

Are designed places better? Case Study of Lhasa City

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ABSTRACT

In the rapid urbanization progress, Lhasa has expanding violently as the biggest city in Tibet. Do we create a better place when we design them? This study investigates the features of spatial elements and structures of city Lhasa. This study analyzes the spatial structure of historic district and recently built zones of Lhasa, aims to clarify the differences between them. However, in some aspect, the newly designed places are less vivid than most historic district.

KEYWORDS

Design; Places; Identity

We are living in a modern era. It is a good thing in general, as technology is advanced. But it also may not be a good thing too. In this up-to-the-minute new century, it is also a time of specialists. Just in the built environment field, we've got urban planners, we've got landscape architects, and we've got urban designers and so forth. This is good for human society. It allows subjects to be explored in depth. But specialization has its own shortcomings as well. These specialists are trying to create a better environment, but the outcomes are usually different to what we expected. In this article, I am going to discuss and criticize contemporary urban design in the scale of city in terms of its usefulness and inefficiency in addressing what I believe to be its defining question: Are designed places better?

1 Background

As I mentioned earlier, today's society is an age of specialists. There are so many professionals. Doctors are concentrated on their scope to find new medicines for curing diseases. Teachers are concentrated on educating people to make this world wiser and so on. In the built environment, urban designers or urban planners are very passionate to build a better environment for our society. And because they are specialized, they are really good in their research field. So many disciplines have been developed deeply. Such as design codes, design rationales, legibility, permeability, variety and so on. But they have forgotten one thing, in today's society, it is very complex. Because of the globalization, this world becomes much more complex than any time. Every thing involves others and is being involved by others at the same time. And in this complex background, there is no single rationale or guideline that can solve problems without cooperate with other fields. These specialists always give others an inappropriate impression that they are going to save the world by their perfect design. But how can they? Did they ever think they designed and built so many junk spaces¹? In the process of transforming the world, they use their peculiar technical language to

¹ Junkspace, by Rem Koolhaas.

survey, to analyse, therefore to achieve their goal, which is to control or create the built form of cities. Did they succeed in achieving their goal? Not really. In so many cases we can see, they have lost the balance. They seek the so-called perfect physical city forms and neglect the effects on social outcomes. They seek the maximum economic benefits and ignore the catastrophes which caused in our environment. They tried to protect environment and to be justice, but it seems exaggerated and not so whole-hearted. They discourage people from thinking of urban design as a normal thing that everyone has got the talent to do it. They pretended it as a sublime highly professional technique. They speak techno-babble, such as permeability, legibility and so on, to make general public awe-inspiring.

2 Study Area

Lhasa, is the administrative capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region in the People's Republic of China, and is located at the foot of Mount Gephel. Because of its special geographical location and racial characteristics, they have developed massive splendid and marvelous achievements in many aspects. As far as I know, architecturally, they have built countless fabulous edifices, such as Potala Palace, Jokhang Temple, Sera Monastery, Zhefeng Temple, Barkhor and so on. Each of them has its very own distinct identity. For example, the Barkhor, which is an area of narrow streets and a small public square located around Jokhang Temple. From Google map or any kind of maps you always can see the beautiful city pattern of this area. This natural city pattern has evolved over several centuries.



Figure 1 typical Lhasa building
(Source from:<http://yeschinatour.com/>)

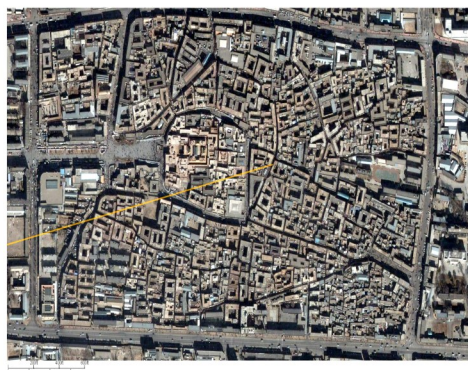


Figure 2 the old beauty city pattern, the Barkhor area
(Source from: Google map.)

3 Comparioson of Features

From above figure 1, we can easily see its special building style and we also can see a few outstanding points in the perspective of city from figure 2. Firstly, it is very permeable place. Roads, streets are very well connected. Form this side of city to another side, there are so many possible routes you can choose. Building blocks are built quite small and most of them have their own courtyard. It well indicated the public space and private space. In a word, in this area, it well presented physical permeability and visual permeability as well (see figure 3). Secondly, it is a variable place. It is a place with varied use and has varied building forms. Lots of activities happen through the day from dawn until dark. It attracts varied people, tourists, hawkers, prayers, buskers, monks, local residents and so forth (see figure 4). In additional, this place has got its very own identity. The pilgrims, the devotional circumambulation, the mendicant monks, the playing children, all of them are representing this area. You can't find this street scene in anywhere else but only in Barkhor. This beautiful city pattern has evolved over years. It is not designed, every strip of road has evolved over centuries, and everyone's behaviors are relaxing, no painstaking. But it is designed, every people is designer.

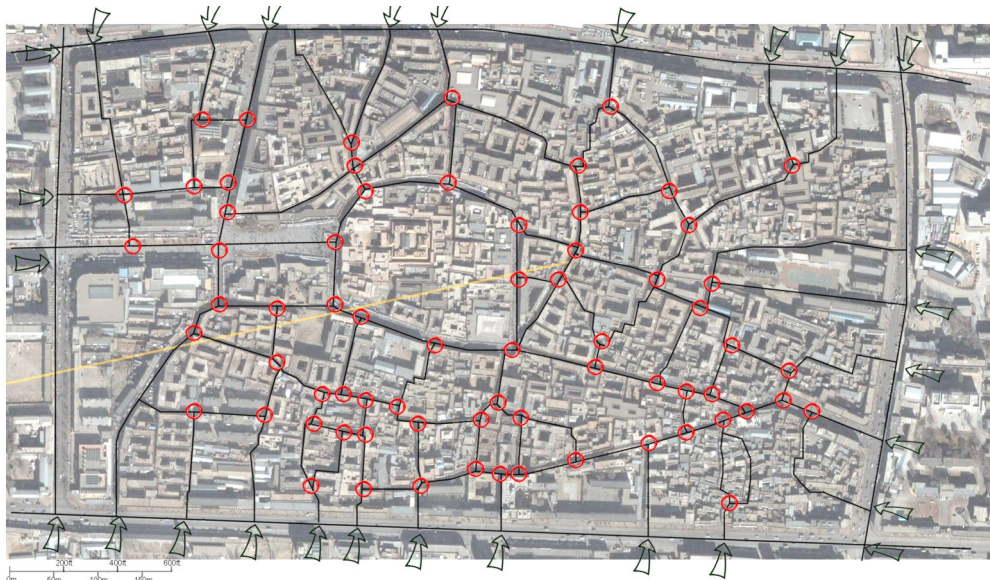


Figure 3 A permeability analysis of the Barkhor area



Figure 4 People's activities in Barkhor area

(Source from: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lhasa>).

Now let's see the new city which built through the last 60 years. It is huge in its size (see figure 5 and figure 6), almost 20 times of its original size. But it is also bland in its city form. Square grid one closes to another. Like this place was original nothing, no context exists. That is not human, that is also not natural. That was built by some so-called professionals. Compare the two entirely different city forms; the old part city is absolutely superior to the new surrounding part.

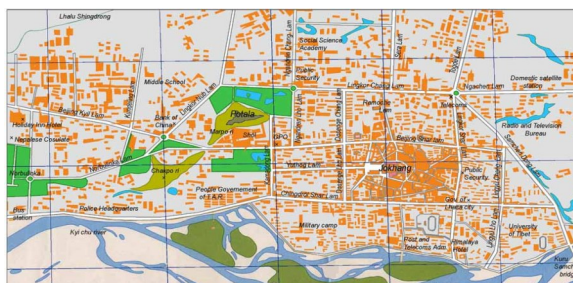


Figure 5 New city expanded pattern

(Source from: www.tibet.ru.)

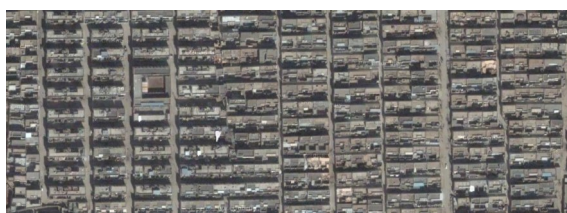


Figure 6 new neighbourhoods near the Barkhor area

(Source from: <http://maps.google.co.uk/maps?hl=en&q=lhasa&gbv=2&ie=UTF-8&sa=N&tab=il>)

4 Discussion

Take a broad view, all successful urban design, which appears in the worldwide, considers urban character, local identity, respect for heritage, pedestrians, traffic, utilities and natural hazards. Nonetheless, the new development in this city has failed on these points. The new urban area has lost its inherent characteristics in so many ways. The urban aesthetics has been lost. It created urban visual pollution. This city lost the ability of as a whole. Grid city form is fantastic for quick urbanisation, but not human. Yes, it is absolutely legible, roads, streets are connected well. Lots of potential routes can be found. But it's just too legible to safety and totally lost its local identity. It reflects the spatial and functional segregation.

This design is extensive and also is intensive. Because sunlight is extremely important in Tibet people's life, they developed one type of city form—all buildings are quite long and narrow and facing south to receive the utmost sunlight, and built it extensively. This design is exclusive and also is inclusive. They tried to keep the historical character in their design, but unfortunately they just comprehend the surface. They designed a type of totally modern building and wearing the local facade. This is not root in past, even not stuck in past but totally pseudo morph. It is similar in the way of shape, not in the way of spirit.

Rather than providing technocratic leadership, the city designer is the partisans of design principles, such as legibility, permeability, transport, social justice, commerce, a health environment and so forth. They speak fluent and logic languages. But when the ideal speech becomes the

objective of planning, as soon as they face the city design projects, they are too concentrating on their developed principles and neglect the other relevant fields they should cooperate. They seem to forget the economic and social forces. They thought they are the 'conductor of the orchestra'. City designers are affected by their mission, to create more and more places for the shortage of homes. However, city designers are unable to attend to everything at the same time especially in the developing country China. This outcome-oriented physical design has left its mark on this city in the form of urban expansion forever. This is always a gap existed in the outcomes of real design projects and the aims of urban design theory if design is performed within narrow boundaries.

To achieve variety in land use patterns as it showed in the Barkhor area, urban designers should keep variety relationship between their to others, for instance, keep relationship with local residents, keep relationship with engineers, keep good relationship with socialists, historians, planners, architects, including professionals and non-professionals. As such, it supplies a vehicle for enriching your knowledge for demystification in design process.

Most urban designers always declare they do not have power. If they had, they would have created a fantastic world. But that is not true. If they don't have power, how can they design proposal becomes reality? How the city is formed and how these beautiful lands are devastated? It is because their power, their lack of self-assurance power. Therefore they get used to blame the fault to others to make themselves feel better. They always say nobody listen to them. Their words are powerless. Only the client has the power to make final decisions. But the decision makers know nothing about urban design. In fact, the power of words depends on the power of the speakers. To quote Bent Flyvbjerg (1998, p. 234): "When we understand power we see that we cannot rely solely on democracy based on rationality to solve our problems." If you tried really hard, you wouldn't compromise. If you are really confident enough, you can persuade the resistance, you must have your own views on what to say and how to say. And furthermore, urban designers should have this ability to argue for change in the struggle of power. This omission constitutes the fundamental weakness of urban design.

There is another example which appears in Lhasa city. Because of the Potala Place, it is one of the UNESCO World Heritage Site. It has a great height. It represents the religion and the city skyline as well. Because of it, in this city, all buildings have limited height. But funny enough, there is another building which just been built in recent years, the police station, which has 25 storeys excluding the roof satellite receiver. Without demur, it is much higher than the Potala Place. It delineates the new skyline (see figure 7). It is a success in terms of building height. But in the perspective of urban design, it is a gigantic faulty stroke. It does not respect the heritage of this city. It is a veritable junk place.



Figure 7 the height compare of the Potala and new police station

(Source from: www.wikimedia.org.)

In this case, the client, the police department has the power to decide which form they want. How high the building should be. The context in this case is much more complex than other. There is the power comparison between the religion and new republic party. So these designers seem extremely powerless in the political background. But that is not a reasonable excuse.

5 Conclusion

To sum up, designed places are might not as good as most of us thought especially in the developing countries such as China. But this is not the reason to deny the usefulness or inefficiency of design in most design projects. Urban designers should be experiential learner from individual cases, design principles has to be engraved on their mind and intent interaction with other fields as well in contributing to professional understanding. It does mean transcending individual experience, placing cases in a broad context, making comparisons, and not limiting analysis to exegesis. And in other aspect, in the decision making process, there should be more people involved in the board. Who is the real client for the cities' develop? They are the people who live here. They have the final rights to decide what they want. So there should be a new decision making hierarchy. Public should be move from the lower level to much higher position. Their opinions and estimations should not be just heard but be put into operations, be weighted in the decision making. Control should be taken from government clients, bureaucrats and places architects, designers, ecologists and so on at the top of the new professional hierarchy. The traditional decision making hierarchy should be deconstructed.

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