.

Looking at our surroundings, we cannot understand things simply in a scientific way. The assertion made by the scholar was not wrong, nevertheless, he had neglected the circumstances of the parents' anticipation, the festive atmosphere, and proper conduct as a guest. We are confronted with a world that expresses its existence in many aspects! It is not merely a physical world. It is also made up of people who are responsible for the cultural background and social relationships. We can easily find out that people with different cultural backgrounds may have varied opinions about the same things (Houbart, 1988). That accounts for the richness of human civilization in this world. Especially in the aspects like architecture and urban planning,

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which contain much influence from the social life of human beings (MEHTT, 1997), the context of something can be more important than its own nature.

I think I will never understand Paris unless I understand the people there. I try to figure out why architecture in Paris is like that by reading the Parisian ways of thinking and behaving. Architecture is not a purely scientific solution to functional arrangement of building space. It is also an outcome of *pensee* involved in the whole process of shaping it. It is not controlled fully in the hands of architect. It is also subject to the people who accept it and the procedural system which realizes it.

IMPLICATION OF UNIQUENESS

Standing in front of la tour Eiffel, I feel the magnificence it implies. In architectural terms, its shape is simply neat and pleasant. The surrounding open space forms a proportional auditorium to view it, feel it, and understand it. The dim texture of its metal fabric at night presents an alluring call to its own reflection on la Seine. Functionally it can be used as an antenna or outlook tower for tourists. But those are not the things it really implies. It can be better understood only by finding the clues to the French ways to create, cultivate and enjoy it. It is not just a scenic object, an entertainment target or a commercial product which can be duplicated anywhere. The uniqueness of its charms is based on the accumulation of historical events, social changes and the evolved styles of French culture.

READING THE PARISIAN WAYS

Having witnessed the grandeur and luxury of many public buildings, squares and boulevards, I cannot help thinking a kind of Parisian instinct for *distingue* show and *chic* pride. It has been a typically Parisian tradition in urban construction that new monumental buildings are generally favoured by the public and endorsed by politicians. The continuing collection of urban *meuble* leads to a kind of 'Workshop'—the French public organizations and their managerial mecha-

nism (IDTPR, 1997)—necessary for Parisians' needs. Besides their need for buildings big enough to contain antiques, they also need large lawn and waterfront area to spend leisure time. Occasionally they really believe that the Etoile around the Arc de Triomphe and the Jardins du Trocadero are the right places for triumphant shouting when the melody of 'We Are The Champion' has echoed from the Stade de France. The special Parisian 'Climate' has fostered the development of those public organizations responsible for caring about the significance of urban space and the sap of urban life in Paris. They are qualified to carry out the governmental policies and planning objectives, skillful in coordinating partners, capable of tackling financial problems, successful in management of maintenance, and ready to hear opinions from the public. They constitute a major part of the powerful public mechanism in Paris and are specialized in large-scale projects, such as La Defense, which seems to be adaptable to Paris only.

In the stillness of the midnight, the Cherie FM sounds so smooth and sweet. It is another side of Parisian emotion and sentiment, which fall asleep at no time. Architects need inspiration in their design (Von Spreckelsen, 1997). The ingredients of subtle mood are in Parisian life! Just try to nose out the subtle distinction of aroma like a *parfumeur*, taste *vin* with *oenologue's* tongue, and view beauty in the eyes of *styliste de mode*. Why not go to Les Deux Magots and La Hune to feel it? Paris enjoys an international reputation for romance and cultural richness, which have resulted in the distinct style of its image as well as its architecture. In reading the ways of Parisian behaviours, I can be persuaded that the human touch is formidable.

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