

Public Space in Urbanisation Area: A Case Study of Xihuangcun Road

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ABSTRACT: Urbanisation is still one of the social themes in developing countries. In China, the rapid process of urbanisation and economic growth bring to people not only more opportunities for creating new life and pursuing happiness, but also the challenge to face various and complex social, economical and environmental problems. Among them some are outstanding, like the shrinking plowland devoured by urbanisation, the withering of village abandoned by urbanisation, the inflating price of house and rent pushed by urbanisation, and the severe-completing and fighting for public resources evoked by urbanisation. While local dwellers are moving out and the out-comers flooding in, the traditional public context is heavily destroyed, and various environment issues are also emerging. Basing on a survey of Ro. Xihuangcun in Beijing, China, this article has made a near analysis on public space, trying to cast light on a model in urbanisation, and to draw some constructive suggestion and solution to this selected area as well.

Keywords: Public space; Urbanisation; Xihuangcun Road; Space feature.

INTRODUCTION

Urbanisation is still one of the social themes in developing countries. In China, the rapid process of urbanisation and economic growth bring to people not only more opportunities for creating new life and pursuing happiness, but also the challenge to face various and complex social, economical and environmental problems. To name a few but outstanding, the shrinking plowland devoured by urbanisation,



Fig. 1: Ro. Xihuangcun and some important nodes

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the withering of village abandoned by urbanisation, the inflating price of house and rent pushed by urbanisation, and the severe-completing and fighting for public resources evoked by urbanisation.

As the capital city in China, Beijing owns the most prosperous districts and the most rich cultures and public facilities. Nevertheless, in its outskirts the phenomenon of rapid urbanisation is very much the same with most other developing cities. The survey object of this article is a "village" named Xihuangcun, which locates in the Shijingshan District, near to the fifth ring of Beijing. It's obviously no more a village but an organic part of the developing area on the periphery of the city. Actually, this 'village' owns a history of 800 years and a temple honoured by ancient emperors, and till 90's of last century, its impressive agriculture feature is still remained as a role of offering agriculture products for the capital city. But in recent years, in demand of development of Beijing, most of the plowlands are transformed into urban planning area, and the bungalows are kept for lodging the out-comers. And in the running pace many modern residential apartments are mushrooming, which squeeze the room of bungalows and the last remains of the traditional space. For this article, public space for the bungalows will be studied and the very example is the road of Xihuangcun, which is the main area of life (see fig.1). Through the information of the surroundings, like building functions, living conditions, and the activities occurred in this road, the space feature is examined and some constructive suggestion are drawn. In fact, the existing condition and the spacial developing pattern of this street represent as a common example for thousands of peripheral areas in the process of rapid urbanisation.

Survey and analysis

Existing condition of Xihuangcun Road

As the object of the survey, Xihuangcun Road, 300m long and 8m wide, is the main public space for the area of the 'village' Xihuangcun, which feeds more than 3000 fixed habitants and countless out-comers. As we know, this group of out-comers rent shops from the local habitants and earn their lives here. But they have a high mobility, most of them have been here for only 3-4 years. With all sorts of small commerce and daily-life service such as fruit stands, restaurants, groceries, garages, Internet bars and public bathroom, the street not only facilitate the daily life for the surrounding habitants, but also offers as a significant work place for those out-comers. In this sense, the space character, the form and environment quality of the street, are closely connected to the workings and livings settled here. While we take a close look at this complex public street, a lot of so called 'problematic' phenomena are emerging, during the flooding of urbanisation, which lists as followed:

(1) The phenomenon of unlawful occupation of public space by private commerce is common (see fig.2,3,4). For this area is out of the strict city governance and public norms, every shops extend to its great need by occupying the very narrow street.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

In the survey we found that, most merchants in this street are out-comers, who have no other living or social activity space, so the public space of this street is more or less taken as their very living space.

(2) The quality of street environment is low (see fig.5). Let alone the poor aesthetics factors like monotonous form, lack of rhyme and rudeness of architecture elevation, the scattered rubbish along the road gives visitors an impression of primitive outdoor market. Actually, the shortage of bins especially almost no big bins for daily life rubbish, and the poor hygienic condition, reflect the lack of environment consciousness and the feebleness of public hygiene management. Luckily, due to the uniformed arrangement by municipality by 2008 Olympic Games, there is a relatively clean public toilet.

(3) The historical and cultural resource is neglected (see fig.6). As mentioned before, here just in this road locates a ancient temple---Guhuangsi, which dates from more than 400 years ago. In the perspective of long-term development for this street, the temple should be a key motivator. In fact, the reparation of main construction and courtyard is almost finished, and it's said that it will work as a local culture relic museum. But why such an important plot of public space has been long time closed from public access is the question that we doubt, lack of management capital, or afraid of damage from the local dwellers?

The type of public space

As in the way of urbanisation, the community of Xihuangcun has a character of combination of town and city. Before the big city is created, the habitants in the town or the market of countryside incline to mix their living and working area in the same place. As said by Pro. L. WANG, director of magazine World Architecture (China), "The mix-use and multi-functioning is a rooted tradition in rural space construction", the workshops alongside the Xihuangcun Road are also the units of family. In summary, there exist three main types of public space here:

(1) space of lane (see fig.7). To be strict, the Xihuangcun Road should be called a lane, because of its narrowness and low mobility of vehicles. It's mix-used and mostly used by pedestrians.

(2) space near workshop (see fig.8). This kind of space is half-public space: without the restrict public management, it's taken as the space for extended workshop, mobile stands, family life, parking lot, dumping site.

(3) space of greenery (see fig.9). It's evident that the rehabilitation of this street owns some plot of greenery but now are all bald and shabby. The only alive green is some old trees, which are registered but still no special preservation.

Social character of public space of Xihuangcun Road

For the character of demography, the population structure for the local community is like the form of sand-glass, while the adults are working outside and the children and seniors are



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

Table 1: Comparison of different public space social character

| | urban public space | urban residential public space | public space in Ro. Xihuangcun | rural public space |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|--|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| attitude to strangers | very acceptable, encouraged | limited, almost not welcomed | acceptable | attentive but not reject |
| mobility | very mobile | fixed, almost not mobile | medium mobility | almost no mobility |
| openness and accessibility | very open and accessible | relatively closed, accessible to habitants | discreet and neutral for visit | conservative and neutral for visit |

kept at home. Most of time, the local habitants refer to the group of 'under-privilege'. Of certain, the other big group is the out-comers who are contrary almost adults between 20-45 years old. But its certain mobility brings this community some unstable factors and some risks of insecurity.

For public space social character, there are some very clear differences from city to rural area (see table 1).

Public space is a open system, which is a mixture of all kinds of 'flows' with outside world. For primitive urbanised area like Xihuangcun, the openness of public space is relatively low, for which the space is mainly used by the local traders. In this sense, a certain closure of street space is favoured for the formation of stability and independence of these out-comers, and also the communication and exchange with public. Otherwise, because the nearness of the family or workshop space to the public street space, this street looks more familiar and more energetic, never worry its vitality if there are still clients for these goods and services.

Furthermore, because of this special group of out-comer traders, the open time of the shops and the occupation of street public space show a nature of periodic interruption, while most of them are going back hometown for new year holiday, marriage ceremony or summer harvest. The interruption is about 1 month per year, which is a phenomenon rather rare in big city.

Reason of the formation

According to the existing condition and some discussion of the public space of Xihuangcun Road, we can search for the reason of its formation on the following four points: a) unlawful occupation of public space; b) poor public management; c) low passion for public activities; and d) mistaken concept for public space design.

Unlawful occupation of public space

The unlawful constructions added by the local habitants, are the main reason for the narrowness and lack of public space for this street. In survey we found that the original street had a 2-3 m pavement in both sides, but most of them are now taken into the extended workshop or family interior space. But how could this 300 m long street lost its both pavements all in the same manner?

Of certain, the action of added constructions leads to the lack

of public space and the disorder of the whole. But frankly speaking, the action of added construction is in the process of transforming public space into private, which indicate and mark outside space to be controllable like of the private. Privatisation is relic of human society evolution, and is also the basic motivator and precondition of our modern market economy. Thus to this point, rather critical to this phenomenon, it's preferable to look for the reason of insufficient public management, meanwhile this action is a kind of constructive utilisation of the passive public space without careful management.

Otherwise, for the uniformed construction, the reasons are probably: a) economical investment. Most the shops have been transformed from their original houses by the local habitants to be suitable for renting to out-comers. In average every landlord owns 2-3 shops of 4 m wide, and when the relationship between these landlords are much close, they are inclined to build together and choose some pattern uniformly. b) psychology of following others. When the house condition vary a lot and the relationship between landlords is not familiar, the result of this uniformed action is due to the psychology of following others. As we know, the more primitive the culture of society is, the weaker the individual consciousness and more inclination of following others.

Poor public management

This points mainly to the authority part, like committee of community, local government. In details the reasons are listed as followed:

- (1) Lack of public affair management and supervision, which is proved by the hygiene condition as mentioned before.
- (2) Lack of public activity facilities. As we know, good public space needs not only sufficient physical space but also necessary activity facilities, like local library, playroom or even some sport instruments or seats alongside the street. Otherwise, the shortage of recession space for this monotony morphology is another reason to reject public activities. Figure 10 shows that some people playing chess on the steps in front of some temporary closed shop.
- (2) Lack of the instruction of public activities. If the physical base is the necessary condition then the guide and organisation of public activity is the catalyst. For example, it includes in the scale of community all sorts of cultural or educational activities

like entertainment, outdoor sport, familiar exhibition, film and debate, etc. For real, there do exist a billboard public alongside Ro.Xihuangcun, but only the administrative documents or notices can be found.

Low passion for public activities

Without doubt, even best public site and excellent public governor cannot guarantee thriving public activity if its people have no much interests. For this main body of public space for Ro. Xihuangcun, three causes are found:

(1) Low participation consciousness. The consciousness of public participation is depends on two aspects: exterior right and interior knowledge. The former represents for the rights and conditions given or created by authority while the later for the public understanding of the rights. If the former is higher than the later, some public resources are wasted. In contrary, public service is out of demand.

(2) Limited participation level. Public participation ability for individuals is up to some factors such as level of openness, subjective estimation, similar experience, social ability and knowledge capacity.

(3) Low participation demand. To participate public activity, exterior motivator and attraction make effect, and meanwhile individuals need spare time, some money and good expectation as well.

As we know, most real habitants in Ro. Xihuangcun are out-come life-earners and the group 'old & young', most of them are living in a inferior living condition, with little financial control, few experience and limited education background, while the authority affords insufficient service and physical condition.

Mistaken concept for public space design

This part is pointed to the public space designers, for whom there exist two flaws as followed:

(1) No careful design for details.

Because of the inferior site importance from the centre city, the city-planners and architects paid little attention to these projects in areas like Ro. Xihuangcun. Otherwise, as the rehabilitation of these 1-2 storied bungalows is relatively easy and has been well expected by both local habitants and developers, the rough planning and design is taken as show by monotonous street space, little consideration of integration of public space in Temple Guhuangsi.

(2) Misuse of urban space design methods.

Viewing the common phenomenon of added construction alongside the street, we can see the failure of the design to a certain degree. Though we do not know whether the design is effective and to future demand or not, but the on-site information collection or analysis is necessary. As we observed that the behaviours of habitants, few cars and low speed of traffic don't need the system of separation pedestrians and vehicles, which is generally used in city centre. In this case, the two side pavements offer a favourable condition (and space limit) for added constructions, and only if one small part of

pavements are blocked by some first build added construction, then most pedestrian will use the main road and the useless pavements are waiting for some other added construction till all room is occupied. In other hand, if the occupied pavements are designed to some parking lot, resting area, greenery plot, then the public space and environment might be of quite another face.

CONCLUSION

First of all, focusing to the problems mentioned above, four angles of thought are discussed for future development.

(1) Planning and design. In the example of Ro. Xihuangcun, we think a kind of 'elastic design' can be tried, confronting the phenomenon of added construction. For example, beforehand some areas for extended commercial use are foreseen, and some other parts of public space are clearly identified. Furthermore, careful instruction for architecture design in the local context will be helpful for the environment quality and public spirit of space.

(2) Public management. We expect more attention paid by some authorities to these people. Careful public management and service are of much help to encourage the harmonious social relationship and all around prosperity.

(3) Public participation. For the moment, the promotion from the authority should lead the way, to enhance public consciousness and some general education for these people. When the site identity and sense of belonging are set, public activity and public self supervision will be much successful. Meanwhile, we need to take special care of the group of children and the aged people, who have more time and more will for public space use.

All in all, facing to the rapid urbanisation we need to retrospect on the way that we have taken as always do. Urban design or rural management mode may neither effect but to its real context. The construction of public space in the area of rapid urbanisation needs the combined effort from city planners and architects, local authorities, and all kinds of local habitants. In the near few decades, most developing countries are under the way of rapid urbanisation, a kind of adaptive and creative method of planning and management for the transition areas is of vital significance.

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